

# Women Participation in Panchayat Raj in West Bengal: An Appraisal

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## ABSTRACT

In Indian democracy there is a need to have a federation with substantial degree of decentralization of powers, functions and finances to the local units of governance. Article 40 of the Indian constitution directed the states to “take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them function as of self government.” There seems to have remained a perceptible reluctance on part of the state governments to set up panchayats on regular basis, give them legitimacy and due power. The credit goes to 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act in 1992 as Panchayati Raj Act, which not only provided autonomy to the grassroots but it also provided reservation of one-third of seats for women in every s for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Though the debate for women’s reservation in parliament still continues, a major milestone was achieved in 1992 when parliament passed the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill, which sought to bring about and institutional change that mandated reserving 33 per cent of seat. The women representation has been very encouraging in states like West Bengal, Haryana, Maharashtra and Rajasthan.

**Keywords:** Leadership, women Rights, self-help group, women participation in panchyat

Women constituted the key stone in the Arch of the Indian society. Indian civilization is based on the spirit of women. In freedom movement women played a significant role in the leadership of honourable Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhiji believed that women had a positive role to play in the reconstruction of society and that the recognition of their equality was an essential step to bring about social justice.

Leadership is not management or directing. Leadership is the ability to inspire or influence others towards the leader’s goal. Management literature mostly focuses on the characteristics of the leader - it asks “what make this person a leader”, rather than “why do these people choose to follow”. Leaders are people who do the right thing; managers are people who do things right (Bennis *et al.*, 1985). Eisenhower once stated that leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to

do it. The word “leadership” can bring to mind a variety of images. For example a political leader i.e., pursuing a passionate, personal cause; an explorer i.e., cutting a path through the jungle for the rest of his group to follow; an executive i.e., developing her company’s strategy to beat the competition. Leaders help themselves and others to do the right things. They set direction, build an inspiring vision, and create something new. Leadership is about mapping out where you need to go to “win” as a team or an organization; and it is dynamic, exciting, and inspiring. Yet, while leaders set the direction, they must also use management skills to guide their people to the right destination, in a smooth and efficient way. Therefore, leadership as has been generally understood can be defined as a special kind of ‘soft power’ where essential in the concept of power is the role of ‘purpose’. That is, leaders exercise power for some purpose, and the purpose itself can vary widely according to context. Clarity of the purpose becomes important because

it is a shared domain between leaders and others, and linked to questions of motivation.

It is necessary that people participate in the political process. Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) is not a new phenomenon in India. Its illustration in history goes back to more than 1000 years. In view of this, an effort has been made in this paper to review the women participation in PRI which is very essential for sustainable economic and social development of women.

**Table 1:** Distribution of joint and single pattas to women in West Bengal districts in 2003

District	Joint Patta	% of total	Single woman	% of total
Darjeeling	1360	2.8	3037	6.1
Jalpaiguri	6087	7.1	4851	5.7
Cooch Behar	8764	6.6	2264	1.7
U. Dinajpur	14316	10.5	1105	0.8
D. Dinajpur	3453	3.9	1148	1.3
Malda	8499	6.8	NA	NA
Murshidabad	10185	8.0	7075	5.5
Birbhum	6941	6.0	4005	3.4
Bardhaman	14565	8.1	5968	3.3
Nadia	2356	3.4	5234	7.5
24 Parganas N	3797	5.0	5960	7.8
Hooghly	9448	17.0	3819	6.9
Bankura	26855	19.2	6619	4.7
Purulia	4006	4.5	3514	4.0
Medinipur	63800	16.1	30210	7.6
Howrah	3669	14.4	NA	NA
24 Parganas S	1778	2.2	39548	48.9
West Bengal	209855	9.7	128593	5.9

Source: WBHDR, Table 2.3, p.36.

## Land Reforms and Women's Rights

Decentralization of governance and land reforms has been two distinctive features of government policy in West Bengal. We began this section by drawing attention to the first, as reflected in women's participation in local self-government through their expanding role in PRIs. Table 1 shows that land reform measures implemented by Government of West Bengal have brought distinct benefits to at least a section of women belonging to the agrarian sector. They now hold formal landholding rights in all the districts of the state i.e., a basic ingredient of empowerment in rural India. As of 2003, women's names featured in about 16

per cent of total pattas, either on individual basis or jointly with male relatives.

Obviously, this long over-due recognition of women's rights in land has to be further 'strengthened and women across the districts of West Bengal need to be made fully aware of this vital entitlement. The presence and potentialities of West Bengal NGOs concerned with women's issues was evident at the Seminar on Empowerment of Women held in Kolkata on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2004, under the joint auspices of the National Commission for Women and the West Bengal Commission for Women, the main component of which was the Interactive NGO Meet. About 40 NGOs participated in this Meet and through their experience and insights, made a valuable contribution to the Seminar. The range of their work covers many important aspects of women's lives and extends to almost all the districts of West Bengal. Some have a special focus, such as women's health (e.g. Swasthaa); violence against women (e.g. Shramajeevi Mahila Samity); women with disabilities (e.g. Sanchar); women in Correctional Homes/Prisons (e.g. Human Rights Law Network); tribal women (e.g. Suchetana) and trafficked women (e.g. Saanlap). NGOs in West Bengal have been developing innovative models for breaking the barriers that stand in the way of women's over-all advancement and their right to a dignified and productive existence. Here we briefly draw attention to some of the remarkable work being done through NGO initiatives:

In view of the many problems associated with customary judicial processes, one NGO (Shramajeevi Mahila Samity) has been relying on 'Salishi' for resolution of conflicts involving violence against women. This is a traditional and widely prevalent method, but reformulated in such a manner that people have come to accept it as a community-based, an non-partisan intervention offering due space to women. The Samity relies on persuasion rather than on fines or other punishment for implementing decisions arrived at through 'salishi' or informal arbitration.

The Samity has recently completed a study entitled "Salishi in West Bengal: A Community-based Response to Domestic Violence" and it is encouraging to know that the number of people seeking help had increased from those involved in 7 cases in 1991 to over 400 cases in 2001.

The Street Survivors of India, an NGO located in Murshidabad district of West Bengal, started its Murshidabad Ashray Project (MAP) in February 2000, in collaboration with the district police. The project has now evolved into what can be described as an informal justice delivery system, with a 'people's court' attending to cases that are related mostly to marital discord and domestic violence against women, and capable of arriving at mutually acceptable resolution of problems.

In West Bengal micro credit/micro finance has acquired a certain prominence during the last decade or so and here too NGOs have been playing a leading role in motivating and mobilising women for economic self-reliance through participation in micro credit programmes. Women who became beneficiaries of such programmes have repeatedly affirmed that participation in credit groups has given them exposure to the outside world, experience in handling money and above all, a sense of solidarity and self-confidence. To quote a report of the NGO South Asia Research Society about its micro credit scheme 'Project Nirdhan': "The many-sided impact of Project Nirdhan upon the target group of land poor or landless women is not exactly quantifiable ... but if the dilapidated thatch hut of a village has witnessed extensive repairs, if more than 89 per cent of the (women) beneficiaries regularly attend meetings, the impact of the project is indeed appreciable". And the contribution of NGOs has to be acknowledged in making such impact visible in most districts of the state.

The NGO Nari Bikash Sangha came into existence in Bankura district in 1986 and has been instrumental in setting up a number of village-based mahila samities/self-help groups, with the main objective of generating much needed opportunities for employment. Under the guidance of this NGO, these women's groups raised plantations of host trees on degraded/abandoned land for rearing silkworms. This venture generated adequate employment and income so that women no longer had to endure the hardships of seasonal migration in search of work. Women's self-help groups (SHGs) are now emerging as a force to reckon with: motivating women to step out of the confines of custom and experience a new sense of purposeful solidarity. These SHGs may have specific objectives in specific areas but the priority remains the same: confront inequity and

oppression through shared awareness and collective action. To give only two instances:

A few years ago 20 women belonging to landless SC families in Hinch village of Kanthi subdivision in Medinipur district were persuaded by a local NGO to embark jointly upon a project which they called 'Annapurna dhangola'. These women were agricultural labourers, receiving part of their earnings in dhan or paddy in the peak season. From this each woman deposited 20 kg in the dhangola or paddy depot, which became their own source of paddy borrowings during the lean season or even for starting a paddy trade. Now many such units function in a number of villages, benefiting hundreds of families.

### **Status of Women Participation in Panchayat Raj Institution**

The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments enacted in 1993 opened a new vista in women's journey towards empowerment; for they paved the way for assured entry of women in grassroots governance through 33 per cent reservation for them in Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs). West Bengal has the unique and unbroken record of holding Panchayat elections at the stipulated 5-year intervals since 1978. PRIs in the state have a 3-tiered structure, with the basic unit, the Gram Panchayat (GP) serving 10-12 villages. The next tier, the Panchayat Samiti (PS) serves about 100 villages and there is an apex body, the Zilla Parishad (ZP) in each district, its chairperson having the status of a state minister. Till 1992, elected women members in Gram Panchayats in the state constituted less than one per cent of total representatives. But the picture has changed dramatically since 1993 when women were elected to the reserved constituencies of the GPs for the first time. Corresponding one-third reservation for women in Municipalities, Notified Areas and Municipal Corporations followed soon after. Reservation for women as office-bearers in the PRIs was introduced in the Panchayat elections of 1998. The relative position of women members in the Panchayat bodies in 1998 is shown in Table- 2 while Table- 3 shows that of the women office-bearers at different levels. It will be seen that in almost all instances the share of women members goes beyond the statutory 33 per cent., there being a woman Sabhadhipati (chairperson of ZP) in 40 per cent

of ZPs. West Bengal's record compares favourably with the situation obtaining in other states of India, except perhaps Karnataka, where women's share in GP seats was more than 43 per cent and in PSs and ZPs, about 40 and 37 per cent respectively. During the 1990s, the average percentage of women members in PRIs (with respect to nine states) was about 27 per cent (Government of India, 1997).

Certain encouraging trends can be noted in the evolving PRI structure and composition in West Bengal. First, there is growing participation of women belonging to weaker sections of society such as scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST). In 1998, for example, SC women comprised nearly 30 per cent of all women representatives in Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads (WBCW, 2001). Secondly, all-women Panchayats have also emerged and working successfully such as the Kultikari Gram Panchayat in Medinipur district. Thirdly, it is often found that as compared to their male compatriots, women members of GPs take a more active interest in essential developmental work such as expansion of literacy and convenient access to drinking water (Chattopadhyay *et al.*, 2004). It has further been observed, that in West Bengal, women representatives are becoming more self-reliant and by and large they do not need to function as 'proxy members'. But it is also a fact that

women panchayat members are not always given equal status with their male counterparts. They are considered 'less equal' than the male representatives and hence, they are seldom given responsibility of work considered to be important by the PRIs and the chairpersons (*karmadhyksha*) of the important standing committees handling substantial funds are almost always men (Ghosh, 2000). One study found that women members of these committed less than one-fifth of total members though women account for one-third of total PRI members (Ghosh, 1997). The relative exclusion of women in decision-making seems to be a common feature in other spheres of the political life of the state and women are also hardly visible in the high level decision making bodies of political parties in the state, in common with the rest of India. According to the West Bengal Commission for Women, a number of political parties (including the Forward Block, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Bharatiya Janata Party) had only a single woman in their state level decision-making units, while the CPI-M had 8 in a total of 28.

Two other issues are comparatively low levels of education of women panchayat members and the paucity of women's presence in the GP meetings. A recent study of nine Panchayats in Birbhum district found that of the 64 women surveyed in 1997, 24

**Table 2:** Women members in PRIs in West Bengal: 1998

PRI	Area of work	Total members	Woman members	SC women	ST Women	No. of PRI
GP	10-12 villages	49199	36 %	18%	7%	3227
PS	Block of app.115 villages	8515	35%	17%	7%	329
ZP	District	716	34%	17%	7%	16

Source: Maitreesh Ghatak and Maitreya Ghatak, "Recent Reforms in West Bengal: Towards Greater Participatory Governance?", EPW, 1 May 2002, p.47

**Table 3:** Women members as office-bearers in PRIs in West Bengal: 1998

Particulars	Women				All seats	% held by women
	SC	ST	General	All		
GP Pradhan	298	94	734	1120	3360	33.6
GP Upa-Pradhan	269	82	392	713	3360	21.2
Sabhapati: PS	28	14	73	115	333	34.5
Upa-Sabhapati: PS	31	8		74	333	22.2
Sabhadhipati: ZP	2	—	5	7	17	41.2
Sahakari ": ZP	1	—	5	6	17	35.3

Source: Ganashakti, 5 November 2003, p.5.



were just literate and four could only sign their names, apart from 12 who had completed primary education. However, this group also included 9 who had passed School Final. The study also found that 25 per cent of each of general category and SC members, 65 per cent of ST members and 50 per cent of Muslim members attended less than half of the meetings held. (Panchayat meetings were held once a month from 1 to 4 pm and during the survey period each member received Rs. 20 for attending meetings). It is necessary that we pay attention to the reasons stated by the women for irregular attendance, for these reflect a common pattern and need to be addressed at appropriate levels. There are (i) *Shortage of time*: Household chores and rearing of children took up so much time that it was not possible for most women to attend meetings regularly; (ii) *Loss of a day's wages*: since a large number of women members worked as agricultural labourers or daily wage earners, they had to sacrifice a day's earnings; moreover, in most cases husbands or adult sons had to escort them to Panchayat offices, incurring additional loss of earnings; (iii) *Poor transport facilities*: one-third of the women surveyed had to walk more than 3 km either to reach a bus stop or the meeting venue as villages were not well connected by road; (iv) *Superstition*: In some household it was still considered inauspicious for women to be involved in Panchayat activities.

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that with growing awareness among women in the PRIs and growing emphasis on appropriate training for this group through government and non-government agencies, most of them will duly enhance their inherent skills and continue to use them as effective community leaders. As the West Bengal Human Development Report observes, "The participation of women in panchayats tends to have dynamic effects on the social and political empowerment of women in

general. More significantly, the greater presence and participation of women in public life has powerful effects of the situation of women in local society generally. There are numerous examples of how local women leaders have emerged through this **process**, transforming their own lives and those of the society around them" (WBHDR, p. 65). It has to be emphasised here that creation of political spaces for women is not an end in itself but only a necessary step towards an egalitarian polity and society.

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