



Research Article

Women In Local Self-Governance: A Sociological Inquiry into Panchayati Raj Participation in Murshidabad, West Bengal

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Abstract

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) reserved 33% (later 50% in West Bengal) of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), marking a radical attempt at gender-inclusive decentralised governance. Using the Murshidabad district of West Bengal as a case, this paper sociologically examines the extent, nature, and limitations of women's participation in local self-governance three decades after the amendment. Drawing on primary data from 180 women elected representatives across 26 Gram Panchayats and 5 Panchayat Samitis (2022–2024), secondary literature, and ethnographic observation, the study finds that while numerical representation has dramatically increased, substantive participation remains constrained by patriarchal bargaining, proxy governance (“sarpanch-pati” or “pradhan-swami” syndrome), economic dependence, low literacy, religious conservatism (especially in Muslim-majority blocks), and caste–class intersections. Yet, a small but growing section of women—particularly younger, educated, Scheduled Caste, and politically mentored women—are beginning to exercise agency and bring gendered issues (drinking water, sanitation, ICDS, domestic violence) into the public domain. The paper argues that mere reservation is necessary but insufficient; without simultaneous investment in capacity-building, social capital, and transformation of domestic gender contracts, the emancipatory promise of Panchayati Raj will remain partially fulfilled.

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1. INTRODUCTION

India's Panchayati Raj system underwent a historic transformation with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992–93. By mandating one-third reservation for women (and proportional reservation for SC/ST), the state sought to alter the gender composition of rural power. West Bengal, already a pioneer in land reforms and Operation Barga, went further: in 2008 it increased reservation to 50% through the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2008, and implemented it from the 2013 elections onwards.

Murshidabad district offers a particularly rich sociological site for studying this experiment. With a population of 7.1 million (Census 2011), it has the highest percentage of Muslim population (66.27%) in West Bengal, high rural poverty (Rural Poverty Headcount Ratio 44.1%, 2011–12), low female literacy (rural female literacy 53.1% vs state 70.5%), and a complex caste–class–religion matrix. These factors intersect powerfully with gender, producing both constraints and new possibilities.

This paper asks three core questions: (1) To what extent have women entered and stayed in Panchayati Raj bodies in Murshidabad? (2) What are the patterns and quality of their participation? (3) What structural and cultural factors enable or impede transformative agency?

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is located at the intersection of three bodies of literature: (a) Feminist critiques of reservation (Kudva, 2003; Jayal, 2006; Ghosh, 2003) that distinguish between “descriptive” and “substantive” representation; (b) The concept of “proxy women” or “sarkari bibis” (Rai, 2007; Baviskar, 2003; Pal, 2004) where elected women act as fronts for male relatives; (c) Amartya Sen's capability approach and Naila Kabeer's (1999) framework of resources, agency, and

achievements, read alongside Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic violence and doxa in rural patriarchal fields.

2. METHODOLOGY

Mixed methods were employed during 2022–2024:

- Survey of 180 women elected representatives (120 Gram Panchayat members, 45 Panchayat Samiti members, 15 Zilla Parishad members) from 9 blocks (Berhampore, Hariharpara, Raninagar-I, Jalangi, Domkal, Bhagwangola-I, Lalgola, Sagardighi, and Samserganj).
- In-depth interviews with 42 women (including 12 who contested and won without reservation in 2023).
- 18 Focus Group Discussions with women voters and SHG members.
- Ethnographic observation in 12 Gram Panchayat offices and 40 Gram Sansad/Sabha meetings.
- Secondary data from District Panchayat & Rural Development Office, Murshidabad (2013, 2018, 2023 election results).

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Numerical Representation

West Bengal achieved 50% reservation in 2013 and has consistently crossed it because of multiple-seat wards and women contesting general seats. In Murshidabad:

- **2013:** 5,842 women elected out of 11,442 GP seats (51.1%)
 - **2018:** 6,104 women (53.4%)
 - **2023:** 6,287 women (54.9%)
- At higher tiers: 56% women in Panchayat Samitis and 58% in Zilla Parishad (2023). Thus, Murshidabad has surpassed even Kerala and is among the highest in India.

Table 1. Numerical Representation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, Murshidabad (2013–2023)

Year	Total GP Seats	Women Elected	% Women	Women in Panchayat Samiti (%)	Women in Zilla Parishad (%)
2013	11,442	5,842	51.1%	—	—
2018	~11,442	6,104	53.4%	—	—
2023	~11,442	6,287	54.9%	56%	58%

4.2 Socio-economic Profile of Women Representatives

Table 2. Socio-Economic Profile of Women Representatives

Category	Value
Average Age	38 years
Religion	Muslim 68%, Hindu 29%, Others 3%
Education	Illiterate 28%, Primary 42%, Secondary 22%, Higher Secondary & above 8%
Occupation	Housewives 72%, Agricultural Labour 18%, SHG-linked Micro-entrepreneurs 7%
Caste	SC 38%, ST 12%, OBC 18%, General 32%

- Average age: 38 years (younger than male counterparts at 46).
- Religion: 68% Muslim, 29% Hindu, 3% others (reflects population but slightly under-represents Hindu SC).
- Education: 28% illiterate, 42% primary, 22% secondary, 8% higher secondary and above (better than rural female average but still low).
- Occupation: 72% housewife, 18% agricultural labour, 7% SHG-linked micro-entrepreneurs.
- Cast: 38% SC, 12% ST, 18% OBC, 32% General (higher SC because of combined reservation).

4.3 Proxy Governance: Still the Dominant Pattern 62% of surveyed women admitted that major decisions (tender,

beneficiary selection, fund allocation) are taken by husband, brother-in-law, or son. Common phrases: “আমি শুধু সই করি, কাজ ওরাই করে” (I only sign, they do the work). In Muslim-majority blocks (Raninagar, Jalangi, Domkal), purdah norms

and low mobility make proxy rule almost normative. In 11 out of 18 observed GP meetings, husbands or male relatives sat beside or behind the woman pradhan and answered questions.

Table 3. Indicators of Proxy Governance

Indicator	Finding
Women admitting major decisions taken by husband/relatives	62%
Prevalence in Muslim-majority blocks	Very high
Observed GP meetings where husbands sat beside/behind the woman Pradhan	11 out of 18 meetings
Typical response	“I only sign; they do the work.”

4.4 Emerging Agency: The Minority Trend Despite the above, 29% women (especially younger, matriculate or above, and those who received training from state programmes like ISGPL, MGNREGA Mate training, or belonged to strong SHGs) reported:

- Independently attending block and district meetings
- Raising domestic violence and child marriage cases in the Gram Sansad

- Prioritising women-centric schemes (Kanyashree, Rupashree, Swasthya Sathi, Jal Jeevan Mission taps inside anganwadi premises)
- In 2023, 312 women contested and 87 won on general (unreserved) seats—mostly SC and younger women.

Table 4. Indicators of Emerging Agency (Active Women Representatives)

Indicator	Finding
Women reporting independent decision-making	29%
Common activities	Attending block/district meetings independently; raising issues of domestic violence, child marriage
Gendered issues prioritised	Drinking water, sanitation, ICDS services, and domestic violence
Women contesting general (unreserved) seats in 2023	312
Women who won general seats	87
Most active segments	Young, educated, SC women; trained or SHG-linked representatives

4.5 Intersectional Barriers (a) Religion: Muslim women face stronger purdah restrictions and lower intra-household bargaining power. (b) Caste–Class: SC women from landless labour households have a higher workload and less time. (c) Literacy: Illiterate women depend on the GP secretary (almost always male) and become easy prey for manipulation. (d) Political Patronage: Most women enter via husband’s or family’s party affiliation (TMC 78%, CPI(M) 12%, BJP 8%). Independent political ideology is rare.

4.6 Impact on Gendered Development Outcomes Blocks with a higher percentage of “active” women pradhans (self-reported + observation) show:

- 18–22% more household toilets constructed under SBM-G
- 30% higher registration of girls under Kanyashree
- More functional Village Health Sanitation & Nutrition Committees with women ASHAs playing a central role. Yet, large infrastructure projects (roads, drains) remain male-dominated domains.

5. DISCUSSION

Three decades after the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the experience of women Representatives in Murshidabad demonstrate the complex and often contradictory outcomes of gender quotas in local governance. While reservations have undeniably ensured high numerical presence, translating this descriptive representation

into substantive representation remains a persistent challenge, a concern widely discussed in feminist political scholarship (Kudva, 2003; Jayal, 2006; Ghosh, 2003). The Murshidabad case confirms what previous pan-Indian studies have highlighted—that numerical entry does not automatically dismantle the socio-cultural hierarchies within which women operate, nor does it fully democratise the gendered nature of everyday governance.

The widespread prevalence of proxy governance in the district further supports earlier analyses by Rai (2007), Baviskar (2003), and Pal (2004), who argue that women’s political presence often coexists with male control over decision-making in patriarchal rural contexts. The finding that 62% of elected women depend on their husbands or male relatives for major administrative decisions reflects a larger pattern of “delegated authority” that has been normalised in many regions. Such proxies are not merely evidence of women’s individual limitations but are embedded within the structural logic of patriarchal bargaining, where women’s participation is permitted as long as it does not fundamentally disrupt established gender hierarchies.

At the same time, Murshidabad also shows emerging signs of agency among younger, educated, and politically mentored women, echoing Kabeer’s (1999) framework of expanding resources, agency, and achievements. Their ability to independently attend meetings, raise issues of sanitation, gender-based violence, ICDS functioning, and child marriage

signifies an evolving form of empowerment that goes beyond token participation. This shift aligns with Sen's capability approach, which argues that genuine empowerment occurs when individuals enhance their substantive freedoms and capacity to act. These active representatives—especially those from Scheduled Caste backgrounds or with SHG linkages—embody a gradual, bottom-up transformation within the Panchayati Raj system.

However, the persistence of symbolic violence and doxa, as conceptualized by Bourdieu, continues to shape women's political experience. Social norms that restrict Muslim women's mobility, caste-based occupational burdens on SC women, and the bureaucratic dominance of male secretaries all reinforce the gendered power structures that circumscribe women's autonomy. Even where women hold formal authority, the internalized acceptance of male superiority often prevents them from claiming full political space. This dynamic demonstrates that decentralised governance cannot be studied in isolation from the socio-cultural field within which it is embedded.

The state's role has also produced mixed outcomes. Although West Bengal introduced ambitious capacity-building initiatives, existing studies and field observations suggest that training has not reached a majority of women representatives, often due to mobility constraints or household resistance. As also argued by Rai (2011), institutional reforms are insufficient unless accompanied by efforts to shift social norms and gender relations within the household. The limited reach of training programmes in Murshidabad illustrates how governance reforms must be integrated with broader social reforms to have transformative impact.

Overall, the findings suggest that Murshidabad stands at a transitional moment between tokenism and transformative leadership. The reservation policy has succeeded in opening doors, but the space inside remains contested. The gradual rise of assertive women leaders demonstrates that gender quotas can become transformative—but only when accompanied by investments in capacity-building, institutional support, and shifts in community attitudes. Without addressing the entrenched structures of patriarchy, the promise of Panchayati Raj as a vehicle for women's empowerment will continue to remain only partially fulfilled.

6. CONCLUSION

The experience of women representatives in the Panchayati Raj Institutions of Murshidabad reveals both the transformative potential and the enduring limitations of gender reservations in local governance. The district's consistently high levels of women's representation—often exceeding 50 percent—demonstrate the success of constitutional reforms in opening political spaces that had historically been inaccessible to rural women. Yet, as this study shows, the mere numerical presence of women has not automatically translated into corresponding shifts in decision-making power. Proxy governance, patriarchal bargaining within households, low literacy levels, religious conservatism in many Muslim-majority blocks, and caste-class

inequalities continue to shape women's everyday political experience and constrain their substantive participation.

Despite these challenges, the emergence of a small yet significant cohort of active women—especially younger, educated, Scheduled Caste, and SHG-linked representatives—signals meaningful though uneven progress. These women are not only engaging more confidently with administrative processes but are also raising gendered concerns such as sanitation, domestic violence, drinking water access, and child protection within Gram Sabha and block-level platforms. Their presence indicates that reservations can nurture leadership and expand women's political capabilities when supported by training, institutional mentoring, and enabling socio-cultural environments.

The findings underscore that empowerment in local governance cannot be achieved through electoral reforms alone. Structural changes within households, shifts in community norms, institutional accountability mechanisms, and sustained capacity-building initiatives are essential to ensure that women exercise real agency rather than symbolic authority. Strengthening state-led training programmes, creating women-centric resource centres at the block level, enforcing legal measures against proxy practices, and encouraging political parties to field more women in general seats are critical steps towards this goal.

In conclusion, the case of Murshidabad illustrates that gender quotas have laid a foundational pathway for women's political inclusion, but the journey towards equality in local governance remains incomplete. For the Panchayati Raj system to realise its full democratic promise, it must not only place women in positions of authority but also dismantle the patriarchal structures that prevent them from exercising it. Only when both public institutions and private domestic relations evolve simultaneously will the promise of "half the seats for half the population" translate into genuine, transformative empowerment for rural women.

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