

WOMEN COUNCILLORS IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE: A STUDY IN SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL, INDIA**Dr. Antara Ray^{1*}**

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology Presidency University, Kolkata

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Antara Ray**Abstract:**

The present paper will look into the women as political agents within the local decentralized political system of India. To do so, data is collected, collated and subjective views are interpreted and analysed from two municipal bodies from the southern district of the state West Bengal. The paper would like to observe how the 74th Amendment of Constitution where one third seats got reserved for women, has an impact on women and society at large after 20 years of its implementation. It would also like to observe the gender biases prevailing in the participation of women in the politics of grassroot level in Indian context.

In the context of Indian governance, the Constitutional Amendments 73rd and 74th were significant milestones in decentralizing power to local bodies, empowering communities, and promoting grassroots democracy. However, the glaring gender disparity in these bodies called for further reform. The reservation of one-third of local governance seats for women through the 73rd Amendment was a crucial step towards addressing this imbalance and promoting gender equality in decision-making processes. This initiative not only aimed to enhance women's participation in governance but also sought to bring diverse perspectives and priorities to the forefront of local policymaking. By ensuring women have a meaningful role in decision-making, these amendments not only uphold democratic principles of inclusion and representation, but also contribute to more equitable and effective governance at the grassroots level. West Bengal was one of the first states to adopt the provisions of 74th Amendment of Constitution and in 1995, for the first time during the municipal elections, constituencies were reserved.

Methodology

The data is collected from two municipalities Baruipur and Rajpur-Sonarapur of South 24 Parganas. Women councillors, residents of the wards, male councillors and other officials working in the municipality were taken as samples. Semi-structured interview schedule, personal narratives and participant observation are conducted for both the women elected administrators, as well as local residents. The sample was selected purposively for the 07 and 15 women elected administrators from Baruipur and Rajpur-Sonarapur respectively along with 30 male councillors and 250 local residents are selected through random sampling from voter list. The narratives and data collected, is compared with the objectives of this present work.

A total of 22 wards are taken that has women councillors for the purpose of the work to understand women in politics and decision making in the local governance. These wards were chosen as they have a woman councillor for the last few years. A total of 250 respondents are interviewed. The present work has recorded and observed certain significant aspects regarding accountability, efficiency and transparency among elected representatives while interviewing the resident voters of this ward. Their opinion about the role of women councillors in facilitating their access, choices and usage of municipal services will be an important indicator about their performance since they are now legitimately participating in the process of decision making. The study also tried look into the other civil bodies, one being women's wing of TMC (Trinomool Congress) of the district.

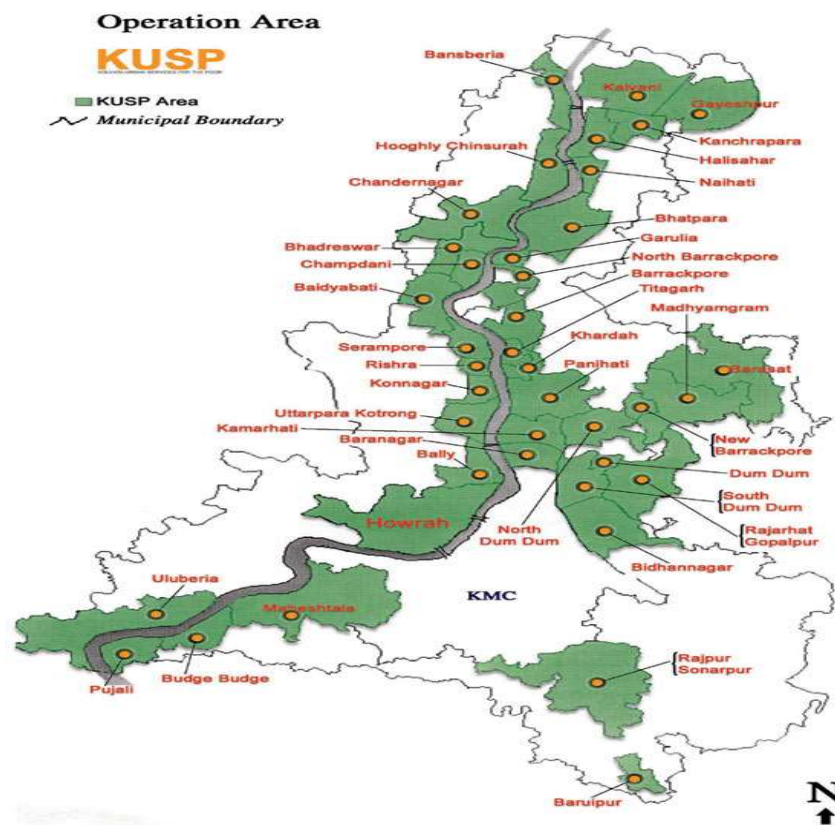
Objectives

The paper would like to examine how the agency and participation of women fairing in the decision-making process within local governance after the 74th amendment of constitution. Additionally, the paper would like to discern whether gender sensitive decisions are being undertaken due to the presence of women councillors. The paper would also like to observe the opinion of local residents at large and their perception about women as political leaders. Finally, the paper would like to critically examine the views and perception of male politicians about their female counterparts and the prevailing gender biases.

Description of the Southern District South 24 Parganas and the Baruipur and Rajpur-Sonarpur Municipalities within the district

South 24 Parganas is the southern most district of the state of West Bengal, India and adjacent to the metropolitan Kolkata and stretches to the remotest riverine villages to the deltas, mangroves and banks of Bay of Bengal. The population mostly resides in rural area and sometimes lack transport and other facilities due to difficult geographical location.

Within this district, the two municipalities chosen for this work is located. Rajpur-Sonarpur Municipality is adjacent to Kolkata Municipal Corporation with a population of 4,70,000 (Men:2,25,000, Women: 2,05,000 and Children:40,000) according to 2011 census and an area of 49.25sq. km and has a total of 35 wards out of which 15 wards have women as councillor. Baruipur Municipality is also located in the district of South twenty Four Parganas, close to Kolkata Municipal Corporation and Sundarbans. It covers a total area of 9.07 sq.km. The total population of the municipality according to 2011 data is 53191 (sex ratio is 947:1000 and child populations is 11.6% as per 2001 census) that consist of a total of 17 wards. The literacy rate is 87.3% and illiterate is 12.7% (2001 census). (<http://baruipurmunicipality.org.in>). Both the Chairman and the Vice- Chairman are men in these two municipalities.



Motivation and Aims of Women Councillors:

Several studies have highlighted the complexities surrounding women's participation in local governance in India. Notably, research by scholars in West Bengal (Asha Bauri et al., p. 142-158) emphasizes the dual nature of women's involvement, distinguishing between effective and pseudo-participation. This distinction underscores the various factors that influence women's engagement in local politics, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities they face. Similarly, a study on the impact of women Pradhans in Gram Panchayats during the COVID-19 pandemic (V. Pandey et al.) highlights the importance of institutional support and community dynamics in determining women's effectiveness in governance roles. These insights suggest that factors such as political empowerment, awareness levels, institutional structures, and economic conditions play crucial roles in motivating women to join and excel in local governance in India. By critically examining these factors, we can better understand the drivers behind women's increasing involvement in political spheres at the grassroots level. T.K.Oommen said "if a substantial proportion of the population participates in diverse developmental activities at all levels in a society," we can claim that in this society popular participation takes place. (ibid. 174-176) He would also like to observe how local governance in urban India has resulted in bringing about "consensual equilibrium fostering participatory culture." (ibid. p. 172). For that, the firstly this research tried collect information from the women councillors with regard to their motivations and other reasons that have cemented the way towards their joining politics. While doing so and taking responses, it was significant to note that while interviewing the women councillors in this field that hardly many of them belonged to a family with political background, but all these women had an inclination to do something of their own. Though having a woman Chief minister in the state of West Bengal, the current women councillors have always found it encouraging enough to join the political field, but the one third reservation of municipality seats cemented the way in the accomplishment of their drive. It has also been found that their husbands and other family members have encouraged them

to actively participate in politics given the fact that it is difficult for the male counterparts to participate in the elections given the provision of reservation of women in the municipality. Therefore, most of the women councillors of this municipality strongly believe that reservation of seats in the municipality have played an important role to gain seats of power in the political field. They are of the opinion that if there was no provision for reservation of women in municipality, it would have been extremely difficult to create a mark in this field of politics given the gender biases inherent in the society.

On the other side, the most of the male counterparts (Male Councillors) believe that 74th Amendment has resulted as a hurdle and barrier for many deserving male candidates. Though the male counterparts were not quite obvious with their words but the study observed that they feel female councillors are competent but not as enterprising as their male counterparts. They believe that women are often found to be too generous and easy-going in taking difficult resolutions. Also, they believed that women councillors lack participation in work on everyday basis as the women give more importance to home and that they can never ignore completely. It was seen that the male counterparts are still biased about the competence and ability of their women counterparts. They are also of the opinion that if there wouldn't have been a reservation, it would have been very difficult for women councillors to come to the position that they hold right now. The male counterparts are openly sceptic about the capacities of women councillors' inspite of the fact that the state is headed by a female chief minister for two terms.

Participation of Women Councillors in Regular Activities of the Municipality:

Here we have tried to observe whether the women councillors attended meetings regularly that were held within the municipal corporations and also in the field within the jurisdiction of the Municipalities. The data here was gathered by interviewing the women councillors, male councillors, chairman of the municipality board and other official staff working here.

When the women councillors were approached and asked if they attend all the meetings, all of them responded that they attend all the meetings always. They do not miss any important meetings as they believe it gives them a sense of agency and prominence. At the same time they argued that these meetings are significant as through these official meetings, they can mark their presence felt and participate in the decision making process. Given the fact that the chairman of the board is a male, so these women councillors believe that it is important for the women to be present and provide them with their perspectives and that do get appreciated in most of the times.

Interestingly, while talking to the male counterparts, they are of slightly different opinion than the female councillors. Though they agreed to some extent if not completely that the women councillors attend meetings but they argued that they do not attend all the meetings. Also, they are of opinion that many a times they try to change the timings of the meetings if possible. This is not true about all the women councillors but this is the case with some of the women councillors. But they believe that mostly they are regular in attending offices at Municipality.

The work tried to collate the responses received from both women and men councillors by taking responses from the official staffs who are involved in the workings of the municipality. Significantly, none of them responded that the women councillors are not sincere with regard to attending meetings. But they alleged that the women councillors are more comfortable in doing the meetings within the municipal corporation building rather than somewhere outside. But the women councillors are mostly active and sincerely attend all the meetings and try and participate by giving their views with regard to their jurisdiction.

Participation in the Decision Making of Municipal Corporation:

74th Amendment Act of Constitution made provisions for women's reservation in the Municipal bodies but then it becomes essential to understand if that has made inroads for women in participating in the

decision making or not. The present study tried to understand the views and experiences of women councillors in this regard. For this purpose, interviews are conducted with the women councillors to record their views and within this period two policies are taken into account to understand the participation of women councillors in making decisions and its implementation other than regular policies of their wards.

While talking to the women councillors, they are of the opinion that initially it was difficult for them to make a mark in the decision-making processes and more so about the implementation of the policies. But the argumentative nature and the in-depth knowledge about their wards, have paved ways towards making successful decisions. With the 74th Amendment in force, there is quite a dominance of women councillors with the male dominated field of politics and therefore that has helped the women councillors to bargain their agency within the field of local politics and governance. Majority of the women councillors are aware about their power and functions.

Further, it was also seen that though women regularly attend the meetings and their opinion about the various policies and programmes are taken heed of, yet all the 22 women councillors have pointed out that it has not necessarily helped them to reduce bias, discrimination and torture based on gender, structurally wide spread in society. Though their family (prior or after marriage) have not come on their way, but political parties, irrespective of gender, bring hardship in their independence in decision taking. The women councillors are all graduates in terms of education and some of them are also service holders like one woman councillor is a school teacher. Despite of being aware and educated all the women councillors believe in prevailing gender biases.

On the other hand, the male councillors are of the opinion that though the women councillors are aware of the problems but they are not always competent in solving the problems and making correct decisions. They also alleged that women councillors readily raised the grievances or problems of their respective wards but are not spontaneous or aware enough with regard to providing solutions to the matter in concern. According to the male councillors and other staff of the municipal corporation, it was observed that they are of the opinion that the women councillors are unaware and do not take much initiative in educating themselves with regard to making decisions towards problem solving. They always either delay the issue in hand or take appropriate help from others to solve problems. There is also a lack of provisions from the government in general with regard to educating women councillors with regard to existing policies and therefore there exist a lack of awareness. The study found that the women councillors are expected to behave like the menfolk when making decisions and that is why the ways of decision making of women are considered to be less effective. When the women councillors are asked about it, all of them refuted the opinions of the male counterparts and believe that they are competent in making decisions in their own way but yes they all sometimes consult the decision either with their senior members of the party or municipality or sometimes their husbands.

Notwithstanding these, there is a gradual change in perception and women have shown determination to seek redressal. They are heightening and quickening the pace of policy and implementation towards concerns like health, childcare, water, sanitation, schooling, family planning, literacy mission etc. But the respondent women representatives were not in favour of dedicating themselves exclusively to women's issues or developmental cause as an activist, rather emphasize on collective cause of holistic urban development that is sustainable in long run.

Awareness of Women Councillors in the working of Municipal Corporations

The study found that the women councillors are mostly not quite aware of fine-prints of various rules and regulations with regard to the working of municipal corporations. This is truer with regard to those who are newly elected councillors. The women councillors who are elected in their ward for a repeat time, they were little better equipped with the understanding of the working of the municipality. The

working of municipality can include urban planning, registration of births and deaths, planning for social and economic development, solid waste management, sanitation related work, water supply, regulation of land usage and construction, making provisions for street lighting, parking lots, bus stops, fire services, improvement and upgradation of slums, making provisions of various urban amenities such as playgrounds, park and gardens, poverty alleviation, crematorium grounds, electric crematoriums, prevention of cruelty against animals and so on. But it has been found that most of the women councillors are unaware of the works under the purview of municipality. The few common works that all the women councillors are aware of are registration of birth and death, regulation of land and construction, maintenance of proper roads, sanitation and lighting. Other than these, the women councillors are either unaware or reluctant in the rest of the matters as they believe that other matters are of secondary concern and which is the view of all the women councillors.

Other types of work of municipality is the collection of revenues that comes from property taxes, water supply bills, rents from municipal corporation owned markets and sometimes houses and along with it the several grants provided by the state governments. The work found that other than the taxes collected by the municipalities, the women councillors are not much aware of the various kinds of grants that are provided by various sources, one source being the state government. Though they are conscious and aware of the funds that are allocated for the construction and maintenance of roads and the like but they are completely unaware of the allocation of funds for other purposes and they are mostly of the opinion that the chairman looks into the funding and other issues. So when it comes to the allocation of funds for their wards, the women councillors are mostly dependent on the chairman of the municipality. Though these women councillors bargain for the funds for the maintenance of their wards in various public matters but they lack a complete understanding of urban and local planning and governance. This will get clearer once we look into the data collected from the resident voters of the various wards where the councillors are mostly women.

Awareness of Women councillors with regard to Governmental Schemes:

In continuation with the last section, where it has been found that women councillors are somewhat reluctant and unaware of the working of a municipality in its entirety, it became essential for the work to know and understand about the knowledge of women councillors with regard to the various government schemes that are present in West Bengal for which provisions are there. In order to understand awareness and knowledge about those schemes, the present work has looked into certain schemes and provisions that are there. The following table shows the level of awareness and knowledge about such schemes:

Table 1

Sl. No.	Name of the Schemes	Known by the Councillors (out of 22)
1.	Shabajsree ¹	7
2.	Khadyasathi ²	9
3.	Shufal Bangla ³	7
4.	Gitanjali ⁴	7
5.	Nija Griha Nija Bhumi ⁵	7
6.	Kanyashree ⁶	22
7.	Shikshashree ⁷	9
8.	Gatidhara ⁸	7

9.	Lok Prasar ⁹	7
10.	Sabala ¹⁰	8
11.	Yubashree ¹¹	12
12.	Swabalamban ¹²	8
13.	Shabujasathi ¹³	7
14.	Swasthsathi ¹⁴	22
15.	Anandadhara ¹⁵	7
16.	Samabyathi ¹⁶	7

From the above table, it can be observed that not all women councillors are aware of all the schemes of the state and government. When the male councillors are asked about their opinion with regard to the awareness and knowledge of women councillors, they were of the opinion that it was the male councillors who made them aware of various schemes and benefits of the government which the women were unaware of.

On the contrary, the women councillors are of the opinion that government does not make provisions to sensitise women political participants towards various schemes and sometimes they do not get any help from their male counterparts. The male counterparts sometimes, in order to maintain their male dominance, do not help these women with informations. But the women councillors are enterprising enough to find it themselves many a times. They believe that fighting elections and gaining a position have helped them to be enterprising and assertive. Hence, the reservation of local governance has significantly helped women in their upliftment and to gain confidence but still there is lack of knowledge dissemination.

Women Councillors' relationship with Women Organisations and Women Centric Agendas

The study tried to understand if the women councillors want to/can act as a representative of women. Also, the study tried to ascertain if there is any relationship between the women councillors and women's organisation and whether women centric issues are been raised and focussed or not. Therefore, the study tried to interview five (5) women's organisation working in the district of South Twenty Four Parganas. Along with it, the study till now could only talk to the women's wing of TMC (Trinomool Congress) of the district. With regard to the women's wing of TMC party, it has been found that the TMC women councillors are the part of the TMC women's wings. But the women's wing of the party is always subordinated within the mainstream party and they mostly look into the functioning, representation and membership of women in the party. Hardly, the women's wings take up issues pertaining to women unless and until some issues get aggravated within the locality.

Out of 22 women councillors 13 were party members of TMC prior to becoming the councillor. Rest 9 women councillors were chosen by the TMC party for the election. They were selected on the basis of factors like clean image, serving the party for substantial length of time, popularity in general in the district and at large like some well-known personality or local celebrity, educational background like teacher/lawyer, the background of the family and so on.

With regard to the independent women organisation of the district, it has been found that the women councillor are not a part of any women's organisation for that matter and these women organisation rather showed their distrust and grievance towards the women councillors and believe that nothing significant have changed over the period of time despite the fact that now one can see women's participation more in the political sphere and more so in municipality due to 74th Amendment and the encouragement thereafter.

The women's organisation believe that a woman's issue is only taken up when it gets political in nature otherwise there is no fundamental change in the working of the women councillors with regard to the

local governance. But the women councillors are of a different opinion. They believe that they give a lot of importance to the women's issues of their constituency and they always bargain their position within the municipality and given an opportunity in the higher levels of the party. They are always aware of the issues related to women in their areas and keep an eye on any kind of abuse. But the study found that none of the women councillors were a member of women's organisation prior to becoming the councillor. Infact they only became the member of women's organisation and that too of TMC's women's wing only after becoming the councillor.

Views of the Resident Voters of the Wards in the municipalities

Firstly, when the resident voters are asked whether the women councillors are approachable or not, they are of the opinion that there was a time when it was the husband/brother/father of the councillor who meet them whenever they approach them with some of their problems or issues. Many a times, since some of the councillors are also working and have lack of time, so most of the times it is the husbands or some other male folk hold the meetings on their behalf. Almost all the residents have faced this at one point of time that even if the woman councillor meets them, it was always the husband or some other menfolk that take the decision. Mostly it is the husband who used to dominate a decision making process and the women councillor always consults while taking a decision.

But this has changed over the period of time and now the older as well as young residents submitted that nowadays, it is always the women councillors who visit them, conduct meeting with the residents and always available for any kind of problem solving and decision making. This is a significant observation of the study that observed how women slowly got emancipated, developed confidence and awareness in decision making and problem solving. Thereby, shows the significant change brought about by the reservation of seats for women in local bodies.

Secondly, the resident voters are of the opinion that there is one benefit in having a woman councillors is that being a woman, she has motherly nature and understands women issues and problems better than a male counterparts. They also feel that there are several kinds of problems related to women that is extremely difficult for some women resident voters to express in front of a male councillor. Furthermore they believe that a man is not as empathetic and sympathetic as a woman towards issues like domestic violence, issues related to marriage, eve-teasing, dowry and the like that makes a woman victim. In these kind of issues a woman councillor always hear them out and try to solve the problems with more patience and care unlike a male councillor. In these matters the women resident voters are in fact happier to have a woman as a councillor where she is more reachable than a male councillor.

Not only that, the resident voters are of the opinion that a woman councillor is more compassionate towards the problems of children and especially of those who are from economically poor background. Though the woman councillor takes the opinion of her male counterparts that include her husband mostly, but still she tries to help the children in distress with regard to education and other factors. Furthermore, as per the resident voters, the woman councillors are also dutiful, compassionate and sympathetic towards the third gender. If needed they also listen to the problems of the third gender and deal with those with utmost care and attention. This is also the case with aged people and their problems like provision of health care facilities in local health centres. If required the women councillors try to make all the provisions and sign the papers diligently to accelerate the process of any kind of hospitalisations and medical concern. Therefore, according to the resident voters of these wards where women are the councillors, it has been stated by all the respondents that they are much more empathetic and compassionate towards the problems of women, children, aged and third gender.

Thirdly, it has been found while interviewing the resident voters that after getting a woman councillor in their wards, one can visibly observe that the participation of women in the local politics and governance has increased significantly. Earlier where women were reluctant in participating in the

electoral politics like campaigning, taking membership in political parties, working for the party and civil society, all these have increased to a great extent after the election of the women councillors. The resident voters believe that having a women councillor have given a boost to the ego and willingness to make a mark in the locality and also a desire to gain some power have been witnessed among many women in the locality. The local political parties are continuously facing an influx in the membership by the women of the locality. The resident voters believe that the presence of a woman councillor have paved way for other women to enter the local politics. Though the resident voters do not believe that it has in any way lessened the hold of patriarchy and mockery that they face by the men of the locality but still women are equally encouraged to enter and work for the political parties.

With regard to the issue of corruption, it was difficult to extract specific incidents from the resident voters but all of them are of the opinion that having a woman councillor did not mark any significant change with regard to corruption and asking for some benefits either in cash or gifts. But mostly these are not being done by the women councillors directly but by the male counterparts who surround them almost all the time. Any work related to construction, land, business, roads and the like have met with some unacceptable events that needed special benefits that the people in concern have to provide to the party and the local governance in some form. This shows that there is no difference in the matter of political favour when a woman becomes a councillor.

Lastly when the resident voters were being asked if they are aware of the 74th Amendment of Constitution, it was found that hardly anyone knows about this amendment. They are of the opinion mostly that they thought it is a decision of the party to make a constituency reserved for women or not. Also, whether a woman is going to fight the local election or not, is completely dependent on the party. Therefore, it was found here in this case that the government again lacks in initiative to educate the people with regard to the reservation of women in local governance.

Gender Biases of Male Politicians

In India, male political figures frequently maintain entrenched stereotypes and biases against female colleagues, thus sustaining a cycle of gender prejudice within the political sphere. Research illustrates that these biases are not confined to India alone, as studies have highlighted similar phenomena among Japanese voters, who, akin to numerous male politicians, nurture robust stereotypes regarding women's proficiency in policy-making and their personal traits (Yuya Endo et al., p. 371-386). Similar cases are found in the present work as well. Such stereotypes, woven into societal norms, are significant contributors to the insufficient support that female politicians receive from their male counterparts, consequently obstructing their political advancement. Additionally, gender stereotyping is instrumental in fostering discriminatory practices, as highlighted by disparities in professional outcomes between men and women, where women are often penalized for displaying attributes or behaviours that deviate from traditional stereotypes (M. Heilman et al.). Here, in the political domain, these ingrained stereotypes and prejudices materialize in the systemic gender biases that thwart the advancement of women at multiple governmental levels.

The opposition and deficit of support extended to female politicians by their male peers have origins deeply nestled in gender prejudices dominant within the political sphere. Male politicians frequently perceive women entering the political domain as a menace to their pre-existing strongholds of power and long-standing patriarchal customs. This hesitance to endorse female politicians not merely obstructs their advancement but equally sustains the inequity and marginalization encountered by women in the political arena. Studies have illuminated that male politicians generally tend to belittle the competences of their female counterparts, discredit their propositions, and exclude them from vital decision-making assemblies. Without the required backing, female politicians grapple to achieve noteworthy contributions, thereby reinforcing the prevailing gender imbalances in Indian politics. It becomes crucial

for male politicians to discern and confront these prejudices to foster a more inclusive and just political environment in India (Prem R. Bhardwaj).

Concluding Remarks

The reservations of one-third of local governance seats for women in India, as mandated by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, have undeniably increased the representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). However, as observed (Bhaskar Kumar Kakati), while the reservation policy has enabled women, particularly tribal women in Assam, to enter local governance structures, it has not uprooted the underlying patriarchal norms within these institutions. Moreover, as discussed (Dr. L. Thirupathi), challenges such as proxy politics, power-brokering, and gender-based discrimination persist, hindering the effective empowerment of women in PRIs. Despite some positive outcomes, including a focus on development issues and increased participation, the need for deeper institutional reforms to address systemic gender inequalities and ensure meaningful participation and influence of women in local governance remains paramount. The complexities and nuances of gender dynamics within PRIs necessitate continuous scrutiny and intervention to truly transform the landscape of women's political representation in India.

The impact of Constitutional Amendments 73rd and 74th in reserving one-third of local governance seats for women in India has been significant. These amendments aimed to increase women's participation in decision-making processes at the grassroots level, thereby empowering them and addressing their underrepresentation in leadership positions. Studies have shown that the reservation policy has led to a substantial increase in the number of women holding elected office. It has also facilitated the inclusion of women's perspectives in policy-making and governance, leading to more gender-sensitive development initiatives (Commonwealth Secretariat). However, challenges remain in terms of ensuring effective implementation of the reservation policy, overcoming deep-rooted gender biases, and providing adequate support and resources for women leaders. Moving forward, it is essential to address these challenges to maximize the impact of these constitutional amendments on women's empowerment and gender equality in India.

Future Implications and Recommendations for Enhancing Women's Participation in Local Governance

Scholars and policymakers must consider the future implications of reserving one-third of local governance seats for women in India. While this policy has made significant strides in enhancing women's participation, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. First, ongoing efforts should focus on increasing women's political literacy and leadership skills through targeted training programs. Second, there is a need for more systematic efforts to dismantle patriarchal norms that inhibit women from fully engaging in decision-making processes. Additionally, it is crucial to monitor and evaluate the implementation of this policy to ensure its effectiveness and address any shortcomings. By continuing to prioritize the enhancement of women's participation in local governance, India can foster more inclusive and equitable decision-making processes that benefit society as a whole.

Furthermore, in order to address and mitigate gender bias exhibited by male politicians within the Indian political sphere, there exists a necessity for the introduction of structural modifications within the political framework. An approach worth considering might involve the imposition of gender quotas to assure equitable representation of women in elected roles. Supplementary to this, the implementation of sensitization initiatives and educational workshops aimed towards male politicians to confront their pre-existing biases and perceptions concerning their female counterparts are advised. Establishing an environment characterized by safety and inclusivity is of utmost importance, enabling female politicians to articulate their concerns without encountering backlash or discrimination. Additionally, the increased

visibility and acknowledgment of successful female politicians may contribute to challenging extant stereotypes, potentially inspiring a greater number of women to engage in political endeavors. Through deliberate efforts aimed at the deconstruction of gender biases in the political domain, India may advance towards a society marked by greater equity and inclusivity, wherein all individuals, regardless of gender, possess equal opportunities to partake in the decision-making process.

Notes

The description of the following policies can be referred to “Ray. Antara, (2018), Interface of Caste and Public Policy: A Case of West Bengal (Unpublished; Invited Lecture on 10th -11th December, 2018 at Institute of Public Policy, National Law School of India, Bengaluru)”.

1. **Shabujshree:** Under this policy which was launched in 2016, after the birth of every girl child, a sapling of a tree will be given to the parents of the child which can be helpful in future for the child's prospect.
2. **Khadyasathi:** It is a policy of ensuring food security and management of targeted public distribution system and procurement of paddy and rice at MSP to prevent distressed sale. It also ensured providing rice and wheat at Rs.2 per kg to those people under Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) categories. It was launched in January 2016.
3. **Shufal Bangla:** Started on 29th September, 2014. Government will directly buy farm produce from peasants and will sell it to people in mobile vans at 14 outlets. Basic objectives of this project are 1) to help the farmer's get premium price and have rational share in consumer's price, 2) To supply quality produce at less retail price and have rational share in consumer's price and 3) Make fruit and vegetable producer's retail market competitive.
4. **Gitanjali:** Under this, government will provide Rs70000 in plains and Rs. 75000 in hill terrains to build own houses for those who are unable to build a house of their own. A person who has a undisputed land and monthly income is less than Rs.6000 comes under this policy.
5. **Nija Griha Nija Bhumi:** Nijo Griha Nijo Bhumi Prakalpo was launched on 18th October, 2011 by Government of West Bengal for providing 5 decimal of land to each identified eligible beneficiary family that is to all landless homesteadless agricultural labourers, village artisans and fishermen in rural areas.
6. **Kanyashree:** This is the most famous policy of the current WB government which is also awarded by UN. It aims to improve the status and well being of girls particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged families through Conditional Cash Transfer by incentivizing them to continue their education and complete secondary and higher secondary education or equivalent modes of education. Also this tries to delay the marriage till the age of 18 years so as to improve maternal and newborns health conditions.
7. **Shikshashree:** Shikshashree is a scholarship scheme which was introduced in 2014 for scheduled caste (SC) category students from classes V to VIII. The scholarship is being paid directly into the bank accounts of the students. During financial years 2014-17, almost 38 lakh students were covered under this scheme.
8. **Gatidhara:** It was launched in 2014 under which government gives loan upto Rs 10lakh on easy instalment basis to anable people buy small trucks, cars and the like for commercial purposes along with a subsidy of 30 percent or up to 1 lakh over sanctioned loan while the repayment of the same. Those who have a family income of Rs 25000 or less per month can avail this scheme.
9. **Lok Prasar:** Lok Prasar was launched in 2014 to rejuvenate the folk art of Bengal. Folk artistes between 18 and 60 years of age receive a retainership fee of Rs 1,000, and in addition an opportunity for four performances per month, with Rs 1,000 paid for each. Senior artistes, that is, those above 60, receive a similar sum as monthly pension.

10. **Sabala:** It was started in 2011 aiming at the adolescent girls of 11-18 years to improve their health status and also to train them with knowledge on family welfare, health and hygiene, life skills and informing and guiding them on existing public services. It was implemented in seven districts of Bengal.²¹
11. **Yubashree:** It was initiated in 2013 in order to extend financial assistance of Rs.1500 per month to 1 lakh per month for those job seekers registered in the employment bank portal which was launched earlier by the same government. Youth are selected on the basis of certain criteria like education (those who are atleast passed eight standard) and age (between the age of 18 years to 45 years). The recipients of this scheme must utilize it for training or vocational purpose that will help them to gain employment.
12. **Swabalamban Special:** It is a scheme aimed towards imparting vocational training to women who are victims of trafficking, sex workers, transgender women and women of such socially marginalized groups. The age group aimed at is 18 to 35 years but can be relaxed till 45 years.
13. **Shabujasathi:** It is launched in 2015 where students (both boys and girls) of class IX, X, XI and XII are being given bicycles to commute to school and back home conveniently.
14. **Swasthsathi:** It was announced in 2016 and is a cashless group health insurance scheme (that is, including families) for all those employed by the State Government's departments, both permanently and part-time. It is meant for various categories of employees like panchayat functionaries, para-workers like ASHAs, anganwadi workers and civic police volunteers, contractual, part-time and daily wage earners under various departments, teachers and non-teaching staff of primary schools, secondary schools and government-aided madrasahs, and others.
15. **Anandadhara:** It was launched in 2012 which is an anti-poverty programme aimed at rural poor and implemented through the self-help groups (SHG) of women.
16. **Samabyathi:** This scheme was launched in 2016 that provides money (Rs 2000) to the immediate kin of poor people in rural regions for organizing funerals.

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