

**WOMEN AND 2018 PANCHAYAT ELECTIONS IN WEST
BENGAL:**

FROM CAMPAIGN TO BOARD FORMATION AND AFTER

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All information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature Review

Women's involvement in politics saw a sharp decline in the post-independence period. Even though the Indian Constitution granted universal suffrage and the right to equality and equal opportunity, women were restricted in such attempts by the patriarchal values of the society. Defining politics as a male endeavour, they were persuaded to stay inside the private domain of the family. With a few exceptions, those women who joined politics did so through familial connections. Although there has been a steady increase in women's political awareness and participation, their presence in the political space as seekers of political power, position and authority is still marginal. Their ability to produce an impact on the political system has been negligible because of the inadequate attention given to their political education by the political parties and the state.

Over the years the number of women contesting elections at all the levels of the Union government has increased. From 45 women contestants in the Second Lok Sabha elections it has risen to 668 after the Sixteenth Lok Sabha elections. As of 2017 women constitute 11.2% of total number of seats in the lower house of the Parliament. Women's representation in the Parliament is still more than their representation in the State Legislative Assemblies. In the elections held during 2013-2017 for various State Legislative Assemblies, percentage of women's representation remained as high as 14% and on an average all India level it was 9%. In contrast a positive voter turnout has been complemented by an upsurge of women campaigners in election campaigns. Where women voter turnout in the general elections has been on the rise from 46.6% in the 1962 general elections to about 65.6% after the 2014 general elections, activities of women campaigners for political parties has risen from 13% in the 1999 general elections to about 22% in the 2009 general elections.

After the 73rd Constitutional (Amendment) Act was passed in 1993 women's political participation at the grassroots for the first time was recognized and guaranteed constitutionally. It led to thirty three percent reservation of seats for women in all the three tiers of the panchayat and to the posts of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons in the three tiers. Currently in many states, reservations for women in the panchayats have exceeded the quota. Reservation in local governance has been passed without much resistance in India, unlike the opposition to the question of affirmative action in the Parliament and State Assemblies. The reservation debate broadly centres around two main issues- the proxy leadership of what Madhu Kishwar called the Beti- Biwi brigade and caste based opposition

to quotas. Most women in the rank and file of national and state level political parties have taken entry in politics as an appendage of and proxy to their male counterparts, safeguarding the seat until the next election. Very few women politicians are there who have displayed strong disapprovals to the sexist and patriarchal assumptions and views of their parties. Uma Bharati of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been seen to challenge her party's decision a couple of times, most importantly her opposition to the party's decision to support the women's reservation bill. When the upper echelons of the party have supported the bill, Bharati has opposed it on grounds that it will strengthen the domination of upper class and upper caste women in the legislatures. It is a legitimate feminist concern but caste based opposition to women's reservation many a times have taken the form of derogatory misogynistic comments from senior parliamentarians. The debates surrounding the issue of women's reservation has still not found any resolution.

The institution of panchayats as rural local bodies of administration has a rich history in India, particularly favoured by Mahatma Gandhi. In the 1920s, when Gandhi set foot in Indian politics, he became a passionate advocate of decentralised governance in the villages through the panchayats. In his article titled "Village Swaraj," Gandhi stated that Panchayat Raj represents true democracy realized. "...we would regard the humblest and the lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land."¹ Hence individuals will become the architect of their own government and at the same time have a personal interest in deliberating upon problems of common interest.² The individual could then be placed at the centre of administration without sacrificing the spirit of communitarianism. Local self government institutions are an integral part of the democracy, where citizens work voluntarily towards the betterment of their communities, instead of following a centralised system of planning and implementation, which imposes decisions from above. Therefore deepening of democracy through panchayats by the continued engagement of marginalised sections of the society, is a necessary public policy instrument which can be successful in accomplishing inclusive, decentralised and engendered governance.

After the failure of the first two Five Year Plans, the Centre decided to constitute committees to make recommendations for the revival of the moribund Panchayati Raj

¹ M. K. Gandhi, 'Village Swaraj,' Compiled by H.M. Vyas (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House) Dec 1962:81 accessed from https://www.mk Gandhi.org/ebks/village_swaraj.pdf

² Divya Joshi, *Gandhiji on Villages* (Mumbai: Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal) 2002:5

Institutions (PRIs) in the country. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee set up in 1957 recommended establishment of a three tier Panchayati Raj system at the village, block and district level. However women's participation in the decision making process of the panchayats did not figure much in the report. It recommended co-option of two women at the district and block level. They were directed to assist in women and child centric issues only. Clearly such a protectionist and tokenistic attitude did not have any discernable effect in terms of giving women genuine opportunities to articulate their interests or providing them with decision making responsibilities.

The *Towards Equality* Report prepared by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974) was one of first extensive attempts to acquire nationwide data on the deteriorating socio-economic and political status of women in post independence India. With regard to the question of women's political presence in the panchayats, it suggested that they be given greater opportunities to participate in the decision making process at the grassroots level. For this reservations had to be brought about in the representative structures of the local government. It also recommended establishment of Statutory Women's Panchayats as an integral part of the Panchayati Raj structure, which could manage and administer development programmes for women and children.³ The Ashok Mehta Committee constituted in 1978 recommended the method of co-optation by election. For the two seats reserved for women in the Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat, any woman who gets the highest number of votes in the election, even if she does not win, should be taken in as a co-opted member.⁴ Much protests were raised against repeated recommendations for co-option from different quarters of the women's movement in the country. But as Prabhat Dutta has rightly argued, the Committee set the ball rolling for acknowledging the need to associate more women in the decision making process of local governance.⁵

The National Perspective Plan for Women (NPP) formulated in 1988 originally proposed in its first draft the method of co-option. As we see from Vina Mazumdar's article, "Reservations for Women" the women's movement in the country was not happy with such a

³ Government of India, *Report of The Committee on the Status of Women in India*, New Delhi: Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Department of Social Welfare, 1975: 304

⁴ Government of India, *Asoka Mehta Committee Report on Panchayati Raj Institutions*, New Delhi: Ministry of Agriculture, Department of Rural Development, 1978: X.9,X.10.1

⁵ Prabhat Datta with Panchali Sen, *Women in Panchayats in West Bengal: An Exploratory Study*. Kolkata: Dasgupta and Co. Pvt. Ltd. 2000: 12

proposal as the last two decades had shown the futility of the method of co-option.⁶ Wider participation of the poorest sections including the dalits and tribal women who lacked audible forums to redress their grievances, had to be ensured in the PRIs. The Panchayats represented the first base that ensured rural women to get a share in the development decisions and of the development cake.⁷ Another reason why reservations for lower class and lower caste women had to be made in the PRIs was to break their barrier of fear and resistance that prevented them from entering the formal political process. The social and cultural realities that prevented women from participating politically had to be taken into consideration by the NPP. In the light of all these issues raised by the women's movement, the NPP revised its original plan. In its new plan it recommended the reservation of thirty percent of seats to be made for women in all rural local self governing bodies at all levels, from the village panchayats to the Zilla Parishads and to the executive heads of all the bodies in the three tiers.

In 1989 the Rajiv Gandhi Government introduced the 64th Constitutional (Amendment) Bill in the Lok Sabha. The purpose was to give 'power to the people' by constitutionally sanctioning the PRIs. The bill sought to reserve thirty percent (including number of seats reserved for women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Tribes) of the total number of seats for women by direct election in every panchayat, allotted by rotation of different constituencies. But three successive bills including the 64th Bill lapsed in the following years due to the political turmoil that swept over the Parliament. Finally the Congress Government under the Prime Ministership of P.V. Narasimha Rao re-introduced the 72nd Constitutional (Amendment) Bill, which consequently took a formal shape with the passing of the 73rd Constitutional (Amendment Bill) in 1993. Some important features of the Act with regard to women's reservation are:

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

⁶ Vina Mazumdar, "Reservations for Women," *Economic and Political Weekly* 24, no.50 (Dec. 16, 1989): 2795-2796

⁷ Mazumdar, 'Reservations,' 2795

c. Provided further that not less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women. Provided also that the number of offices reserved under this clause shall be allotted by rotation to different Panchayats at each level.

Nirmala Buch in her work *From Oppression to Assertion: Women and Panchayats in India* found it significant that in the new amendment the reserved seats for the chairpersons 'shall be' by rotation while that of membership 'may be by rotation'.⁸ The provision to mandatorily rotate the chairperson's position was a significant step taken by the government for women. Buch, along with her research and field associates conducted a study in the three northern states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Their aim was to understand the experiences and perspectives of 1020 newly elected women representatives and 180 community members. Interviews were taken in nine selected districts and selected case studies were developed as part of the study outcome. Their work has looked at the impact of the Amendment and its operation in the three states, its effectiveness and limitations, and women's response to it. The work also explores the response of the family, the society and the public officials towards women's political attitudes and initiatives.

The 73rd Act has led to a marked increase in women's political participation at the grassroots. But the numerical expansion of women in panchayat bodies will not lead to their effective political participation if they do not have social dignity and economic equality. Especially in the states where the study was conducted, social institutions are embedded in feudal, casteist and patriarchal structures. Thus social and economic equality has to be achieved before political equality can be institutionalised. Reservation of seats is a procedural mechanism of empowerment; substantive empowerment requires massive changes in the living conditions and socio-economic status of women. The 73rd Act has been perceived to be one such measure which can bring about socio-economic empowerment of the marginalised sections of the society. Moreover the existing patriarchal norms that dominate the social and political institutions has to be addressed to eliminate the attitudinal barriers that negatively affect the negotiating capabilities of women. Governance has to be engendered to make it more responsive and inclusive.

⁸ Nirmala Buch, *From Oppression to Assertion: Women and Panchayats in India*. (New Delhi: Routledge), 2010.

The team revisited the districts in 2002-2003 to get updates from the same respondents after the 1999-2000 panchayat elections. Finally in 2009, a supplementary study was undertaken for the same purpose. But the present work mainly deals with her insights from the first set of interviews conducted in 1996-1999.

The Participatory Research in Asia conducted a study on the experience of women panchayat leaders in the six states of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh.⁹ The primary objective of the study was to provide data to evaluate and analyse the status of women in Panchayati Raj as well as to understand the reality of the impact of the 73rd Amendment on rural women's lives. The study mainly concerns itself with the elected women representatives, many of them being new entrants in the political sphere. It attempted to understand the social and political scenario in which the women contested elections and won, and how they were operating in the post-election phase. The findings of the research reveal a lot of indecision, inability and unawareness in women due to socio-economic inequities and patriarchal dominance. Many women respondents interviewed felt that they had won the election only because the seats were reserved for them; otherwise they could neither contest nor win in a general seat. In states like Uttar Pradesh and Odisha, the decision to stand for elections was thrust upon them because the male members of the family who were previously elected representatives to the panchayat did not want to lose their seats due to the new reservation provision. Himachal Pradesh had more women who contested elections as they felt themselves to be good candidates. This could be attributed to a reduced level of restrictions and higher levels of literacy rate in the state. In Haryana many women elected to the panchayats had families with strong political connections.

On the other hand, states like Uttar Pradesh and Haryana had women Panchs belonging to the scheduled castes who were determined to acquire political power and work towards the betterment of their communities. In spite of facing various forms of oppression they had been able to carve a niche for themselves in the traditional male bastion. The research has presented numerous case studies on the matter. One such case deals with Son Devi, a Sarpanch in Jakhala Panchayat in Rohtak district, Haryana. Soni Devi a Dalit, headed an area where different castes lived together. She was illiterate, wore a veil while interacting with the males in the village and had no knowledge on how Panchayat Raj works. But after getting

⁹ Participatory Research in Asia. "Women's Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: An Analysis of Six States (Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh)." November 1999.

elected she took on a more proactive role, interacting with government officials and other men in the village to understand her functions and to fulfil her responsibilities as a Sarpanch.

Raghabendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo in their article, “Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India,” compared the type of public good outcomes resulting from mandated women’s representation after the passing of the 73rd Act in 265 village councils in Rajasthan and West Bengal.¹⁰ Surveys were conducted in Birbhum in West Bengal and Udaipur in Rajasthan. The results of the survey suggests that the gender of the representative affect public policy outcomes in the villages in both districts. In both places significant investments were made for drinking water provisions in Gram Panchayats reserved for women. In West Bengal more provisions were made for improvement of roads in Gram Panchayats reserved for women than in Rajasthan. Furthermore in West Bengal the presence of a woman Pradhan led to higher attendance of women in the Gram Sansad. Women in the villages with a reserved Pradhan were very likely to visit her with complaints or requests. In Rajasthan on the other hand, the sex of the Pradhan had no influence on the attendance of the women in the Gram Sansads. Their study also presented the fact that women elected representatives were more sensitive to the needs of other women because their gender preferences aligned with them. An important conclusion from the above mentioned work is that even at the lowest level of the political system the politician’s identities affect policy decisions.

Bidyut Mohanty in her article, “Panchayati Raj, 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Women” stated that the coming into force of the 73rd Act has created a ‘silent revolution in the country.’¹¹ However it is only the first step in the direction of women’s empowerment. Proper social, economic and political conditions are necessary to enable women to participate effectively in the local government institutions, without endangering the positive values of the family.¹² She finds the southern states of India to be comparatively less discriminatory towards women than the northern states, of course with regional variations in the south. For example one can find widespread infanticide in Tamil Nadu and a registered increase in dowry demands in Kerala despite having a high literacy rate. These show that the patriarchal

¹⁰ R. Chattopadhyay, and E. Duflo. “Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India.” *Econometrica* 72, no.5 (Sept.2004): 1409-1443.

¹¹ Bidyut Mohanty, “Panchayati Raj, 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Women”. *Economic And Political Weekly*. Vol.30 No.52 (Dec 30, 1995): 3346

¹² Mohanty, “Panchayati Raj”, 3346

social system by and large, has affected women's role as independent decision makers in the country.

Mohanty opines that the exercise of political power is directly linked to the socio-economic position of the women. Gender biases operating within the family variously undermine the self worth of women. They fail to take decisions independent of the dictates of the male members of the family. Social factors like inadequate access to food and health care facilities, illiteracy, visible and invisible forms of violence cripple their attempts at leading a life they have reason to value. Economically, they have a weak bargaining position vis-à-vis the men in the income generating sectors. All these get reflected back in the political public sphere. Women have insignificant representation in the legislatures, local government bodies and within the party hierarchy. Even if they are members of local bodies due to the provision of mandatory reservation, they act as proxies to their male counterparts. In the panchayats they do not have autonomous decision making power. A patriarchal value system combined with criminalisation of politics, emergence of fundamentalism and lack of legal awareness discourage them from developing political ambition. Therefore their social status has an impact on their political participation and vice versa. To bring women at the centre stage of the political process a thorough dialogue has to be initiated between the government, voluntary organisations, women activists and political parties.

Prabhat Datta with Panchali Sen in their work, *Women in Panchayats in West Bengal: An Exploratory Study* has similarly observed that women's effective participation in panchayats cannot be ensured simply by amending the constitution.¹³ Reservation of seats is definitely a step forward. But necessary changes are also to be brought about by creating a new culture of democratisation at the grassroots. Datta and Sen has jointly conducted an exploratory study of all women members elected to the Gram Panchayats under Ausgram II block in the district of Bardhaman in West Bengal. The data were collected through in-depth interviews of 42 women members, to understand their role perception and performance, their motivations to contest elections, their political awareness and the limitations they faced to play their roles as elected representatives. The findings of the study indicate that women have had difficulties in playing their roles as elected representatives due to lack of cooperation from their families, political parties and the apathetic attitude of the government functionaries. Many members

¹³ Prabhat Datta, with Panchali Sen. *Women in Panchayats in West Bengal: An Exploratory Study* (Kolkata: Dasgupta and Co. Pvt. Ltd.) 2003

could not attend meetings for being financially dependent on their family because of which they were not given bus fares and such other expenses. The existing arrangement of rotation of seats had a dampening effect on their political participation as it led to lack of motivation to contest for the seats for a second time.

The findings of the study showed that comparatively, women across states in India experience the same inhibiting factors to their political empowerment at the individual and family level. However at the social and political levels, women in West Bengal do not face many of the difficulties faced by their counterparts in other states because of politicized panchayats and strong party led women's organisations. For the authors, genuine political empowerment of women will not come overnight.¹⁴ On the one hand women have to fight for their rights and on the other, the attitude of the society towards women needs to be changed.

G.K. Lieten's article, "Caste, Gender and Class in Panchayats: Case of Barddhaman, West Bengal," takes a look at the functioning of panchayat institutions at the Memari II block of Barddhaman.¹⁵ The Left parties have had a predominant electoral base in the district from the 1950s. Widespread rigging of elections alongside skirmishes and interparty clashes were common. The survey conducted in the block confirmed that poor peasants and agricultural labourers had become pro-active in the political arena. Before the Left came to power the zamindars and the rich sadgope peasants dominated the panchayats. The scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST) only had a symbolic representation. But a glance at the figure on caste composition of panchayats in Memari II from 1978 to 1988 showed that there has been a gradual increase of SC and ST in the panchayats. A high percentage of panchayat members under Left rule were agricultural labourers and poor peasants. Almost 45% of its members belonged to families of small peasants and agricultural labourers while 25% came from families of middle class peasants and small business owners. The author attributes such a high presence of lower classes in the political arena to the conscious political intervention of the Left.

Greater visibility of lower castes and classes had not been accompanied by any significant visibility of women in the panchayat institutions of the district. When the survey was conducted, only 7 members out of the 141 members of the gram panchayat were female.

¹⁴ Datta, *Women in Panchayats*, 88.

¹⁵ G.K. Lieten, "Caste, Gender and Class in Panchayats: Case of Barddhaman, West Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 27, no.29 (Jul 18, 1992): 1567-1574

Lack of education and political consciousness, lack of leisure time and gendered responsibilities within the family were some of the reasons cited for women's low level of political participation. Attitudes of some men interviewed revealed that they were neither interested in sharing household work nor did they motivate their spouses to participate in politics. It was assumed that, "...her contribution in the panchayat would be much less than that of a man."¹⁶ Religion was another factor for invisibility of women in the political sphere. As a Madrasha teacher argued, "...I must accept pordah for our women folk. It would be against our religion if they would go and attend meetings."¹⁷ According to some of the respondents, in a *purushtantrik samaj* (patriarchal society), "women are treated as slaves by Muslims, by brahmins, by santal, by chamars, by sadgopes..."¹⁸ Hence a paternalistic mentality was a basic cause for low presence of women in politics. An interesting observation from an interview of a woman member of the panchayat revealed that she did not think that male members opposed much to women's political participation. Rather it was the *protha* (custom) and traditional norms of social institutions, changing which would take time.

Lieten in another work titled, "Panchayat Leaders in a West Bengal District," studied the socio-economic background of panchayat leaders in Mahammad Bazar block of Birbhum district.¹⁹ The survey data was collected from all the candidates who contested the 1988 panchayat elections. For assessing the socio-economic background of the candidates, their class, gender, caste, occupation, education and age was considered. Young candidates from all parties dominated the elections. 43 percent of Forward Bloc and Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) candidates were illiterate or had studied up to class IV. In comparison to SC and ST, women's presence as candidates in the panchayat elections was negligible. Leaders across political parties did not believe that women could make any significant contributions in the panchayat. Representation of SC/ST candidates were also not uniform but they still had prominent positions in the panchayats. While CPM was dominated by SC/ST candidates, sadgopes dominated Congress(I) and Forward Bloc. The findings of the survey confirmed that a new type of leadership was emerging in the lower levels of the political system which included poor peasants and agricultural labourers but women were completely absent in that system.

¹⁶ Lieten, "Caste, Gender and Class," 1570

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Lieten, "Panchayat Leaders in a West Bengal District," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, no. 40 (Oct 1, 1988): 2069-2073

Maitreyi Chaudhuri in her essay, “Against Heavy Odds: Women in West Bengal Panchayat,” examined the role of women in PRIs by interviewing female panchayat members of Bolpur-Sriniketan block in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal.²⁰ The survey was conducted in 1997, covering 64 elected women panchayat members. They were the first group to be elected in the reserved quota in the 1993 elections. Of the 64 women members, 40 were Hindu (out of which 16 belonged to general caste and 24 to SC), 14 belonged to ST and 10 were Muslim. The age composition of women ranged from 20-40 years and 24 were literate out of the 64 members. Majority of them were landless or belonged to families having marginal land holdings. Politically most of them were affiliated to the CPM.

The findings of the study show that women did not attend panchayat meetings regularly due to family responsibilities, poor transport facilities, prevalence of the superstition that women’s political involvement in the panchayats was inauspicious and the unwillingness to incur loss as many women were daily wage agricultural labourers. The main reasons for low level of political participation among women was attributed to shortage of time, inadequate cooperation from villagers and political parties, political violence and lack of awareness about panchayat duties. Thus the present survey also showed that reservation is only a means for women’s empowerment and more education, training and cooperation and support is necessary to make them emerge as successful political leaders.

It is Ashim Mukhopadhyay’s article, “Kultikri: West Bengal’s Only All Women Gram Panchayat” which in turn shows how an enabling and supportive environment can further the cause of women’s effective political participation.²¹ It is beneficial not only for the women themselves but for the development of the village as a whole. Mukhopadhyay’s article presents to us interesting insights on West Bengal’s first all-women gram panchayat at Kultikri in the tribal dominated Sankrail block of Jhargram sub-division, Midnapore district. The study was conducted after the 1993 panchayat polls. The gram panchayat had 13 women members, 9 of whom were less than 28 years of age. 7 members belonged to the ST and 2 members to the SC. All of them were politically affiliated to CPM. Despite the fact that the women did not have significant academic background and political experience, they were articulate, inquisitive and determined. The panchayat had done remarkably well under their

²⁰ Maitreyi Chaudhuri, “Against Heavy Odds: Women in West Bengal Panchayat,” *Manushi* Issue no.124 (2001): 12-16

²¹ Ashim Mukhopadhyay, “Kultikri: West Bengal’s Only All-Women Gram Panchayat”. *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no.22 (June 3,1995): 1283-1285

leadership. Till August 1994, 53 people were given IRDP²² loans. Many other developmental works had been undertaken in the area with grants received from various governmental schemes. The panchayat had strived towards improving the standard of education and level of literacy in the area. It also arranged infrastructural facilities to start training-cum-production centres of ready-made garments aiming at the economic empowerment of local women.

Objectives of the Study and Geographical Area

The few relevant studies presented above show a gradual upsurge in the political participation of women in rural local governance in India, particularly in West Bengal. Most of the studies have critically examined the social and environmental factors that hinder political as well as personal empowerment of women. Women are lagging behind than men in political experience, awareness and interest due to various socio-economic and cultural constraints. At the same time empirical data presented in some of the studies show that women in West Bengal are politically more active in comparison to other states. It can be attributed to the policy perspectives and ideological underpinnings of the political parties that have run the state government. Certain works have also thrown light on the rising incidence of violence against women in politics. But full-fledged research that particularly deals with the impact of political and electoral violence on women, especially in West Bengal, is scarce.

The PRIs have given greater visibility to women in the electoral scenario of rural Bengal. The present work attempts to discuss the construction of this 'visibility'. The study initially sought to examine the problems that women face in their involvement in different phases of the electoral process and how such problems are related to questions of class, caste, sexuality and other frameworks of social relations. As the work has progressed with time, it has focused on how the respondents have perceived the 'political' while negotiating with multiple agents in the political process to articulate their voices. Analysis and interpretation of certain underlying causal factors- social, structural and symbolic- have been made to understand the nature and extent of women's political participation in the recent Panchayat elections held in West Bengal in May 2018. To look at these issues, case studies of the village of Uttar Radhanagar and Magrahat East Gram Panchayat in South 24 Parganas have been undertaken. It is based on field work involving focus group discussions and personal interviews. The

²² IRDP stands for Integrated Rural Development Programme which was launched by the Government of India in 1980. It is a self employment program for the rural poor so that they are able to increase their income.

primary data has been supplemented by secondary data collected from official Panchayat Acts and other relevant government reports and documents, manifestos and party documents and some relevant news selected from mainstream media.

The West Bengal State Election Commission has been constitutionally vested with the superintendence, direction and control of the entire process of conduct of elections to the Panchayats and Municipal Bodies. There are at present 825 Zilla Parishad constituencies spread over 20 Zilla Parishads and 1 Mahakuma Parishad; 9217 Panchayat Samiti constituencies in 341 Panchayat Samitis and 48649 Gram Panchayat constituencies in 3354 Gram Panchayats. There are 7 municipal corporations and 119 municipalities in West Bengal. A look at the vote share at the level of Zilla Parishad show that All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) has won 793 constituencies out of 823 (96.2%), BJP has won 22 (2.7%) and Indian National Congress (INC) has won 6 (0.7%) of the constituencies. The rest has been evenly won by All India Forward Bloc has (AIFB) and the Independent. The status of 823 constituencies is known out of 825. At the level of Panchayat Samiti, the status of 9214 out of 9217 constituencies is known. AITC has won 8062 (87.5%) constituencies, BJP has won 769 (8.3%), CPM has won 110 (1.2%) and Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) has won 5 (0.5%) constituencies. The Independent has won 112 (1.2%) constituencies while the rest has been distributed between INC, AIFB, CPI and Others. At the level of Gram Panchayat the status of 48636 constituencies out of 48649 constituencies are known. 78.4% of seats have been won by AITC.

The present study has been conducted during the period of transfer of power from the old gram panchayat board to a new one. In fact August 28, 2018, the first day of the field work was the day when the new panchayat board was formed. All the interviews were taken just after the 2018 West Bengal Panchayat elections ended. The timeline of the interviews ranged from August 2018 to December 2018.

The three villages of Harishankarpur, Magrahat and Uttar Radhanagar fall under the jurisdiction of Magrahat East Gram Panchayat. According to the 2011 Census the gram panchayat covers an area having a total population of 32,715 out of which 51% are males and 49% are females. Total number of members in the gram panchayat is 23 out of which 3 members are part of the Panchayat Samiti. The present Panchayat Pradhan position is reserved for a woman. Out of the three villages, the village of Uttar Radhanagar has been selected for conducting the field investigation. According to the 2011 Census data, Uttar

Radhanagar has about 1210 households. It has a total population of 6070 out of which male population is 3192 and female population is 2878. The SC population is 2295. The village is divided into *paras* (localities) in terms of caste and religion. Accordingly there is the Rajbanshi *para* or Hindu *para*, Khan *para* or Muslim *para*, Sheikh *para*, Loskar *para*, Christian *para*, Pondogotto *para* etc. 56% of males and 43% of females are literate in the village. The field work has been conducted in two such *paras* namely Hindu and Muslim *para* and in the Magrahat East Gram Panchayat.

The Magrahat East Gram Panchayat falls under the Magrahat II block. There is 1 Samiti, 14 Gram Panchayats and 214 Gram Sansads under Magrahat II block. The two blocks of Magrahat I and Magrahat II are located in the district of South 24 Parganas. The district of South 24 Parganas has a total of 29 Panchayat Samitis, 310 Gram Panchayats and 4882 Gram Sansads.

Methodology

Having a feminist research agenda demands generation of situated knowledges that emerge from practical struggles of gendered social existence. The process of production of alternative and situated knowledges is dynamic and does not deny the play of power that influences the outcomes of such production. Because of this, feminist research is pervaded by theoretical and ethical concerns. But without challenging the dominant systems and frameworks of knowledge production, a critical understanding of the lives of the marginalised will not be possible. Hence women who have been traditionally marginalised both as producers and subjects of knowledge generation have been placed at the centre of the present study.

Gender however, is only one identity of multiple identities that a subject can have. These identities on the one hand can be defined in terms of the individual's material position- her socio-economic and political status. On the other hand, ideological power differences can make the subject take up contradictory, fragmentary and temporary identities. Subjective identity is then produced from one moment to the next, according to certain exclusions and motivations of how one defines oneself and whether such definitions serve to fulfill her interests in differing moments of positionality. Every position of every subject is under control of the context in that particular moment. Such positions will continue to change as the cognitive experience of the context changes. These fragmentary moments make stronger (or weaker) one's powers of disrupting the dominant historical discourse. The shifting social and

political relationships perpetuate forms of self-organization that may help the subject in negotiating with and challenging social injustices, which may not align with standard notions of agency and empowerment. Agency implies active expression of one's choice in leading a life she reasonably values. But when such explicit expression of one's choice is absent, can we say that agency is also absent? The process of expressing one's choice is a continuous activity of negotiating with dominant power relations and any form it takes, explicit or not, should be taken as an expression of agency.

Focus group discussions have been conducted precisely to understand how agency works in silence or in retreat. Identity is not only the product of how one constructs one's selfhood in relation to others. It is also a product of how one constructs one's selfhood in difference to others. In this regard even the act of withdrawing or remaining silent becomes a glaring manifestation of how the ideology of patriarchy works in concert with established notions of political power and how resistances to it become a political act. Identity formation is a fragmentary but a continuous process created and mobilized in and through politics.²³

Another reason why focus group interviews have been given prominence was to have access to dialogic encounters and power differentials between women respondents who constituted the focus groups in Hindu and Muslim *para*. Four focus group interviews were conducted, two in each *para* on two separate days. Each group comprised of women voters in the age group of 18 to 65 years. A wide age range was selected because many respondents were not sure about their age and did not have voter identity cards. Dialogic encounters emerged when initial subtle resistances to dominant views took the form of visible disagreements with time. The utterance of impulsive responses by the subjects while responding to each others' views have helped to interpret the specific nature of the 'political' from their perspectives.

While the group discussions in the Hindu *para* took place in the courtyard of the house of an ex-elected woman representative, the group discussions in the Muslim *para* was conducted in a village montessorie school. All of the nine women respondents in the Hindu *para* were married and had more than one child. All of them belonged to the SC. Out of the nine members one was a graduate. Most of them had discontinued their education and were

²³ Nivedita Menon, *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004):190

just literate. One woman passed the twelfth examination after getting married. It can be assumed that she got married before reaching the legal age. The second focus group interview was conducted with the same respondents. In the Muslim *para* the first group mainly consisted of seven women who taught in the local Montessori school. All of them were above 30 years of age, married and lower caste Muslims. Apart from some women who were already there in the first interview session, more joined, giving the researcher an opportunity to talk to eleven Muslim lower caste women voters on the second day, all of whom were housewives. They were just literate and had more than one child.

Even if the respondents challenged each others' views, the process of collective opinion formation may sometimes dominate or intimidate the minority not to speak their minds. It is not a disadvantage of group interviews; rather the respondents may want to occupy fluid positions to remain in the good eyes of others when the interviewer leaves their social space. Every new position in asserting itself in different moments displace the whole structure in some way and that, by the logic of action and reaction, it leads to all sorts of changes in the position-takings of the occupants in the group.²⁴

The social space plays a central role in the construction of the subjects and their selfhood. For instance the panchayat office is a social and an analytical space of discipline. The subjects as well as the researcher had to be surveilled by making them assemble under the same roof. The researcher was not allowed to meet the newly elected women representatives (EWRs) in the privacy of their homes. Five of the EWRs were called up by the executive officers who work in the panchayat, to be present in the Gram Panchayat office. The researcher was not allowed to call them up and her request to take the group interview in an isolated room free of supervision was partially kept. Out of the five EWRs who were called up, four were able to come. Three of the EWRs were newly elected while the fourth respondent had been elected for a second term. Three of them were elected in the reserved SC seat while the fourth woman was elected in the general category seat. All of them were housewives and belonged to joint families, Hindus and literate. One respondent said that she was a graduate.

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or The Economic World Reversed." In *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Randal Johnson, 29-73. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): 58

Everyone was under inspection, not by the presence of some physical being but by being present in themselves under that roof. The minute details of the room tamed those who gathered in it. An occasional glance at the door, lowering one's voice when the clerk entered to set down the files, a nervous laugh when the respondents were told to be comfortable while talking. Power is at once visible and verifiable as proposed by Bentham. In Bentham's Panopticon the inmate will constantly feel that he is being spied upon. He must not know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.²⁵ Government as an activity and art is carried out as rational practice thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and on those upon whom it is practiced. Here 'government' not only refers to the political structures and institutions but also how it designates the way the conduct of individuals and groups might be directed.²⁶

Initially the aim was to conduct the interviews in an open informal setting like the veranda or yard of the house. Informal settings like the courtyard of the house are preferred because it is relatively open, neutral and not subject to 'intrusion of an authority'. People will be able to engage and deliberate upon matters more freely without the risk of outsiders surveilling or judging them. Closed environments like the panchayat office for example do not give the respondents the comfort to open up during conversations. But surveillance is not simply an external phenomenon. The social space does not lie outside the economy of power and therefore the argument that informal settings (as opposed to formal ones) will be more open and free does not seem plausible. Personal one-to-one interview was conducted with an elected woman representative in the privacy of her own home. It revealed that even if one is outside the institutional structure of the panchayat, one is not outside the perpetual surveillance of social and institutional norms. The political institution as a social space does not play a role here. But the shared knowledge generated by the panchayat along with the norms of the social space of the family led the subject to a form of self-surveillance.

For the purpose of keeping track of the interviews, a tape recorder has been used in places only where permission has been given by the respondents. Where recording has not been possible, field notes have been taken. Two separate questionnaires have been prepared, one for the women voters and the other for the EWRs. The Panchayat Pradhan's interview could

²⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201

²⁶ Michel Foucault, "Afterword" in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 221

not be conducted due to non-cooperation from the Gram Panchayat. The questionnaires have been framed in English and Bengali. They have both open and close ended questions. The questionnaires cover personal information of the respondents, their socio-economic background and their interpretation of the 'political'. Apart from the questions that have been formulated in the questionnaire, many other questions also came up as the discussions progressed.

The sampling of the area of study and the respondents has been a combination of purposive and theoretical sampling. The disadvantage of qualitative non-probability sampling is that researcher judgement is utilised to select research participants. However the judgements have been based on theoretical criteria and sensitivity to context. Data has been collected and analysed, based on which decisions have been taken as to what data to collect next. Accordingly theoretical sampling has provided the opportunity to adequately deal with the dynamic nature of social investigation. Most importantly theoretical sampling has allowed sampling not only people but also the time and context. Behaviour of the respondents has been observed in both formal and non-formal settings.

Researcher Positionality

The timing and extent of researcher self disclosure is vital in gaining the trust of the respondents. For example, after conducting the first focus group interview in Hindu *para*, the researcher was asked various personal questions. To be part of their worlds the researcher had to shed off the cloak of a stranger. Commitment to a scientific ethic of detachment is unlikely in this scenario. These social interactions assured the respondents about her identity and helped to remove scepticisms from their mind.

In creating such positions the researcher also has to position herself with herself. Even if she is committed to her goals and identity as a feminist researcher, how she is working towards such goals in the field without jeopardising her project becomes important. As a female feminist researcher it was a constant process of self censure, navigating political and patriarchal practicalities. It must be acknowledged that situations have had power over her because of which she failed to move in directions that she initially prepared for. But failures are as much part of the process of knowledge generation as are successes.

Engaging with the field and those who constitute it is not a one way process where the researcher gazes at the field. The field also gazes back and the identity of the researcher

determines how the field will react to it. Especially in the context of the present work, the field has been capable enough to make assumptions about the background of the researcher. For the members of the field, the researcher identity as part of Jadavpur University took precedence over her position as a researcher. The panchayat officers were sceptical in ‘allowing’ the elected women representatives to talk to a female urban educated middle class researcher coming from Jadavpur University- lest they are influenced in some way that will make them question authority. Their assumptions about the institution as a whole dictated their behaviour towards her and even determined the kind of questions the researcher had scope to ask.

Any social world is a field of forces having a set of objective power relations which impose on all those who enter the field, irreducible to the intentions of the individuals or even to the direct interactions among them.²⁷ The researcher cannot enter the field by denying the forces that constitute it. Especially in the context of field work, one cannot simultaneously search for embodied accounts of living by disembodiment one’s own multiple and fragmentary identities because it affects the field as well as the respondents. The identity of the researcher always influences the subjects. Consequently it shapes not only how the respondents interact with her but also how the researcher positions herself in relation to them. It gives rise to ethical issues but reflexivity becomes crucial to identify the effect of power relations on the research process.

Finally, taking up the position of a feminist researcher entails observing the ‘unnatural’ within the ‘natural’, the silences and hesitations and the intent behind such silences. To be fully aware of the substantive, the symbolic and the psychological researcher has to listen and see how power works its way through the language and body of the subjects. Working on the skills of engagement and socialisation then becomes imperative, not only to have prolonged access to the field but also to develop the ability to understand oneself as a researcher.

Excluding the Introduction and Conclusion, the present study is divided into three chapters. The first chapter looks at the history of Panchayati Raj in Bengal in the pre- and post- independence phase. It describes the three tier panchayat structure and important provisions of many panchayat acts and amendments of West Bengal. It provides a history of

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups,” *Theory and Society*, 14 no.6 (Nov. 1985) 724

how political parties like the Left Front and AITC have controlled the panchayat and deals with the rhetoric of leftist class politics by presenting a case study of the Namasudra community. In referring to the presence of lower castes like the Namasudras for instance, in West Bengal's electoral and political scenario, the purpose has been to show how caste-class negotiations shape the popular political culture. The constitution of leadership and followership of the parties is defined by caste-class relations. Such relations may give rise to antagonisms as well as coalitions but the category of caste does not get subsumed by the class rhetoric.

The second chapter looks briefly at the debates concerning women's reservation policy at the Parliamentary and State assembly level, comparing it with the passing of the 73rd Constitutional (Amendment) Bill in 1993. Apart from that, an attempt has been made to locate the 'woman's question' in the party programmes and manifestos of three important political parties in West Bengal that is, CPM, AITC and BJP. Among all the Left allies, the programmes only of CPM have been looked at because it was the dominant force in the alliance. The purpose of such an analysis is to understand the wide disparity between what is prescribed and what is practised especially with regard with women's political participation in the state. The final section of the second chapter describes the political situation of the state during the 2018 Panchayat elections and how it impacted women's political participation. Three case studies have been selected from *Anandabazar Patrika* to showcase the impact of electoral violence on women during elections. The case studies covering all the three parties have been selected on the basis of complaints registered by the National Commission for Women and on the basis of its nature which prompted continuous reporting of the same news.

The third chapter specifically deals with the field work, focus group discussions and personal interview conducted in the village of Uttar Radhanagar and Magrahat East Gram Panchayat in the district of South 24 Parganas, held during August 2018 to December 2018.

CHAPTER 1

PANCHAYATS AND POLITICS IN WEST BENGAL

History of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bengal in the Pre-Independence Period

The origins of the system of panchayats in West Bengal can be traced to the Bengal Village Chowkidari Act of 1870 passed by Lord Mayo. These panchayats were not democratic and were composed of persons nominated by the district collector or any subordinate officer chosen by him, with the sole purpose of levying and collecting chowkidari tax for the maintenance of the village watchmen.¹ The panchayats represented the interests of the dominant socio-economic class in the village, “drawn from the members of the founding families or from the Brahmins and the superior cultivators. The menials and the landless had almost no say in its affairs, except perhaps in South India.”² Because a large part of the tax was used as salaries for maintaining the chowkidars and dafadars, financially nothing was left to carry on the municipal functions of the village. The panchayats were not concerned with national development, but with the problem of maintaining order and structure in a small community. Their role in this task might have reflected the broader needs of the political powers dominant at the national level in that they reproduced order and stability at the base of the society, but they were at no time integrated into any wider project designed to bring development or change to the villages.³ The chowkidari panchayat became unpopular shortly after it was introduced.

The Bengal Local Self Government Act was passed in 1885 to implement the Ripon Resolutions of 1882. The Act provided for a three tier panchayat system in rural Bengal. District boards, local boards at the level of each sub-division and union committees comprising of a group of villages were set up. But the ideals of the Resolutions in utilizing an “intelligent class of public spirited men” for rural development could not be fulfilled.⁴ The institutions continued to be dominated by British officials via groups having vested interests. The local boards were soon abolished due to excessive reliance on limited subsidies and lack of autonomy under the district boards.

¹ George Mathew, ed. *Status of Panchayati Raj in the States and Union Territories of India* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, Institute of Social Sciences, 2000), 306

² H. Tinker, *The Foundations of Local Self Government in India, Pakistan and Burma*, (Athlone Press: London, 1954) in *Panchayati Raj and The Decentralisation of Development Planning in West Bengal (A Case Study)*, Neil Webster (Calcutta: K.P Bagchi, 1992),13

³ Webster, *Panchayati Raj*,13

⁴ *ibid*

The jurisdiction of union committees extended over a large number of villages and they coexisted with chowkidari panchayats for a long time. But they had little role to play outside the context of village politics.⁵ The district boards, the units of local government at that time, became dominated by the ‘influentials’ of the district.⁶ The district officer was vested with real powers. He was an appointee of the colonial state and hence an extension of the colonial vision. The major functions of the board were to look after medical and public health, education, relief measures during famine etc. Gradually functionally specific boards were formed to take over the functions of the district boards stifling it in the long run.

The Ripon Resolutions wanted to set up a comprehensive scheme of local self government institutions. Instead as Webster summarized,

... they were little more than minor appendages to the administration, a limited extension of the colonial state into the districts with the aim of appeasing the nascent nationalism of an elite capable of mobilizing local political power. It was a thinly disguised attempt to incorporate them into a formal relationship with the colonial government’s existing administrative framework... the denial of funds and responsibilities of the boards reflected their real status in government thinking as being largely peripheral.⁷

The failure of the 1885 Act and the Bengal Partition of 1905 inevitably led to demands for administrative reforms. The Bengal Village Self government Act was passed in 1919 on the basis of the recommendations of the District Administration Committee set up by the Government of Bengal in 1914. Like the Royal Commission on Decentralization (1909) it also advocated establishment of a unified system of rural local government. The act set up union boards at the village level by merging the chowkidari panchayats and union committees. It would cover an average of 8 to 10 villages with a total population of 10,000 to function under district boards. The union boards continued to function for about four decades, and in the process created such lasting influence that even later developments introducing democratic decentralization could not alter some of the traditions created by them.⁸

⁵ Webster, *Panchayati Raj*, 13-14

⁶ G. R. Reddy, ed. *Patterns of Panchayati Raj in India* (Delhi: The Macmillan Company of India Ltd., 1977), 285

⁷ Webster, *Panchayati Raj*, 14

⁸ Mathew, *Status of Panchayati Raj*, 308

If compared with the union committees and local boards of the 1885 Act, the union boards of the 1919 Act had a wider jurisdiction and greater responsibilities with respect to village administration. They looked after the chowkidars and dafadars, and also worked towards improvement of the village as a whole. It was the first attempt to introduce self governing institutions for the rural people in Bengal. However they were not at all representative and local power groups controlled it because the boards were always elected by limited franchise.⁹ The principle of local taxation for local purposes followed by the colonial state and an exploitative land tenure system of the zamindars who controlled the panchayats, did not generate much funds for providing basic amenities to the rural poor. In practice the changes brought about by the 1885 and the 1919 Act led the rural middle class to draw on the poverty of the rural areas for generating political support for their own nationalist agendas.¹⁰

Growth of Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal in the Post-Independence Period

The West Bengal Panchayat Act was passed in 1956. The union boards gave way to Gram Panchayats and Anchal Panchayats. Deviating from the recommendations of the Balvant Rai Mehta Committee, a four tier panchayati structure was set up consisting of the Zilla Parishad, Anchalik Parishads, Anchal Panchayat and Gram Panchayat. Each lower tier was under the control of the higher tier. The Anchal Panchayats were a continuation of the union boards which had existed for long in the pre-independence period. As with the majority of states, West Bengal accepted the need for a Panchayati Raj system without the underlying philosophy and principles presented in the Mehta Report.¹¹

The Gram Sabha was to hold an annual meeting and a half yearly meeting apart from watching over the activities of the Gram Panchayat. From amongst the Gram Sabha members, members of the Anchal Panchayats were to be elected by the members of the Gram Panchayat. The adhyakshas of the Gram Panchayat were ex-officio members of the Anchal Panchayat. Responsibilities such as imposition of taxes, supervision of dafadars and chowkidars, maintaining Nyaya Panchayats and providing grants to Gram Panchayats were to be performed by the Anchal Panchayats. The Anchalik Parishads were formed to look after

⁹ The electorate was selected on the basis of age, place of residence, taxation and education, from the time of the 1885 Act. Women were excluded and they became voters only in 1950.

¹⁰ Webster, *Panchayati Raj*, 14

¹¹ Webster, *Panchayati Raj*, 20

development activities of the entire block. The Pradhans of the Anchal Panchayats within the block and the members of Parliament and Legislative Assemblies (MPs/MLAs) elected from any constituency falling within the block were ex-officio members of the Anchalik Parishads. Four members were nominated by the state government two of whom were women and the other two belonged to backward community. The Panchayat Samitis of the Mehta Report had the same status as that of Anchalik Parishads.

At the district level there were Zilla Parishads which also consisted of two women nominated by the state government apart from other members drawn from different sources. The Zilla Parishad was entrusted with the task of looking after developmental activities in the entire district and supervising the lower tiers of the panchayat structure. It had advisory responsibilities towards the state government regarding distribution of financial resources and developmental activities among the lower tiers. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in West Bengal at the end of March 1973 covered 98% of rural population.¹²

Even if decentralized structures of government were created by the two acts, popular participation in the sense of involvement of rural people and decentralization of power did not take place. Participation was minimal, the powers and responsibilities devolved were few, financial support was lacking, departmental and administrative officials functioned as before, and panchayati raj remained little more than a distant idea given the absence of political will on the part of the state government.¹³ There was no reconsideration of the role of the state field administration after Anchalik Parishads and Zilla Parishads were established. The state field agencies were preferred over the PRIs which became one of the major obstacles in the growth of rural local government in the state.

In 1978 political parties for the first time in India contested elections at the level of local government in West Bengal. By institutionalizing the panchayats, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) came to dominate the local politics of West Bengal. The West Bengal Panchayat Act had been passed in 1973 but it was not implemented due to the existing political instability in the state following the declaration of Emergency by the Indira Gandhi government in 1975.¹⁴ It was only after the Left Front government (LFG) was voted to power

¹² Reddy, *Patterns of Panchayati Raj*, 290-291

¹³ Webster, *Panchayati Raj*, 21

¹⁴ In the West Bengal Panchayat (Constitution) Rules, 1975, 'Act' means the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973. Published under Notification No. 19325/Panch, dated the 24 November 1975, in the "Calcutta Gazette, Extraordinary", Part I, dated the 24th November, 1975.

in 1977 that the act was finally passed with certain amendments. The Act provided for a three tier panchayati raj structure with the Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level.

With the passing of the 1973 Act, the four tier panchayati structure has been replaced by the three tier model in all the districts except in Darjeeling. The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Act was passed in 1988 for the hill areas of the district. The Hill Council Act specifically deals with the social, economic, educational and cultural advancement of the Gorkhas and other marginalized communities residing there. Hill areas comprise of the three sub-divisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong. With the enforcement of the Act, the Zilla Parishad has been divided into Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in the three hill sub-divisions and Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad in Siliguri sub-division. The three tier system of panchayat prevails only in Siliguri. The hill sub-divisions only have the Gram Panchayat.¹⁵ The first three tier panchayat election in Siliguri was held in 2009.

The Gram Panchayat is the lowest tier of decentralized governance in the state. For every village or a group of contiguous villages the state government has constituted a Gram Panchayat bearing the name of the village. The total number of members elected for a term of five years, shall be not less than five and not more than thirty. Members will elect from among themselves one person to be the Pradhan and another- as the Upa-Pradhan in the first meeting of the Gram Panchayat in which a quorum is present. Not less than one-third of the total number of offices of the Pradhan and the Upa-Pradhan in a district including the offices reserved for the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) are reserved for the women. The offices so reserved shall be determined by rotation.

The 1973 Act was amended a few times for instance in 1992, 1994 and 1997. Important provisions regarding reservation of seats were incorporated in the 1992 Act. It made provisions for reservation of one-third seats in the Gram Panchayat for SC/ST in proportion to their population in that gram. Such seats are allotted by rotation to different constituencies having SC/ST population. It has been further provided that not less than one-third of the total number of seats reserved for SC/ST shall be reserved for women belonging to the SC/ST as the case may be. The constituencies for the seats so reserved for women are to be determined by rotation. Not less than one-third of the total number of seats, including the seats reserved for the SC/ST, in a Gram Panchayat shall be reserved for women. The constituencies for the

¹⁵ <http://darjeeling.gov.in/admin/panchayat.pdf>

seats so reserved for women shall be determined by rotation. No member of the SC/ST and no woman for whom seats are reserved, shall be disqualified for election to any unreserved seat, if eligible for election to a Gram Panchayat. All the three amendments of the state act made before and after the introduction of the new constitutional provisions had a larger agenda, namely reform of the institution. The major thrust of reform was on two fronts: enhancement of responsibility of the elected representatives in the management of panchayats and making the institution more accountable to the public.¹⁶

Every constituency of a Gram Panchayat shall have a Gram Sansad consisting of persons whose names are included in the electoral roll of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. The Gram Panchayats shall hold an annual and a half-yearly meeting for each Gram Sansad. Meetings of the Gram Sabha shall be presided over by the Pradhan and in his absence, by the Upa-Pradhan. The Gram Sansad shall guide and advise the Gram Panchayat in regard to the schemes for economic development and social justice proposed to be undertaken in its area; laying down principles for identification of schemes; identifying beneficiaries for various poverty alleviation programmes; constituting a Gram Unnayan Samiti etc. The Gram Panchayat cannot refuse to act upon any recommendations of the Gram Sansad relating to prioritization of list of beneficiaries or scheme or programme so far as it relates to the area of the Gram Sansad. Such decision of the Gram Panchayat shall be placed in the next meeting of the Gram Sansad.

Every village will have a Gram Sabha consisting of persons registered in the electoral roll pertaining to the area of the village. It is the duty of the Gram Panchayat, to give public notice of such meetings by beating of drums as widely as possible, announcing the agenda, place, date and hour of the meeting. A notice of such meeting will also be hung up in the office of the Gram Panchayat. If the meeting is adjourned similar publicity will have to be made. Meetings of the Gram Sabha will be presided over by the Pradhan of the concerned Gram Panchayat or in his absence, by the Upa-Pradhan.

All questions and points raised before the Gram Sansad will be discussed and referred to the Gram Panchayat for its consideration. The latter, on consideration of the resolutions of the Gram Sansads, will place them before the Gram Sabha. It will prepare a report on the work done during the previous year and the work proposed to be done during the following year and submit it to the prescribed authority and to the Panchayat Samiti. The duties of a Gram

¹⁶ Mathew, *Status of Panchayati Raj*, 312

Panchayat under its area of jurisdiction are — to provide for sanitation, conservancy, prevention of public nuisances; curative and preventive measures; supply of drinking water; the maintenance, repair and construction of public streets; the supply of any local information to the Zilla Parishad or the Panchayat Samiti within the area; administering the panchayat fund and collecting taxes; maintaining chowkidars; administering the Nyaya Panchayat etc.

At the block level of every district the state government has constituted a Panchayat Samiti bearing the name of the block. Seats have been reserved for SC/ST and women in the manner similar to the Gram Panchayat. Each Panchayat Samiti shall consist of the Pradhans of the Gram Panchayats, three persons elected from each gram, the MPs and MLAs residing in the respective blocks and members of the Zilla Parishad not being Sabhadhipati and Sahakari Sabhadhipati. Every Panchayat Samiti will elect in its first meeting at which a quorum is present, one of its members to be the Sabhapati and another member to be the Sahakari Sabhapati. The offices of Sabhapati and Sahakari Sabhapati will also be reserved for SC/ST and women and is subject to allocation by rotation. The Panchayat Samiti will have to prepare a report on the work done during the previous year and the work proposed to be done during the following year and submit it to the prescribed authority and to the Zilla Parishad. Being an unit of self-government it has been entrusted to achieve economic development and secure social justice in the block under its jurisdiction. Further it may be vested with such powers by the state government as the latter may think fit.

The Zilla Parishad at the district level (except Darjeeling) consists of the Sabhapatris of the Panchayat Samitis, three persons elected from each block within the district and MPs and MLAs residing in the district. Seats have been reserved for SC/ST and women in the manner similar to the Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti. Every Zilla Parishad will elect in its first meeting at which a quorum is present, one of its members to be the Sabhadhipati and another member to be the Sahakari Sabhadhipati. The offices of Sabhadhipati and Sahakari Sabhadhipati will also be reserved for SC/ST and women and is subject to allocation by rotation. The Zilla Parishad has to prepare and submit annually a report on the work done during the previous year and the work proposed to be done during the following year to the prescribed authority. As an unit of self-government and, in order to achieve economic development and secure social justice for all, it has to undertake execution of schemes, performance of any act, or management of any institution or organisation entrusted to it by the state government or any other authority; establish scholarships or award stipends within the state for the furtherance of technical or other special forms of education. It has the power

to advise the state government on all matters relating to the development work among Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis. It may be vested by the state government with such powers under any local or special Act as the latter may think fit.

The 1992 Amendment therefore, made elaborate provisions for the reservation of seats in the three tiers of the panchayat and the 1993 elections were held on the basis of the amended panchayat provisions. West Bengal became the first state in the country to enable women to contest in slightly more than one-third of the total seats reserved for them.¹⁷ But reservations were made only for the seats of the members and not for the offices of the chairpersons. The 1994 Amendment consequently provided for reservations to the offices of both chairpersons and vice-chairpersons, in all the three tiers, for SC/ST and women. The 1998 elections were held in accordance with this provision.

	NUMBERS	TOTAL	SCHEDULED CASTES	SCHEDULED TRIBES	WOMEN
Gram Panchayat	3330	50345	14131 (28.06%)	3755 (7.45%)	17907 (35.56%)
Panchayat Samiti	341	8579	2410 (28.09%)	613 (7.14%)	3015 (35.14%)
Zilla Parishad	17	723	279 (35.58%)	68 (9.40%)	246 (34.02%)

Table 1.1: Elected Members in the Three Tiers of the Panchayat (1998)

Note: Figures in parantheses indicate percentage. Cited in Mathew, *Panchayati Raj*, 314

An interesting development that needs to be mentioned with regard to the provision of reservations in the state is the passing of the West Bengal Panchayat Elections (Amendment) Act of 2012 and West Bengal Panchayat Elections (Second Amendment) Act of 2012. These two acts were enacted to amend the principal West Bengal Panchayat Elections Act of 2003. In the first amendment the words “Backward Classes” were inserted after the words “Scheduled Tribes”. Seats were to be reserved for the backward classes in all the three tiers of the panchayat structure and Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad in proportion to the backward classes in the area. Such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies. As nearly as practicable one half, but not exceeding one half of the total number of seats as well as the offices of the Pradhan and Upa-Pradhan, Sabhapati and Sahakari Sabhapati, Sabhadhipati and Sahakari Sabhadhipati, shall be reserved for women from SC/ST and

¹⁷ Mathew, *Status of Panchayati Raj*, 314

backward classes. Such seats shall be filled by direct election and allotted by rotation to different constituencies.

In the second amendment it has been further inserted in the principal act that the total number of seats reserved for SC/ST and the backward classes, severally or jointly, will not exceed fifty percent of the total number of seats in any Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, Zilla Parishad and Mahakuma Parishad. When the number of seats reserved for SC and ST, severally or jointly, reaches fifty percent of the total number of seats in the panchayat body, seats will no longer be reserved for the backward classes even if a sizeable proportion of the population consists of backward classes in the area. The same proviso is applicable to the offices of the Pradhan and Upa-Pradhan, Sabhapati and Sahakari Sabhapati, and Sabhadhipati and Sahakari Sabhadhipati. Apart from the provision of reservations, the 1992 amendment strengthened the role of the Karmadhyakshas of the Sthayee Samitis of the Panchayat Samitis and the Zilla Parishads. The executive power and responsibilities given to the Karmadhyakshas in the Zilla Parishads and the Panchayat Samitis and the provisions to delegate executive functions to the ward members of the Gram Panchayat to assist the Pradhan indicated a shift towards a cabinet type of executive structure- the chairperson and his colleagues forming a team for all the three tiers of the panchayat bodies. The intention of these legislative provisions remains unfulfilled as the chairpersons dominate all the three levels.¹⁸

The PRIs were taking shape not only by affirmative actions for greater decentralization and devolution of powers, but also by the nature of regime and leadership that constituted it. The local leadership (landowning class) was being incorporated in the political parties who now started to compete with one another to infiltrate and gain political power in the panchayats. To quote a part of the findings of the IPP study team, “the pre-existence of well-established local leaders in the Union Boards and District Boards has diluted the impact of Panchayati Raj as a force of political change, and the leadership structure has not undergone any appreciable change as a result of democratization of local administration.”¹⁹ Congress,

¹⁸ Mathew, *Status of Panchayati Raj*, 313-314

¹⁹ ‘Panchayati Raj in West Bengal: IPP Study Team’s Findings’, *Kurukshetra*, Vol.15, No.11 August 1967 in Reddy, *Patterns of Panchayati Raj*, 295

since the district board days, has been dominating the rural local bodies, and their firm hold on the rural local authorities helped the party in sustaining the strength at the state level.²⁰

The food crises of 1950s and 1960s had mobilized poor peasants and agricultural labourers (the landless) to demand land reforms and just prices for agricultural produce. The volatile political situation in the state in 1967 and collapse of law and order due to *bandhs* and demonstrations led to the defeat of the Congress government in the fourth general elections in the state. A non-Congress Leftist government was formed under the leadership of the United Front (UF) and panchayat reforms were proposed. But the government was soon dismissed. Congress returned to power, forming a coalition ministry with the Progressive Democratic Front. Soon after, the state was brought under President's Rule in 1968. The UF was voted to power for a second time and again in 1970 the state was brought under President's Rule. In 1972 the Congress returned to power by creating a reign of terror by using police and goons and widespread rigging of elections. Guns and bombs dominated state politics and armed conflict between mainstream parties claimed hundreds of lives both in the towns and villages.²¹ A period of calm was witnessed between 1972-77 during which the opposition was totally repressed or destroyed.

From Panchayats to 'Party Society': Investments of the Left Front Government

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya has identified four phases in the first three decades of Left dominance in rural West Bengal.²² The first phase from 1997 to the mid 1980s was a period of rapid acquisition of ceiling-surplus land from the big landowners, distributing such lands to the landless, recording the names of sharecroppers and instituting party based panchayats. The second phase from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s was a period of high agricultural production and deregulation of local markets. This period was short lived and it ran into the third phase from the mid 1990s to 2006. The third phase was characterized by agricultural impasse due to fragmentation of land holdings, depressed markets and lack of investment in infrastructure. The fourth phase starts from 2006 when agricultural lands were being utilized

²⁰ Reddy, *Patterns of Panchayati Raj*, 295

²¹ Partha Sarathi Banerjee, "Party, Power and Political Violence in West Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no.6 (Feb 5-11, 2011):16

²² Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, "Of Control and Factions: the Changing 'Party-Society in Rural West Bengal,'" *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no.17 (Feb. 28- Mar. 6, 2009): 59-60

for non-agricultural pursuits which signaled the end of the exceptionally long Left Front (LF) rule in West Bengal.

The LF had three tasks at the rural front when it came to power in 1977 that is, regeneration of the stagnant rural economy through land reforms, democratizing the rural governing process and undermining 'rock departmentalism'²³. All the three tasks were intrinsically related in that they were to be brought about inter alia the newly politicized "red panchayats"²⁴. As Finance Minister Ashok Mitra said, "if panchayats fail, the CPM experiment fails."²⁵

Local government institutions were under the strict control of the big landowners and a powerful bureaucracy. For power- political and economic- to be transferred to the lower and lower middle classes, on the one hand, they had to have access to political benefits in the panchayat. On the other, the stronghold of the propertied elites on the land had to be broken down by launching battles against the vested interests of the landed gentry (*bastu ghughuder bansa bhango*). Consequently the peasant organizations of the party involved themselves in organized rural political mobilization. The panchayats became both the political and economic edifice upon which the subaltern groups carried on their struggles to bring about a change in class relations. It was in tune with the ideological commitments of the party and had a substantial impact in giving meaning to the process of democratization.

To free the panchayats from the domination of big landlords the representation of SC and ST members in the panchayat increased, along with non-agriculturalists like teachers and workers through elections. Kohli gave the example of Midnapore where a survey of 515

²³ In the Minhas report of 1973, the word 'rock departmentalism' was used to describe the nature of departments involved in rural development. Webster explained the meaning of the word by stating, 'rock departmentalism was rooted in the deep elitism and conservatism that permeated much of the bureaucracy reinforced by the hierarchical administrative structure through which state policies and programmes were channelled down through the district department to the block and ultimately to the village. It was top down planning with little side ways interaction with the local government institutions.' In Prabhat Datta, 'Politicizing Rural Development: Lessons from India's West Bengal', *Asia Pacific Journal of Rural Development*

²⁴ The term was coined by Bhabani Sengupta, *CPI-M*, ch.6. While Sengupta's assessment of the panchayats is far too optimistic, for the minimal evidence he cites, he nevertheless deserves to be credited with being one of the first to recognize the novelty of the CPM's experiment in West Bengal. Cited in Footnote in *The State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform*, Atul Kohli (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987),109

²⁵ Ashok Mitra, Calcutta March 16, 1979 in, *The State and Poverty*, Interview by Kohli, 109

Pradhans revealed that 217 of them were teachers. Rural based teachers were placed in positions of leadership in the Gram Panchayats because they were educated and politicized. The social background of lower caste and lower classes in positions of leadership in the Gram Panchayats indicate that the LF leadership had been reasonably successful in mobilizing different sections of the rural poor. At the same time efforts had to be made to involve the poor and the landless in rural development programmes to thoroughly effectuate agricultural and land reforms.²⁶ The established bureaucracy had failed to carry it out as they routinely frittered away developmental resources in conjunction with local notables.²⁷

The programme of recording names of sharecroppers was popularly known as Operation *Barga*. It was implemented in two ways. According to the previous sharecropping laws, the burden of proof that a sharecropper/ tenant were indeed a tenant was on the tenant himself. The landlords could therefore easily evict them in case problems arose between them and the sharecroppers. The L.F. government made extensive efforts to amend those laws transferring the burden of proof regarding who the sharecropper is, on the landowner. The sharecropper thus had legal rights and security of tenure. The new laws aimed to reduce the landowners' control of and income from their property, while increasing the rights and income of those who worked the land- the sharecroppers.²⁸

The CPM has thus achieved what no other Indian political force has been able to achieve as yet, namely comprehensive penetration of the countryside without depending on large landowners. From this perspective, as argued by Kohli, the politics of West Bengal underwent a fundamental structural change. While the class structure remained intact, not only institutional penetration had been achieved but also institutional power had been transferred from the hands of the dominant propertied groups to a politicized lower middle strata.²⁹ Bhattacharya has termed Kohli's approach as the "institutional approach" where the political becomes more important than the social because the political arrangements of the CPIM enabled it to generate a considerable capacity for reforming the social order.³⁰ A unified rural leadership, disciplined organizational arrangements, being both centralized and

²⁶ Land reforms included recording the names of sharecroppers, giving them permanency of tenure, access to credit and redistributing surplus land among the rural poor.

²⁷ Kohli, *The State and Poverty*, 115

²⁸ Kohli, *The State and Poverty*, 125

²⁹ Kohli, *The State and Poverty*, 113

³⁰ Bhattacharyya, "Of Control and Factions," 60

decentralized and making reformism tolerable to the propertied classes was central in establishing their political autonomy over the social order.

A complete control of every sphere of social activity of the rural people in the state by the dominant political party gave rise to a phenomenon termed as ‘party-society’. Party took precedence as the mediating institution of social as well as political life, over family bonding, caste identities, religion and market. “Every other social institution, such as the landlord’s house, the caste council, the religious assembly, sectarian foundations... and so on, have been eliminated, marginalized or subordinated to the party. Rural life is literally inconceivable without the party...”³¹ But party did not simply mean CPM alone as Chatterjee opined. The mediating role of party between the government and the people in their everyday affairs were imitated and developed by all the other parties whether they were partners to the Left or the opposition. The parties and their local functionaries became the principal arbitrators in all social, family and personal disputes and the principal facilitators when individual villagers needed help in matters of health, education, finance etc. A considerable amount of the Gram Panchayat’s time was spent in holding *salishi sabhas* on a variety of disputes involving property, marriage and social norms.³² It was a “continuous and daily process of consensus making... [meant to keep] at least a majority of people sufficiently satisfied to ensure their continued electoral support.”³³

Political parties were accepted as moral guardians in both public and private lives of the families.

In fact, the Left’s unusual electoral record made even the local government institutions vulnerable to strong partisan incursions, eroding their autonomy and independence. Conditions such as these have produced in rural West Bengal a specific form of sociability- of ‘party-society’. Party-society, therefore, is the specific form of political society in West Bengal’s countryside... the overriding goal is to protect the constituency of a party’s support base and expand it periodically from election to

³¹ Partha Chatterjee, “The Coming Crisis in West Bengal,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no.9 (Feb. 28- Mar. 6, 2009) 43

³² *Salishi Sabhas* are khap panchayat like village kangaroo courts or tribal councils, which have existed in rural areas from ancient times and are responsible for dispensing swift (and sometimes crude) justice.

³³ Chatterjee, “The Coming Crisis,” 43

election... The line between the panchayat and the ruling party was often porous, the former merely endorsed or formalized decisions taken by the latter.³⁴

Elections are important for party societies as they operate through the panchayats to gain legitimacy. Hence for the parties to be politically successful, the social could not be neglected, rather it had to be systematically controlled so that the people could no longer conceive their public as well as private lives in absence of party intervention.

In the initial years of the Left rule, indeed the party-society carried out numerous pro-poor reforms thereby expanding its rural support base. But the initial enthusiasm started to fade after 1983 when the second panchayats were elected; with the coming of the third panchayats in 1988, the innovative spirit of the early years were hardly seen.³⁵ The panchayats became engrossed in routine bureaucratic works. The fourth panchayat elections of 1993 gave the impression that the LF was swiftly losing its ground. It seemed that the agrarian programmes no longer had clarity of objectives and outcomes. Instead the panchayats were becoming a conduit for distribution of benefits to maintain consensus. A fairly mechanical relationship grew between the panchayats, the party members and the bureaucracy making it difficult to differentiate between who did what. Turning a critical eye on the performance of the LFG, Bandopadhyay opined that the whole panchayat system had become bureaucratized. "The élan and vitality with which the panchayats started in 1978 got dissipated and it became in many a place a lifeless and sterile elected administrative structure."³⁶

The stability that came to signify the Left rule was achieved, not by collaborative consensus making, but by repressing all kinds of protest against the party. Terror, intimidation and murder became the order of the day. "...stability was not attained through hard policy choices, but by negotiations at all levels... The consensus was: If it resulted in anarchy, this could not be allowed."³⁷ Democracy turned into an oligarchy where the panchayat bosses got entangled in corruption, the rural gentry emerged as a powerful political class in the villages, student union bosses became powerful centres for extracting fees and

³⁴ Bhattacharyya, "Of Control and Factions", 60-63

³⁵ Poromesh Acharya, "Elusive New Horizons: Panchayats in West Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, no.5 (Jan. 29, 1994): 231

³⁶ D. Bandopadhyay, "Fourth General Elections of Panchayats in West Bengal," *Mainstream* (June 26, 1993) 18 in G.K. Lieten, "For a New Debate on West Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, no.29 (July 16, 1994), 1835

³⁷ Ranabir Samaddar, "Introduction" in *Passive Revolution in West Bengal 1977-2011*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd), xvi

recruitment of teachers at every level was controlled by the bosses of the teacher's association. The influence of money and muscle power was revealing the dark side of the party society.

The individual even if she/he did not support that version of a coercive leftist politics, where negotiations were being reached at by silencing dissent, still had to subscribe to it. Social and emancipatory struggles were being replaced by the private pleasures of the individual. Samaddar called it a 'new regime of governmentality' where democracy is not only a society to be governed in a particular way, or a specific government of society, but a reminder of the ungovernable which every democratic government must ultimately silence. "...in order to arrive at stability, not only unsavoury compromises were made, deals were struck, dissent was gagged, offices and locations of profit were shared, and when the land loot began, the disciplinary process was accompanied by considerable violence."³⁸ The incident of Marichjhapi refugees and the Singur-Nandigram movements come to mind.

The ruling party became disillusioned with corruption and nepotism from the lower most levels to the top of the administrative hierarchy. Panchayat funds were being utilised to strengthen party organisation. Programmes of government reform became programmes of the party. Williams observed that the use of panchayat funds to secure political support was commonplace and development money was directed exclusively to the member's friends and supporters.³⁹ This politics of dole giving (*paiye deowar rajniti*) has to be followed by all political parties to keep their supporters satisfied and to stay in power.

Sumanta Banerjee argued in a similar vein that in the rural areas of West Bengal benefits from land reforms (like Operation *Barga*, redistribution of land among the landless, rise in minimum wages) had reached the optimum threshold.⁴⁰ Their beneficiaries acquired new aspirations and emerged as a new middle class.

Ideological commitment to the goal of equitable redistribution of income has been replaced by the fierce competition among themselves for the largest slice of the cake- whether it comes in the form of money in the name of rural development, or contracts for road building or licences to run buses or trucks, or power and position

³⁸ Samaddar, "Introduction," xix

³⁹ Banerjee, "Party, Power and Political Violence," 17

⁴⁰ Sumanta Banerjee, "Violence Without Ideology," *Economic and Political Weekly* 35 no.34 (Aug. 19-25, 2000), 3003-3004

as members of panchayats and MLAs...the CPI(M)... ranks have been swelled by the entry of a large number of apolitical elements... But the party does not have enough to distribute among all. The left-outs remain disgruntled. Dissatisfaction with unkept promises and retaliation by CPI(M) functionaries if they protest, are also driving a large number of the party's supporters to switch over to the Trinamul...The hopes aroused by the Panchayati system dissipated into widespread frustration with the nepotism and corruption on which the local leaders are thriving.⁴¹

A look at the number and percentage of uncontested seats in local level politics in West Bengal (see Table 1.2) shows how the percentage of such seats has increased by leaps especially over the last two panchayat elections. The Left parties with time have shifted away from their purpose of empowering the poor politically. Instead they have focused all their attention on retaining power by dominating and coercing the middle and lower-middle classes. Party loyalty seems to have become the most important identity, crucial for one's survival in rural Bengal, where houses can be burnt and people evicted only because they

Years of Panchayat Elections in West Bengal	Number of seats won uncontested in Panchayat elections	Percentage of uncontested seats to number of total seats
1978	338	0.73
1983	332	0.74
1988	4200	8
1993	1716	2.81
1998	600	1.36
2003	6800	11
2008	2240	5.6
2013	6274*	10.7
2018	20076*	34.2

Table 1.2: Uncontested Seats in the Panchayat Elections over the Years, in Banerjee, "Party, Power and Political Violence," 18.

Note*: Correspondent. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/record-uncontested-wins-in-west-bengal-panchayat-poll-history/articleshow/63965895.cms>. May 1, 2018. Accessed on July 5, 2018.

have chosen to vote for a party of their choice.⁴² For that the lives of human beings of flesh and blood do not matter as long as the party of any colour and ideology can hold on to their

⁴¹ Banerjee, "Violence Without Ideology," 3004

⁴² Banerjee, "Party, Power and Political Violence," 17

electoral power and political position. It seems that the current ruling party All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) is following its predecessor when it comes to using coercive methods both for mobilising the rural lower strata and for dominating them during the panchayat elections in the state.

However one thing that distinguishes the ruling party from its predecessor is its ability to win the confidence of the SC and ST for electoral purposes. It is because of the pro-*bhadralok*⁴³ image of the Left leaning intelligentsia which has made them ignore the fact that the everyday lives of the rural poor is very much embedded in caste identities as class relations. In the context of rural West Bengal the Marxian ideas of antagonistic class relations cannot be understood without reference to the caste identities of the landowners and the labourers because it is as much subjective as structural.

Dayabati Roy conducted an ethnographic study in two villages located in Dhaniakhali and Singur blocks of the district of Hooghly.⁴⁴ Through her work she has precisely brought forth the fact that institutional or formal decentralization of power has not been able to eliminate caste based hierarchy from the cultural and social body of the society because such hierarchies are as much subjective and psycho-social as is economic and structural. In the cultural-ideological field, the sense of caste hierarchy was prevailing both in the political party and in society.⁴⁵ So even if the SC and ST members aspire to acquire political power and social mobility through reservation of seats in the panchayats, the reality is almost entirely different. Their social identity as a member of a lower caste and as someone engaged in manual labour (therefore a *chotolok*)- was socially legitimized by the upper caste educated *bhadraloks*. It was a reminder to the self and the 'other', that the other will never, in the true sense of the word, have political and social empowerment in spite of occupying the panchayat seats. This again makes us question whether reservations are enough in themselves if the person does not have social dignity. More than structural reasons, the *bhadralok* reaction to lower caste political mobilization is evident when Roy talks about Khagen Malik,

⁴³ *Bhadralok* and *chotolok* are social categories reflecting the nature of local system of class relationships in Bengal. While *bhadralok* refers to prosperous, well- educated and respected upper and middle class Bengalis, *chotoloks* or *abhadroloks* are lowly people not having refined behaviours and classy tastes. *Chotolok* is often used as a slang for describing lower classes or people who display 'lower class like behaviour and taste'. *Bhadraloks* have historically dominated the CPIM leadership in the towns and villages.

⁴⁴ Dayabati Roy, "Caste and Power: An Ethnography in West Bengal, India," *Modern Asian Studies* 46 no.4 (July 2012),947-974

⁴⁵ Roy, "Caste and Power," 973

a lower caste Pradhan of a Gram Panchayat. Malik's experience has showed that a SC person has been accepted in the position of the Panchayat Pradhan by the party due to compulsions of the provision of reservation. But in actuality the upper caste leaders have been extremely reluctant to relinquish their power by foregrounding the superiority of their caste category while being part of a Left dominated panchayat.

Furthermore injection of lower caste members by Left leadership did not mean giving them access to political power because they were 'intellectually superior' to the lower castes in carrying out political and administrative tasks. Roy has given the example of Madhabi, the wife of the village party leader who ridiculed the political assertions of the SCs and STs. The woman was an active member of the Mahila Samiti and caste consciousness was entrenched in her mind even if she was associated with leftist politics. From Roy's work, a part of the woman's comment has been quoted below,

...These people [the *chotoloks*] have become so adamant that they don't care [about] anyone. They can't be taken to task even if they don't work in the field properly. You must realize what happens if the shoe is placed on the head. One should be kept in the arena earmarked for him/her in the society. Anyhow all the mental works have still to be done by us. Can they do such works? Do they have the brains? The persons from Scheduled Caste-tribal communities are now becoming panchayat members and even panchayat pradhan, but who are performing the real works of panchayat other than people like us.⁴⁶

In the report titled "New Horizons for West Bengal's Panchayats" prepared by Nirmal Mukherjee and D. Bandopadhyay for the West Bengal government in 1993, similar observations were arrived at. The report states, "The panchayats brought in a middle category of society into key positions, many of them school teachers... However power has yet to travel down the lower levels. SCs and STs have been elected but do not hold key positions. The poor in general have not been elected. The middle category thus remains in firm control of the panchayats." It further observes, "Panchayats packed with well intentioned 'middle' are no substitute for fair representation from both 'middle' and 'lowers', for the 'lowers' surely know what is good for them."⁴⁷ The authors of the report shared their experience from their field work in which they stated that they were "taken aback to hear an argument

⁴⁶ Roy, "Caste and Power," 959

⁴⁷ Acharya, "Elusive New Horizons," 232

reminiscent of the ‘white man’s burden’ from an elected functionary.” It is because of the predominance of the middle classes in the panchayats that the land reform and other agrarian measures for the poor has been neglected for the longest time, according to the report. If the poor laboring classes were proportionately represented so that they could look after such programmes themselves, probably then the durability of the programmes would have lasted longer. What the report further suggested was that “... panchayats composed of proportionate representation from the labouring classes may be the pre-condition for changing the power relations, but by itself it may not achieve much in that regard without initiating the process of counter-socialisation through a movement for counter education... A process of counter-socialisation through a movement of counter- education is the new challenge before the West Bengal Left for ushering in the new horizon of West Bengal's panchayats.”⁴⁸

Marginalizing the ‘Caste’ Factor: The Rhetoric of Leftist ‘Class’ Politics

The relation between caste, class and politics in West Bengal under the rule of the Hindu *bhadraloks* may give the impression that identity politics based on caste is absent from the public discourse. A widely held political myth that has prevailed in the state for a long time is that class politics of the secular and liberal Hindu Left ideology has made the category of caste irrelevant. In an apparent ‘non-political’ context, why then does the same Left leaning liberal families hold on to their caste identities when they arrange marital relations or engage in funeral rites? Without going into these discrete contradictions, what must be mentioned here is that, the category of caste has never been absent from Bengal’s consciousness. Caste forces have never been appropriately mobilized for electoral articulation because of the hegemony of class politics and the *bhadralok* reaction to lower caste political mobilization. But “by making some adjustments in form it has managed to sustain itself...” even under the impact of political and socio-economic reforms of the LFG.⁴⁹ Landownership was not simply a relation between classes in terms of ownership of means and ends of production. It was also a relation between castes in terms of specialization of functions and construction of collective subjectivities.

Praskanva Sinharay proposed that the secular public image of the erstwhile ruling parties, the class politics of a leftist political culture and the hegemonic domination of the urban

⁴⁸ Acharya, “Elusive New Horizons,” 233-234

⁴⁹ S. Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Domination in Colonial Bengal*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004) 247, in Roy, “Caste and Power,” 948

educated upper caste liberal *bhadralok* has made caste an irrelevant category in the electoral politics of the state.⁵⁰ The author talks of an emergent new politics in the state in which the lower caste Matuas have made a dramatic entry from 2008 onwards. But it is a mistake to think that caste loyalties are absent from the popular consciousness just because it is not apparently part of the electoral scenario.⁵¹ Caste polarizations are as much a politico-economic reality in West Bengal as in other states of India, argues Chandra and Nielson. In contrast to other states where lower caste social movements have rocked the hegemony of the upper castes, post colonial West Bengal has seen the Namasudra community assimilating and acculturating themselves to the *bhadralok* culture to gain social and economic status and mobility. Sarbani Bandopadhyay has tried to address the issue of *bhadralok* reaction to lower caste politics in West Bengal by studying the Partition history of Bengal.⁵² “That caste was marginal to Bengal politics was a nationalist/bhadralok myth but the sustenance of this myth was becoming increasingly difficult as the swadeshi movement began to show not only a clear lack of interest of the so-called lower castes but also their active resistance to it.”⁵³ During the swadeshi movement a large section of the dalit population agitated against their caste and socio-economic oppression and claimed special privileges from the colonial government. Their nascent political rise posed a threat to the *bhadralok* hegemony and hence the latter became way too enthusiastic in pushing forward the partition of the state. “Partition not only kept a huge dalit population away from West Bengal; when they fled East Bengal and came to West Bengal they did so as refugees whose primary concern could not have been politics but survival.”⁵⁴ The partition therefore solved the question of caste in Bengal’s politics although not without resistance.

Apart from the weakening of lower caste solidarity, another reason for the upper caste Hindus to demand partition was their disinclination to have a future under Muslim domination. The process of Islamisation had already ‘otherised’ the Namasudra refugees as

⁵⁰ Praskanva Sinharay, “A New Politics of Caste.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no.34 (August 25, 2012), 26-27

⁵¹ P. Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Popular Criticism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) in Uday Chandra and Kenneth Bo Nielson, “The Importance of Caste in Bengal,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no.44 (Nov.3, 2012) 59

⁵² Sarbani Bandopadhyay, “Caste and Politics in Bengal,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47 no.50 (Dec. 15, 2012), 71-73

⁵³ S. Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial Bengal: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2011), in Bandopadhyay, “Caste and Politics,” 71

⁵⁴ Conversation with S K Ray, dalit activist Nov. 7, 2012, Calcutta, in Bandopadhyay, “Caste and Politics,” 72

‘Hindus’. Their migration helped the upper caste Hindus in consolidating Hindu nationalism by suppressing the lower caste identity of the refugees and recognizing them as a ‘Hindu minority’.

That the caste factor has always been important in the state’s politics has been briefly explained in this chapter with special reference to the Namasudra community or Matua Mahasangha. As early as the 1870s and 1880s the Rajbansi community of North Bengal and the Namasudras of East Bengal were at the forefront of scheduled caste movements in Bengal. In 1946 the Rajbansis and the Namasudras were the main protagonists of the Tehbhaga movement. There were several incidents of conflicts and violence when the Namasudra refugees posed a threat to the local Hindu residents as well as high caste Hindu refugees over maintenance of the local balance of power. In course of time the Namasudra leaders aligned with political parties who could take measures for their rehabilitation as ‘Hindu refugees’. Initially the Namasudra community sided with the Congress before the rise of LF. From the 1980s, the supporters split between the two parties although the Matua organization preferred to stay away from any explicit political alignment.⁵⁵

In the current political scenario the resurgence of the Matuas cannot be treated as an isolated phenomenon especially when both AITC and Bhatratiya Janata Party (BJP) are involved in the game of wooing the followers of *Boroma*, the matriarch of the Matua community. Unfortunately for the longest time, the Left leadership neglected to position itself strongly to win the Matua vote bank. In the post-1977 period the Matuas were supporting the L.F. In fact in the two parliamentary elections of 1971 and 1977, P.R. Thakur, a well known Matua leader, lost to the CPM candidate, indicating a decisive left takeover of the refugee and scheduled caste constituencies- both merging into a leftist vote bank that remained intact until 2009.⁵⁶ The Left discovered the Matua vote bank again in 2009 when communist leaders like Brinda Karat and Biman Bose rushed to Thakurnagar near the Indo-Bangla border to get the blessings of Binapani Devi, popularly known as *Boroma* (elderly mother). The Namasudras are Bengal’s second largest SC population- the former Chandal refugees who left Bangladesh to settle in the districts of Howrah, the two 24 Parganas, Nadia, Malda,

⁵⁵ Partha Chatterjee, “Historicising Caste in Bengal Politics,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47 no.50 (Dec.15 2012) 70

⁵⁶ Sekhar Bandopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, “In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal After Partition,” *Policies and Practices* 59 (Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Feb. 2014) 15

Cooch Behar, North and South Dinajpur.⁵⁷ The question that lingers is whether the Matuas are important for the elections or it's the other way round. Praskanva Sinharay has argued that the politics of bargain have been mutually beneficial for both sides- the community and the party. "The former gains its political salience in the institutionalised domain of state politics; whereas the latter, quite cunningly, aims to eventually integrate the former's discrete politics within its influence."⁵⁸

Although the Matuas negotiated with all the major political parties it eventually aligned with the AITC before the 2011 Assembly elections. Manjul Krishna Thakur, the younger son of *Boroma*, was appointed as the Minister of State for Refugee-relief and Rehabilitation. A parallel development was the formation of the Social Justice Forum by Abdur Rezzak Mollah, a former LF minister. In the contemporary state politics the Matuas therefore will continue to play a vital role for the continued electoral victory of the ruling party. Even the BJP is trying to follow the path taken by AITC. As we have seen recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to launch his Lok Sabha campaign from Thakurnagar by fielding *Boroma's* grandson Shantanu Thakur.

In referring to the presence of lower castes like the Namasudras for instance, in West Bengal's electoral and political scenario, the purpose has been to show how caste-class negotiations shape the popular political culture. The party-society not only exists due to party intervention in the everyday life of the community; on the contrary the party is also influenced by the society and the material and symbolic relations that embody it. The flow of resources from the party to the society through the panchayats is not a one way phenomenon. The constitution of leadership and followership of the party is defined by caste-class relations. Such relations may give rise to antagonisms as well as coalitions but the category of caste does not get subsumed by the class rhetoric. It is within the consciousness of the people who make up the Gram Panchayats and proceed to set up local alliances for articulation of interests.

⁵⁷ Ajanta Chakraborty. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/The-Matua-factor-in-Bengal-politics/articleshow/32988818.cms>. March 31, 2014. Accessed on July 5, 2018.

⁵⁸ Praskanva Sinharay, "The West Bengal Story: The Caste Question in Lok Sabha Elections," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no.16 (Apr. 2014) 2

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN, POLITICAL PARTIES AND PANCHAYATS

Women and Panchayati Raj

হ্যাঁ মানুষ। মেয়ে/ পুরুষ মিলিয়েই মানুষ। আমাদের দেশের লোক। দেশে যত মানুষ আছে ৪৮.১ ভাগ হচ্ছে মেয়েরা, প্রায় অর্ধেক। মাঠে/ ঘাটে, খেত/ খামারে, অফিস/ কাছারিতে, ঘরে/ বাইরে, জীবনের অলিতে/ গলিতে কাঁধে কাঁধ মিলিয়ে পুরুষের সঙ্গে খেটে চলেছে। কিন্তু আমাদের এই পুরুষ শাসিত সমাজ, ভাঙা আর্থসামাজিক কাঠামো বস্তাপচা বোধ মেয়েদেরকে পেছনে ফেলে রেখে তাদের অংশীদারত্বকে না মেনেই খুশি হতে চেয়েছে বারবার, তাদের কাছ থেকে ভোট নিয়ে ‘জনপ্রতিনিধি’, ‘দেশনেতা’ নির্বাচিত হয়েছে, তাদেরকে ডেকে ভিড় দেখানো হয়েছে, চুপচাপ ‘হাত তোলা’ কে দাম দেওয়া হয়েছে, কিন্তু সামাজিক/ রাজনৈতিক অধিকার দেওয়ার প্রয়োজনীয়তা অনুভব করেনি। জেনে বুঝেই মেয়েদের ‘সচেতনতাকে’ গুরুত্ব দেওয়া হয়নি। এই জোরাজুরির বিরুদ্ধে আওয়াজ তুলতে মেয়েরাও বাধ্য হয়েছে।

১৯৯৩ এর সংবিধানের ৭৩তম সংশোধনের ফলে যেমন সাধারণ মানুষ কিছু ক্ষমতা অর্জন করেছে, তেমনি মেয়েদের জন্য 1/3 অংশ সংরক্ষণ তাদের উচিত প্রাপ্য – “সামাজিক/ রাজনৈতিক অধিকার” আদায় করে নিয়েছে। এর ফলে সারা দেশে প্রায় ৮ লক্ষ মহিলা স্থানীয় পঞ্চায়তি শাসনে সক্রিয় অংশগ্রহণের অধিকারী হবে। যদিও অনেক দেরি হল- তবুও এ সংশোধন এক উল্লেখনীয় জয়, এবং অবশ্যই এ মানুষের জয়জাত্রা। তবে যেটা মনে রাখা জরুরী এ পাওয়া কুড়িয়ে পাওয়া নয়- লড়ে পাওয়া। এই পাওয়া কে সম্মান দিতে হবে, এ ক্ষমতা ঠিকমত ব্যবহার না হলে ভাবিকালের নেতৃত্ব আবার কুক্ষিগত হবে মুষ্টিমেয়র হাতে। “পাওয়াকে সামলে রাখার জন্য প্রয়োজন কঠিন প্রস্তুতির, অন্যথায়...

The above quote is part of a short opinion presented by Loknath Ray for a special issue on Panchayati Raj published in *Kishani Samachar* in 1995. It was published after the West Bengal Panchayat Constitution Rule was modified in 1993. With such modifications, West Bengal saw reservation of 23,707 seats throughout the state during the panchayat elections held on May 30, 1993. 64,325 women candidates contested for the seats. Total number of women candidates fielded by the political parties including the independents stood at 55,207 at the level of Gram Panchayat; 8242 women candidates at the level of Panchayat Samiti and 876 women candidates at the Zilla Parishad level. Post the passage of the 73rd Constitutional (Amendment) Act, the Panchayat Constitution Rule was again reformed in April 1998 to

conform to it. It introduced reservation of Pradhan positions for women and for the SC and ST. The above quote hints at some basic attitudes that prevent women from participating actively and holistically in politics. Women constitute half of the country's population, working alongside men, both in their productive and reproductive capacity. But their contributions toward the society and the polity have never been acknowledged by the patriarchal culture and the state. Moreover they have always been treated as secondary citizens, as instruments in election campaigns whose only existence within the polity is to make up the crowd and silently support the 'people's representative'.

The 73rd Amendment Act has given women in general and women from lower castes and classes in particular an opportunity to secure their rightful place at the level of local government. By participating in the decision making procedures at the level of the community, women can make significant contributions towards achieving what is of immediate importance in their locality. Active participation of women in the panchayats in many instances has led to successful implementation of schemes with regard to health and education of girls and mothers in the villages. Their community activism can be translated into real power to make institutional changes that improve the quality of both private and public lives.¹ Given that much of women's political action is community based, it is at the local level that women's participation in electoral politics can have a significant impact on challenging and changing patriarchal structures.² Furthermore what has to be remembered is that women's demand for reservations is a result of years of struggle of women's organisations and groups throughout the country. It has to be respected and protected from unscrupulous elements who want to capture and retain power by hook or crook.

Even though the sex of the representative does not determine the policy initiatives taken for development of the villages, but priority given to public good provisions certainly reflect the gender of the representative. For instance, in West Bengal women complain more often than men about drinking water and roads. So there are more investments in drinking water and roads in Gram Panchayats reserved for women. In Rajasthan, women complain more often than men about drinking water but less often about roads, and there are more

¹ Joti Sekhon, "Engendering Grassroots Democracy: Research, Training and Networking for Women in Local Self Governance in India," *NWSA Journal* 18 no.2 (Summer 2006), 103

² Sekhon, "Engendering Grassroots," 103

investments in water and less investment in roads in Gram Panchayats reserved for women.³ Moreover women, having limited interaction with the men, can approach women representatives without the hesitation of breaking social norms. Hence the gender of the representative can influence policy decisions.

In the Indian Constitution, Article 40 of the Directive Principle of State Policy deals with the organisation of village panchayats. It says that the state shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to function as units of self-government. Panchayats received constitutional recognition with the passing of the 73rd Constitutional (Amendment) Act in 1993. The Act is significant in more than one sense, the most important being, women's political participation at the grassroots for the first time was recognized and guaranteed constitutionally. Some important features of the Act with regard to women's reservation are:

- d. Not less than one third of total number of seats shall be reserved for women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
- e. Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat.
- f. Provided further that not less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women. Provided also that the number of offices reserved under this clause shall be allotted by rotation to different Panchayats at each level.

Before the 1993 Act was passed, a host of committees were constituted, all of which with variations in recommendations, wanted to revive the moribund PRIs in the country. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee in 1957 recommended establishment of a three tier Panchayati Raj system at the village, block and district level. However women's participation in the decision making process of the panchayats did not figure much in the report. A section of the report recommended appointment of Gram Sevikas and women social extension officers for women welfare programmes and co-option of two women at the district and block

³ R. Chattopadhyay and E. Duflo, "Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India," *Econometrica* 72, no.5 (Sept.2004), 1411

level⁴. They were merely directed to assist in ‘women centric’ issues only. “The problem of co-option raises the question of the system of co-opting member. Unless certain safeguards are introduced to secure independent and competent women, the present practice of co-opting women either as an adornment or as an innocent non-entity will continue.”⁵ Such ‘add women and stir’ rationale clearly will not have any discernable effect in terms of giving women genuine opportunities to articulate their interests or providing them with decision taking responsibilities.

The *Towards Equality* Report prepared by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974) was one of first extensive attempts in post independence India to acquire nationwide data to understand the contemporary socio-economic and political status of women. Chapter VII of the Report deals with the political status of women in India and also includes the indicators which were used to assess their deteriorating political status. It suggested that women be given greater opportunities to participate in the decision making process at the grassroots level. For this reservations should be made in the representative structures of the local government.⁶ It also recommended establishment of Statutory Women’s Panchayats at the village level for greater participation by the women in the political process. These bodies were not meant to be parallel organisations to the Gram Panchayats but should form an integral part of the Panchayati Raj structure, with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare and development programmes for women and children.⁷

The Report pointed out the responsibilities that political parties have regarding their sponsorship of women candidates for elections to Parliament and State Assemblies. “The parties reflect the established values of a male dominated society, which would be difficult to alter without certain structural changes in the socio-political setup... While they may initially start with 15%, this should be gradually increased so that in time to come the representation of women in the legislative bodies has some relationship to their position in the total

⁴ Prabhat Dutta with Panchali Sen, *Women in Panchayats in West Bengal: An Exploratory Study* (Kolkata: Dasgupta and Company Private Limited, 2003),10

⁵ Vina Mazumdar, ed. *Symbols of Power: Studies on the Political Status of Women in India* (Bombay: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1979), 82

⁶ Government of India, *Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*, (New Delhi: Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 1974), 304

⁷ Government of India, *Report of the Committee*, 304

population of the country or the State.”⁸ But the Report was unable to recommend the system of women’s reservation in the State Assemblies and Parliament. A number of reasons were provided by the Committee members for rejecting such a measure. Two such arguments that stand out were:

“(f) Women have been competing as equals with men since 1952. They must continue to do so and stand on their own merits and intensify their political and social life. A departure from this equality now will be a retrograde step.

(g) The minority argument cannot be applied to women. Women are not a community, they are a category. Though they have some real problems of their own, they share with men the problems of their groups, locality and community. Women are not concentrated in certain areas confined to particular fields of activity. Under these circumstances, there can be no rational basis for reservation for women.”⁹

The liberal argument that women can compete with men as equals stand true if we think of our social system to be free of structural and patriarchal biases. Traditional normative theories of democracy aim at providing justifications for moral desirability of democracy and right to equality without enquiring how intensely masculinist and exclusive the democratic foundations are. There are numerous cases throughout the country where women elected representatives have been consistently waging their struggles against upper class elitism and patriarchal forces to stand as equals with men. Buch for example talks about *Kamla* a dalit Sarpanch in Chattarpur who was initially supported by the dominant upper caste group in her village at the time of elections on condition that she would not question their authority.¹⁰ After getting elected she refused to indulge in wrong doings which led to cancellation of all panchayat meetings under orders of the dominant castes. The Up-Sarpanch did not come to the meeting and told the others not to attend it. At the time Buch took the interviews, meetings were still not held. But *Kamla*’s resistance reflects the political agency and efficacy of women countering caste, class and patriarchal prejudices while remaining in positions of political authority.

⁸ Government of India, *Report of the Committee*, 302-305

⁹ Government of India, *Report of the Committee*, 304

¹⁰ Nirmala Buch, *From Oppression to Assertion: Women and Panchayats in India*, (New Delhi: Routledge) 2010

Historically women have been relegated to the level of secondary citizens to maintain the gendered status quo of the social system as a whole. It is at once systemic, structural and symbolic. Affirmative action is aimed at extenuating societal disadvantages derived from socio-historical processes of an unjust social order.¹¹ It is just one step but a necessary step to minimise if not do away with social discrimination and give women especially from the lower castes and classes access to political power. The idea of affirmative action does not go against the right to equality. It augments the right by recognising the fact that some groups in our society who have been historically discriminated against owing to their caste, class, gender etc. need additional support to compete with the rest. Such preferential treatment does not treat half of the country's population as a minority. It cannot be denied that the social and political field is still manipulated by patriarchal power play and if reservations were not there women's chances of competing with men in the political system would have been negligible. One of the earliest cross-state studies on women's leadership in the PRIs conducted by Participatory Research in Asia confirms this. The interviews conducted, revealed that women felt that they won the election only because the seats in their particular area were reserved for them. A general seat would not have given them the chance to stand for elections.¹²

After the Balwant Mehta Committee, the second most important committee to take up the issue of strengthening women's role in panchayats was the Asoka Mehta Committee constituted in 1978. The Committee recommended co-option of more women in the election processes to enhance their efficacy and effectiveness at autonomous decision making. For the two seats reserved for women in the Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat, any woman who gets the highest number of votes in the election, even if she does not win, should be taken in as a co-opted member.¹³ Much protest was raised against repeated recommendations for cooption from different quarters of the women's movement in the country. But the Committee acknowledged the need for associating women with the processes of decision making although it could not give a clear direction as to how that would be achieved.¹⁴

¹¹ Prakash Louis, "Scheduled Castes and Tribes: The Reservation Debate," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38 no.25 (June 21-27, 2003), 2475

¹² Participatory Research in Asia 'Women's Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: An Analysis of Six States (Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh)', November 1999

¹³ Government of India, *Asoka Mehta Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions*, (New Delhi: Department of Rural Development, Ministry of Agriculture, 1978), X.9,X.10.1

¹⁴ Dutta with Sen, *Women in Panchayats in West Bengal*, 12

The National Perspective Plan for Women (NPP) was a policy document formulated by a Core group constituted by the Government of India in 1988. The Plan sought to make bold interventions to correct societal imbalances and inequalities persistent in the development programmes targeting women. Some of the areas that the Plan especially focused on were rural development and agriculture, employment and training, health and family welfare, legislation, political participation and decision making, media and communication.

Political participation in a narrower sense indicates voluntary involvement in the political affairs of the state. However the essence of political participation lies not only in taking part in electoral and administrative activities but also to engage in informal political activities with the aim of challenging traditional power structures. The NPP defined political participation as an involvement in any form of organized activity that affects or seeks to affect power relationships. Broadly political participation for the NPP referred to “activities by those not formally empowered to make decisions, these activities being mainly intended to influence the attitudes and behaviour of those who have powers for decision-making. In fact protests and demonstrations against those in power also form part of political participation.”¹⁵

Referring to the method of co-option proposed by the Asoka Mehta Committee, the NPP again pointed out that co-option was being done only in letter and not in the spirit of getting women involved in the panchayat. Hence the women hardly had any scope to participate independently and democratically in the political processes of the PRIs. Instead it suggested the following:

- a. Reservation of thirty percent of seats should be made for women in all rural local self governing bodies at all levels from the village panchayats to the Zilla Parishads.
- b. There should be reservation of thirty percent of the executive heads of all bodies from Gram Panchayats to Zilla Parishads for women;
- c. Certain percentage of constituencies in the lower tiers of the panchayats can be exclusively declared as women’s constituencies and all executive positions in a certain number of territorial jurisdictions can be reserved for women candidates.¹⁶

¹⁵ Government of India, *National Perspective Plan for Women* (New Delhi: Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1988-2000),153

¹⁶ Dutta with Sen, *Women in Panchayats in West Bengal*,13

Following the NPP debate, states like Karnataka and Gujarat implemented women's reservation in the PRIs. In the period between 1974 and 1996 two significant developments took place in Indian politics when the same representatives of the women's movement who had rejected reservations demanded it again.¹⁷ One such development was the influx of lower castes in the domain of the public political sphere. Greater political participation of marginal social groups like dalits and other backward classes rose in the backdrop of challenges to the legitimacy of the national integrity argument which propelled the 1975 Emergency. "... The emergence of social justice as a rubric to talk about caste equity (and) *political representation of castes and communities*... is a distinct achievement of this period."¹⁸

The other challenge came from autonomous women's groups during the 1980s which saw more women in leadership roles in movements against corruption and price rise. The autonomous women's groups placed feminist demands on the public agenda questioning underrepresentation of women in governmental decision making bodies. By the time of the NPP therefore, there was both an acknowledgement of women's active participation in politics as well as of their absence in decision-making bodies.¹⁹

In 1989 the Rajiv Gandhi Government introduced the 64th Constitutional (Amendment) Bill in the Lok Sabha. The purpose was to give 'power to the people' by constitutionally sanctioning the PRIs. The bill stated that as nearly as may be, thirty percent (including number of seats reserved for women belonging to Scheduled Castes and tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat. It was further laid down that where only two seats were reserved for the Scheduled Caste or as the case maybe, Tribes, one of the two seats would remain reserved for women belonging to the SC, or as the case may be, ST.²⁰

But the Bill could not be passed due to the disapproval of Rajya Sabha. In 1990 when the Janata Dal came to power the matter was reconsidered. Fresh constitutional amendment bills were introduced and approved in the Lok Sabha. Terms were changed to 'not less than one-

¹⁷ Nivedita Menon, *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*, (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 168

¹⁸ Yogendra Yadav 'Electoral Politics in the Time of Change. India's Third Electoral System, 1989-99,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, (21-28 August 1999) pp. 2393-9, (emphasis added) cited in Menon, *Recovering Subversion*, 169

¹⁹ Menon, *Recovering Subversion*, 169

²⁰ Dutta with Sen, *Women in Panchayats in West Bengal*, 15

third' reservation of seats for women at the three tiers of the local government. But once again the bill lapsed due to collapse of the government. Finally the Congress Government under the Prime Ministership of P.V. Narasimha Rao re-introduced the 72nd Constitutional Amendment Bill, which consequently took a formal shape with the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bill in 1993. A significant step for the government in this regard was that, while the reservation of seats according to the Amendment 'may be' allotted by rotation, the reservation of Chairpersons' post 'shall be' allotted by rotation. The seat designated for reservation has to be mandatorily changed.²¹

Today in many states, reservations for women in the panchayats stand at fifty percent. A look at the figure (see Figure 1) below shows an increased representation of women at the panchayat level in many states, some exceeding the thirty three percent quotas. 14 states have 50-58% representation of women in the PRIs. Jharkhand leads the way with 58%, followed by Rajasthan and Uttarakhand. Even though such reservations have been introduced a nationwide legislation to reserve fifty percent of seats for women in rural and urban local bodies has not come into being. The Constitution (110th Amendment) Bill and the Constitution (112th Amendment) Bill was introduced for the purpose in 2009 but it lapsed with the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha. Various states over the years have increased the quotas to fifty percent in their PRIs and West Bengal is one of them.

A formal right to stand for elections and occupy reserved seats is no guarantee that the women will be able to participate in politics effectively once they are inside the system. "Not only do women need to be prepared for participation in formal electoral politics, they also need to be enabled to act independently and be confident in setting and implementing policies. This usually requires challenging traditional patriarchal institutions that limit political participation and activism."²² The political parties therefore have a major responsibility in providing political education to its women supporters. Party societies for instance being so relevant in rural West Bengal, can help not only to bring about gender favoured structural reforms of the panchayat, they can even influence positively the family attitudes towards women's political participation. It is more likely for women to challenge power structures both at their workplace and in their homes if they have the support of the political parties.

²¹ Buch, *From Oppression to Assertion*, 9

²² Sekhon, "Engendering Grassroots Democracy," 103

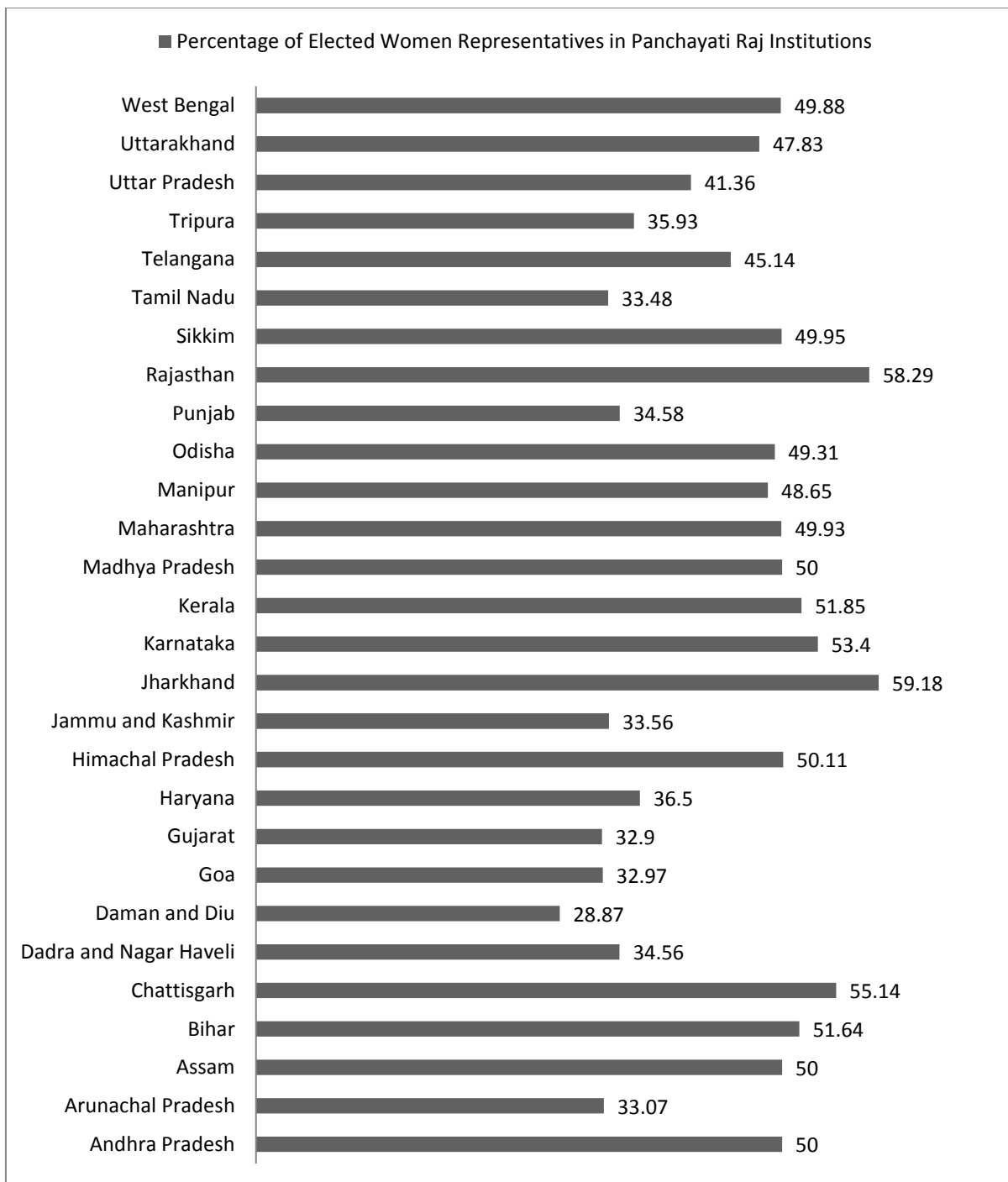


Figure 2.1: Status of Representation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in India

Note: There are 13.45 lakhs Elected Women Representatives in PRIs which constitute 46.14% of total Elected Representatives. Above details are based on information provided by States/UTs as on November 24, 2016

Locating the “Women’s Question” in the Party Programmes in West Bengal

Political parties both at the national and regional level do not make sincere efforts to politically educate and conscientize the women even though they mention it in their party manifestos. They discriminate against women not only in terms of nomination and seat allotment but also in the party rank and file, and chain of command. Most political parties have vigorously opposed the demand for women’s reservations in the Parliament although the same parties have supported it at the level of local government. The two main issues on which the reservation debate stands are- the proxy leadership of what Madhu Kishwar called the *Beti- Biwi* brigade and caste based opposition to quotas. With the exception of a few women politicians, most have entered politics through their families. They are unable to take decisions without the influence of the male members of the party and act as proxies to their male counterparts. Uma Bharati of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has challenged her party’s decision a couple of times, most importantly her opposition to the party’s decision to support the women’s reservation bill. Bharati has opposed it on grounds that it will strengthen the domination of upper class and upper caste women in the legislatures, which is a legitimate feminist concern. But caste based opposition to women’s reservation many a times have taken the form of derogatory misogynistic comments from senior parliamentarians who are genuinely scared of the ‘*par kati auratein*’ (short haired women) dominating the Parliament. It reveals the psyche of Parliamentary members placed in positions of leadership in the political parties and institutions, towards women. Combined with distaste towards lower classes and castes, the issue of women’s reservation has still remained a sore point for many political parties in the country.

A look at the ‘women’s question’ in the manifestos and party documents of the CPM shows that from the time of its inception they have tried to develop a clear political framework to address the multifarious forms of oppression faced by women at the intersections of class, caste and gender.²³ The 1964 Party Programme for instance stated the requirement of equal pay for equal work for both men and women, removal of social inequalities and discrimination against women, equal rights with men in such matters as inheritance of property including land, enforcement of protective social, economic and family

²³ Among all the Left allies, the programmes only of CPM have been looked at because it was the dominant force in the alliance.

laws based on equal rights of women in all communities and efforts to democratise family structures by providing suitable support systems in childcare and domestic work. Families are inherently unequal and if the party intervenes in the private sphere for political purposes, it will lead to politicization of and conscientization about women's lives.

The Programme also describes the exploitation of women at different levels "as women, as workers, as citizens" which has been further elaborated in its 2005 Central Committee Document on the Party's Perspective on Women's Issues and Tasks. The ideological underpinnings of the party have held capitalism responsible for not being able to create the material conditions necessary for women's equality and emancipation. The party finds it necessary to bring more women into its aegis especially at a time when women are struggling to exercise their agency against all forms of gendered violence. The 2005 Party Programme has fleshed out in details the different dimensions of women's oppression. Women across class, caste and community face oppression because of their gender. The unequal share in resources both in the family and society leads to their greater vulnerability. Under capitalistic exploitative conditions the sexual reproduction of labour in the family supplements reproduction of labour in the market making invisible and unaccountable the domestic work performed by them.

The devalued status of women within the family has a corresponding impact on their role in the economic and political sphere. A working class woman- whether in rural or urban areas- face gender and class exploitation. A significant portion of women workers are casual labourers working in the unorganised sector in hazardous conditions. They do not have any social security and get remarkably low wages. Struggles for the particular demands of working class women are a specific and an important part of class struggle that has been waged by the party for decades. The party has taken initiatives to start a separate platform or committee for working women within the existing trade unions.

Caste has been identified by the party as an instrument of women's exploitation. Dalits, adivasis and women from minority communities who are at the bottom of the social and economic ladder face a triple burden by virtue of their class, gender and caste. They not only bear the brunt of exploitation from their own families and upper caste men but also from upper caste women. In the context of women's representation in the panchayats, dalits and tribal women are prevented from raising their voices against social injustices and illegal activities within the panchayat as well. The symbolic hierarchies reinforced by the caste

system act as a source of ridicule and slander for the lower caste women. Such hierarchies are staggeringly prevalent in formal political institutions like the village panchayat that calls for democratic decentralisation and devolution of powers at the grassroots. It clearly shows the weakness of those arguments that fail to recognise the capillary nature of power that emerge from traditional social norms and which are veritably a part of the neutral and formal political institutions. The CPM thus wants to consolidate caste, class and gender identities for political empowerment of lower caste women. Although the replacement of male Brahmin landlords by female SC agricultural labourers do not automatically change the class goal of the institutions or bring them more in tune with the requirements of the most needy and oppressed sections, the changed composition is bound to make a difference, even if only in terms of weakening of caste hierarchy.²⁴

This aspect brings us to the question of women's rights as decision makers in government bodies. As citizens in a democracy, women face discrimination from the state concerning social, economic, political and developmental policies affecting them. The CPM has unequivocally supported the decision of one-third reservation of seats for women in local self government bodies. The most recent Manifesto for the 17th Lok Sabha elections call for implementation of one-third reservation for women in Parliament and State Assemblies. An essential task for the party then is to provide political education to its women cadre so that when they are in positions of political authority they can further develop their potential as equal political participants in the public sphere. The party seeks to make conscious efforts to make the women comrades more self reliant by encouraging them to stand on an equal footing with men in public life.

The 2011 West Bengal Legislative Assembly elections marked the historic defeat of the longest serving democratically elected communist government in the world. It was in 1998 that for the first time the regime of LFG came under threat with the birth of AITC. Afraid of losing its power and its support base in the rural areas, all kinds of opposition was suppressed via illegal killings and unanswered deaths. The new born party in alliance with the BJP by taking this opportunity challenged the hegemony of the LF. It even successfully captured some seats in parts of South Bengal. Political violence spread in the rural areas as thousands of armed people from the lower strata of rural society were mobilised by the warring sides for

²⁴ G.K. Lieten, 'Panchayat Leaders in a West Bengal District,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 no.40 (Oct. 1,1988) 2070

area domination.²⁵ “Even relatives were seen fighting each other and burning each others’ houses in their fight for area domination. Not all people joined those battles on their own as coercive methods were used by both sides to mobilise people, but some people did join the fights voluntarily and became part of the power game conducted in favour of these parties.”²⁶

The current ruling party in West Bengal that is AITC, address the issues concerning women in their manifesto much differently than CPM. Popularly known as the government of *Maa-Mati-Manush*, Mamata Banerjee’s government is one of the most powerful regional governments in the country.²⁷ *Didi* along her party and government has received both praise and ridicule as her regime is identified to be standing in sharp contrast to the *bhadralok* regime of the Left.²⁸ “...the left leaning intelligentsia compare her unfavourably with the polished, educated, masculine, *bhadralok* manners of Left Front politicians, of whom Jyoti Basu is the paragon, with his statesmanlike aloofness, never a comrade, never an elder brother (*dada*), clad in snow white dhoti, crisply ironed white kurta and polished casual shoes....In contrast, Mamata’s ordinariness, the high-pitched drama of her protests, her crumpled saris, halting English and colloquial Bengali are constantly ridiculed by the media, and likened to that of a maid servant rather than a would be leader of the people...”²⁹ Precisely this is what Banerjee has used to her advantage. Her roughness, her ordinariness has helped in bringing her closer to the underprivileged sections of society who vehemently oppose the *bhadralok samaj* for the polished image that it upholds.

The party states in its manifesto (2019) that it has reduced the rate of unemployment by 40% in the state. It seeks to give special importance to women employment including the filling up of reserved seats by women belonging to minorities and other backward classes. The party after coming to power has implemented various public welfare policies like the Swami Vivekananda Merit cum Means Scholarship, *Kanyasree Prakalpa*, *Yuvasree*, *Sabuj Sathi*, *Sabujasree*, *Rupasree* and *Samabyathi*. The *Sobuj Sathi* scheme for instance was launched by the ruling government wherein all school going children were gifted bicycles by

²⁵ Banerjee, “Party, Power and Political Violence”, 17

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ The government of *Ma-Mati-Manush* is translated as the government of the Mother, Motherland and People. It is a popular Bengali political slogan coined by AITC chief and the current Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee.

²⁸ Mamata Banerjee in the popular consciousness is the epitome of a caring yet strict older sister; hence she is addressed by all as *Didi*.

²⁹ Rob Jenkins (ed.) *Regional Reflections: Comparing Politics Across Indian States* (New Delhi” Oxford University Press, 2004), 299-300

the state government. Previously bicycles were distributed only to girl students so that they could travel safely to schools. Now under the *Sobuj Sathi* scheme bicycles have been distributed to all school going children marking the government's efforts to improve the state of education in West Bengal. The *Sabujshree* scheme for instance has been introduced whereby the state government has decided to plant a sapling with the birth of every girl child in the state.

The ruling government created another milestone by launching the *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, a conditional cash transfer scheme to improve the wellbeing of girls especially those who belong to socio-economically disadvantaged families. The scheme aims to curb child marriage and incentivise girls to continue in education. In 2017 the scheme was awarded the United Nations Public Service Award in the category of 'Reaching the Poorest and Most Vulnerable through Inclusive Services and Participation'. As on November 9, 2018 there are approximately 60 lakh recipients of the monetary benefits under the scheme as claimed by the party. A national level study jointly conducted by researchers from Indian Institute of Management and Shiv Nadar University confirm that conditional cash transfer schemes like the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* can provide a rationale in reducing the rate of early marriages and young women being subjected to domestic violence.³⁰

It is worth dwelling on this point that the AITC Manifesto gives more importance to welfare schemes for the social and economic empowerment of women and girls in the state. What is lacking is a clear strategy and political framework that can lead to distinctive political and ideological mobilisation of its women supporters. The party supports the demands for thirty three percent reservations of seats for women and has fielded numerous women candidates during the 2018 panchayat elections. But one can find almost no mention of women's political empowerment in its manifesto. It prioritises the fulfilment of women's social and economic needs. But to a great extent the political agenda of the party has been constructed without reference to women being ideologically incorporated in the party structure. Political inclusion of women has less significance when compared to its social and public welfare initiatives.

³⁰ Gaurav Dhamija and Punarjit Roychowdhury. "How Women's Age at Marriage Impacts Domestic Violence." <https://www.ideasforindia.in/topics/social-identity/how-women-s-age-at-marriage-impacts-domestic-violence.html>. July 2, 2018. Accessed on July 5, 2018.

Finally the third most important political party and the current largest opposition in West Bengal is the BJP. The section on ‘Women Empowerment’ in its 2019 Manifesto starts with the following words of Prime Minister Narendra Modi:

India needs not just women development but women led development that makes women the leading force of our development trajectory,’ and as per this belief we have determinedly gone beyond tokenism to take substantive measures to ensure overall development of women and to achieve gender equality. Building on these positive measures we will continue to pursue the course of holistic development and increased participation of women in society and economy.

To bring about women led-development the party is committed to ensure greater participation of women in the workforce. Efforts will be made by the party to create better employment opportunities for women in rural and semi rural areas. The party also wants to strengthen the crèche programme especially for parents engaged in the unorganised sector. They will continue their work to legislate a bill that will prohibit discriminatory practices like Triple Talaq and Nikah Halala in its goal of achieving equal rights for women. Apart from giving women’s security a priority, the party wants to work towards providing easy access to menstrual health services to women. With regard to reservation BJP has again committed to thirty three percent reservations in Parliament and State Assemblies through constitutional amendment.

When BJP on the one hand talks about ‘women led-development’ it is disquieting to see the party remaining muted on the issue of impact of electoral violence on women in Bengal. Ironically it stands true for all the political parties which contested the panchayat elections. All the political parties in West Bengal have vigorously protested against the widespread electoral violence that marred the last panchayat elections- either by countering it with greater violence or moving to court. But no party has explicitly talked about the impact of electoral violence on women.³¹ Innocent people lost their lives during party rivalries that waged on, from before April 2018 and continued even after the elections ended. The

³¹ In 1998, on three occasions in the debates that took place in the Lok Sabha, demands arose drawing attention to the atrocities on the SC, ST and women, and rigging in the panchayat elections in West Bengal. On one such occasion Mamata Banerjee had raised the issue with regard to the states of Rajasthan and West Bengal. It is one example of the issue being raised at the Parliamentary level. But no initiatives have been taken to substantially combat the issue in a country-wide basis because violence against women in politics is not recognised as a form of gendered violence.

incidents were shamelessly politicised as the dead bodies turned in circles among the parties. Most of the victims of electoral violence were men and the pages of all the major newspapers adorned violent pictures of blood and death, tears and sweat. But questions still remain whether the political parties have done anything worthwhile for the families who had lost someone of their own.

Another interesting observation was the complete absence of news coverage on women who themselves had faced violence. For instance in *Anandabazar Patrika* and *The Times of India* the news had successfully covered, exaggerated and even published the same news at irregular intervals in their websites on political violence and electoral fraud. They talked about scores of women candidates depending on their husbands when they were out campaigning for themselves and throes of women voters coming to vote in isolation of the news regarding their conditions of mobility. What about the women who were pulled out of nomination queues, thrown to the ground and beaten up?³² What about the women who were threatened with dire consequences if they left their houses to campaign for themselves? What about the women who faced domestic violence for daring to express their political views? The political parties are not only responsible for the lack of absence of such news. The mainstream media dominated by political and non-political elites determine which news to highlight and which to ignore. Electoral malpractices have historically been a part of the political legacy in West Bengal and presenting cases on how it directly and indirectly affects the women and minority communities can lead to critical reporting on women's political empowerment. A cross country study of violence against women in politics has confirmed that the political system as a whole with its components like the state, the government and the political parties are completely in denial of its existence. It is absent from the public discourse and is sparingly reported by the media during elections.³³ From voters, campaigners to candidates and elected representatives women have faced abuses- structural and symbolic. Intertwining of such abuses with discourses on caste, class, age, religion etc can show why a comprehensive cooperation of the political parties is needed to address it.

³² Closed door press conference at The Press Club August 9, 2018 on "Does Politics Empower Women?"

³³ Report on Violence Against Women in Politics: A Study Conducted in India, Nepal and Pakistan, Centre for Social Research and UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2014: 7

The wide disparity between what is being promised and what is being practised especially in the context of women's political participation in the state has to be confronted both by the parties and the news media. The next section presents a few case studies on how the parties and the newspapers during the 2018 panchayat elections approached certain issues which involved women voters and political workers.³⁴

Panchayat Elections in West Bengal: The Current Scenario (2018)

...electoral processes are fundamentally about the attainment of political power, often in high stake contexts, they can sometimes be a catalyst or accelerator of conflict. Experience shows that electoral contests can elevate social tensions and provoke violence especially when the electoral process itself is not perceived to be free and fair, or where those seeking to retain or gain political power have few or no qualms about resorting to extraordinary measures including the use of force- to win... Elections do not cause violence, but the process of competing for political power often exacerbates existing tensions and stimulates the escalation of these tensions into violence.³⁵

To understand the nature and extent of women's political participation at the grassroots it becomes imperative to examine the implications of electoral violence on their participation.

The last panchayat elections in West Bengal held on May 14, 2018 was neither free of political theatrics nor electoral fraud. Murder and manipulation, confusion and coercion and in fact all forms of party or/and electoral violence goes on in a continuum throughout the year. This has its impact on the formal electoral procedure as well. In rural Bengal, inter-group clashes are a daily occurrence, even intra-group clashes are common. Virtually all political violence is directly and indirectly related to electoral competition and leadership loyalty rather than party ideology. The West Bengal State Election Commission has been constitutionally vested with the superintendence, direction and control of the entire process of conduct of elections to the Panchayats and Municipal Bodies. There are at present 825 Zilla Parishad constituencies spread over 20 Zilla Parishads and 1 Mahakuma Parishad; 9240 Panchayat Samiti constituencies in 341 Panchayat Samitis and 48751 Gram Panchayat

³⁴ The case studies covering all the three parties have been selected on the basis of complaints registered by the National Commission for Women and on the basis of its nature which prompted continuous reporting of the same news.

³⁵ UNDP, 'Elections and Conflict Prevention: A Guide to Analysis, Planning and Programming' Democratic Governance Group, Bureau for Development Policy, 2009, IV

constituencies in 3354 Gram Panchayats. There are 7 municipal corporations and 119 municipalities in West Bengal.

According to the April 2, 2018, notification of the West Bengal State Election Commission (SEC), April 9, 2018 was fixed as the last date for making nominations. May 1 and May 3, 2018 were fixed as the dates on which the polls had to be conducted for the districts as classified into two sets by the SEC. Hours after the window for filing nominations closed on April 9, the ruling AITC in some parts of the state started to celebrate its uncontested victories. Opposition parties cited the prevalence of large scale electoral violence throughout the state and blamed the Commission for not taking any actions to stop such violence. In many places the opposition was allegedly not allowed to file their nominations or were forced to withdraw it. The ruling party on the other side also alleged that their candidates were beaten up and in extreme cases, murdered, for daring to file their nominations. Following this the SEC by a sudden separate notification extended the date for filing nominations to April 10. On the same night AITC Member of Parliament and lawyer, Kalyan Bandopadhyay and the state government mailed the Commission claiming that its new notification was legally invalid. The SEC on April 10, revoked the order making a reversal of its own decision. This led the BJP to appeal to the Supreme Court against the decision of the Commission. The Hon'ble Justice Subrata Talukdar of the Calcutta High Court issued a suspension on further actions of the SEC.

On April 11, CPI(M) and BJP again moved the Supreme Court against the Commission's decision but the apex court vested all the responsibility for quick resolution and disposal of the case on the Calcutta High Court. On April 12 Justice Talukdar passed an interim order, stalling the entire election process until April 16 and ordered the SEC to provide it with details of complaints of electoral malpractices. Justice Talukdar called the SEC notification as "an abuse of discretion", and that the "Commission was now in need of help and guidance."³⁶ He also imposed a fine of 5 lakh on the BJP for concealing the fact it had moved the Supreme Court while a similar petition was being heard in the Calcutta High Court on the same day. The judge described it as "forum hunting". On April 13, Bandopadhyay and the state government challenged the order in the division bench as several judgements show that

³⁶ Arkamoy Dutta Majumdar. "Calcutta High Court stalls West Bengal Panchayat election process till 16 May." <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/skQy7cDDWTnTT35Y4IbffO/Calcutta-high-court-stalls-West-Bengal-panchayat-election-pr.html>. April 13, 2018. Accessed on July 5, 2018.

the court cannot intervene once the election process starts. Bandopadhyay petitioned for a fast hearing in the division bench but his petition was dismissed and April 16 was fixed as the day for the hearing. The division bench on April 16 dismissed the appeal and sent it back to the single bench for hearing. Paying full heed to the orders of the apex court, the single bench decided to resolve quickly and justly the hearing of the cases.

On April 20, the Calcutta High Court ordered the SEC to release a new notification to restart the election process. New dates for extending the filing of nominations, scrutinizing such nominations and the last date for withdrawal of nominations had to be laid down in the new notification by the SEC. The opposition including BJP, Congress and CPM welcomed the judgement of the High Court. The ruling party too welcomed it for it saw the ‘drama’ of the opposition as a way to cancel the elections.³⁷ According to the new notification by the SEC published on April 21, 2018,

- a. April 23, 2018, was fixed as the extended day/ date for making nomination;
- b. April 25, 2018 was fixed as the date for scrutiny of nominations;
- c. April 28, 2018 was fixed as the date for withdrawal of candidature.³⁸

In compliance with the order of the High Court, the SEC in consultation with the state government fixed May 14, 2018 as the date on which the elections would be conducted in all the twenty districts. May 17 was fixed as the date for the counting of votes. AITC swept the panchayat elections in the entire state although it faced tough competition from BJP in the western districts of Purulia and Jhargram and from the independent candidates in Singur and Bhangar.³⁹ Bhangar was witnessing skirmishes from before the panchayat elections. Locals termed as ultra-left groups allegedly by AITC leader Arabul Islam, opposing the setting up of power substations there, clashed with AITC supporters. Power Grid Corp. of India Limited wanted to set up a substation in Bhangar for which land was bought from private aggregators by the state owned firm; but the protestors alleged that the land was grabbed from them by

³⁷ Correspondent. <https://www.anandabazar.com/state/bengal-panchayat-elections-2018-hc-order-sec-to-announce-fresh-date-of-the-election-process-dgtl-1.789570>. April 28, 2018. Accessed on July 5, 2018

³⁸ http://www.wbsec.gov.in/files/contents/1169-SEC-Gazette_Notification_-_Extension_of_date_for_nomination.pdf

³⁹ Arkamoy Dutta Majumdar. “Trinamool sweeps Panchayat elections in West Bengal, BJP finishes second.” <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/B3WNF9INsNh2ajfvudq3H/Trinamool-sweeps-panchayat-elections-in-West-Bengal-BJP-fin.html>. May 18, 2018. Accessed on July 5, 2018

the political leaders.⁴⁰ During the panchayat elections the resistant group filed their nominations through Whatsapp, a cross-platform electronic messaging system. They successfully backed a Congress candidate in their area and even pulled over six victories in the ten seats. But allegedly they had to face severe repression from the ruling party and some lost their lives for it. This is the first time in any election in the country where the candidates were permitted by the High Court to send their nomination papers via an electronic messaging system as they were physically stopped to do so.

The panchayat election results were declared on May 17, 2018. The counting process saw sporadic incidents of violence. In less than two hours after the polls started the SEC received multiple complaints of violence from North and South 24 Parganas, Burdwan and Coochbehar. After the final results were declared the ruling AITC emerged as the massive winner at all the three levels. Simultaneously the election results also revealed the inroads that BJP has made at the level of village panchayat. It has well surpassed two important political parties in West Bengal namely the INC and CPM. While the panchayat election in 2003 gained infamy for the death toll, 2018 polls set a record in the number of seats won without a contest.⁴¹ A look at the vote share at the level of Zilla Parishad show that AITC has won 793 constituencies out of 823 (96.2%), BJP has won 22 (2.7%) and INC has won 6 (0.7%) of the constituencies. The rest has been evenly won by All India Forward Bloc (AIFB) and the Independent. The status of 823 constituencies is known out of 825. At the level of Panchayat Samiti, the status of 9214 out of 9217 constituencies is known. AITC has won 8062 (87.5%) constituencies, BJP has won 769 (8.3%), CPM has won 110 (1.2%) and Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) has won 5 (0.5%) constituencies. The Independent has won 112 (1.2%) constituencies while the rest has been distributed between INC, AIFB, CPI and Others. At the level of Gram Panchayat the status of 48636 constituencies out of 48649 constituencies are known. The party wise vote share at the Gram Panchayat level is given in Figure 2.2.

While the political bigwigs were involved in legal battles, the political situation at the lower levels was no short of large scale mob violence. Despite the deployment of elaborate

⁴⁰ Arkamoy Dutta Majumdar. "Violence in Bhangar over setting up of power substation." <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/neMjaTURwTgTHKvmwC1WaN/Violence-in-Bhangar-over-setting-up-of-power-substation.html>. December 29, 2017. Accessed on July 5, 2018.

⁴¹ Sumanta Chaudhuri. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/2003-and-2018-when-bengal-panchayat-polls-turned-bloody/story-Tdgc4ZBsURTnc7V7BuwFO.html>. May 15, 2018. Accessed on July 5, 2018.

security personnel violent clashes left dozens dead and many injured. Gun shots were fired, crude bombs hurled and ballot boxes burnt at numerous polling stations in Nadia, Murshidabad, Bhangar, Coochbehar, North and South 24 Parganas. The apparent disorder is not a random act. It is an organized part of the electoral agenda of all political parties and a means to maintain order- the order of those in power. Critiquing power involves not only resisting it at an individualistic level or the way the mechanism of power is exercised. In the context of women's political participation during panchayat elections in West Bengal, resisting power also involves resisting the backlash of violence- both visible and invisible- to keep them away from electoral politics.

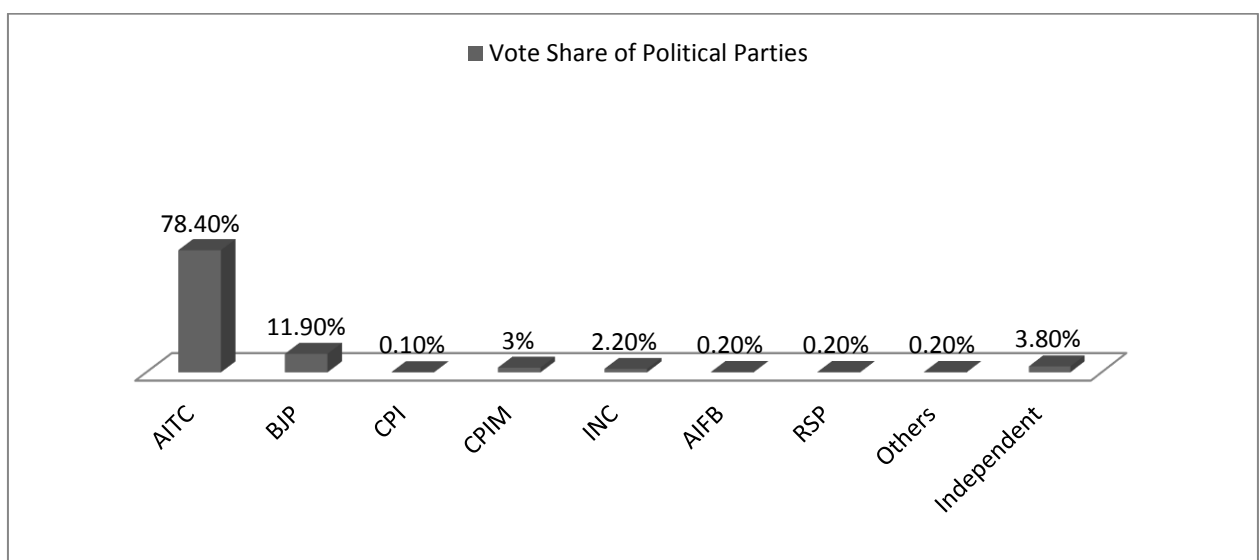


Figure 2.2: West Bengal Gram Panchayat Result (2018)

For instance, let us take the example of a case in Shantipur where the relatives of a woman candidate from BJP were severely harassed by anti-social elements. The woman had to leave her home with her husband, brother in law and son out of fear of retaliation, for filing her candidature. In her absence allegedly some anti-socials barged in their home late at night and raped her sister in-law. Her mother in-law was also manhandled and left for dead.⁴² The candidate filed a complaint to the National Commission for Women (NCW). From a press note released by the NCW we get to know that the complainant in her petition made serious allegations of continuous threats to her and her husband by anti-social elements. “The woman, in her complaint mentioned that most recent incident happened at midnight of 29th

⁴² Sushmit Halder. <https://www.anandabazar.com/state/bengal-panchayat-elections-2018-in-the-absence-of-a-bjp-candidate-attack-on-pregnant-lady-1.799033>. May 16, 2018. Accessed on July 5, 2018

April, 2018 wherein a group of people from a political party attacked and ransacked her house. She also stated that in the attack, her sister-in-law who is 6-months pregnant was also molested and brutally beaten by the said group. The complainant further stated that her sister-in-law was in the hospital and her miscarriage was also being apprehended. A complaint was lodged in Nadia Police Station but no action had been taken.”⁴³

Another case in Medinipur that made news was that of Kabita Patra an AITC party worker and wife of AITC panchayat member Gopal Patra. She was allegedly harassed by other members of the party because she dared to stop booth jamming during the elections. She was ‘punished’ and publicly shamed. She was made to wear a garland of shoes before being made to walk down the streets of her village⁴⁴. She was forced to apologise to the other party workers. Some claimed that she was either an Independent candidate or a supporter of one. But no steps were taken to address how the woman’s dignity was decimated in one stroke. Pictures of the incident were widely circulated causing much discomfort to the ruling party. Kabita *debi* said, “অন্যায়ের প্রতিবাদ করেছিলাম। কিন্তু তার শাস্তি যে এমন হতে পারে ভাবিনি।” (I protested against a wrongdoing. But I did not imagine that I would be punished in this manner.)

At the early hours of the day of panchayat polls two CPM party workers were burnt to death after a few AITC activists allegedly torched their houses while they were asleep. Residents of North 24 Parganas, Debabrata Das and his wife Usha were regularly threatened by AITC workers for being associated with CPM. Samik Lahiri, CPM Secretary of South 24 Parganas wrote a scathing letter to the State Election Commissioner for failing to provide a democratic environment to conduct free and fair elections all the while accusing the SEC of shielding armed goons. The ruling party has denied any involvement in the incident but the atrocious act has witnessed widespread media attention. Fearing for his life their son went into hiding after the incident and reluctantly talked to media persons about it.

Electoral violence is one such barrier that is multi-dimensional in the sense that it not only affects a women’s role to be a viable citizen in a democracy; it also affects her mental health and bodily integrity. It *disables* a woman to be a citizen and a woman. It curtails the freedom

⁴³ NCW Press Note, May 7, 2018.

⁴⁴ Correspondent. <https://www.anandabazar.com/state/tmc-allegedly-harassed-wife-of-their-own-panchayat-member-in-west-medinipur-dgtl-1.801919>. May 19, 2018. Accessed on July 5, 2018

of political participation and is a gross violation of women's fundamental and human rights. Women experience such violence not only in public places but also in their private lives. The goal of such violence is not only to control their political participation but also to uphold discriminatory gender ideologies that reflect the dichotomy of private and public responsibilities. The mother or the wife or the sister does not have autonomous decision making capabilities within the family. It is assumed that they will not have the faculties to be politically autonomous in the public sphere as well. If they try to exercise their agency in either of the two domains they need to be controlled which ultimately takes the form of some kind of violence- physical or otherwise. The family, the political party and even the state indulge in perpetuating that violence limiting women's effectiveness to be autonomous and responsible citizens of the country. Where violence- physical and psychological- is at the core of political existence, the reason for human existence vanishes. Violence as a political construct is necessarily gendered on grounds that:

- a. women are targets of electoral violence because they are women;
- b. the very form of electoral violence is gendered;
- c. the gendered nature of electoral violence discourages women particularly to engage in politics. As politics is assumed to be a male- centred activity violence is a public virtue and so it is 'better for women to not be a part of it' or suffer the consequences.

A comparison of party programmes and manifestos with the political reality at the panchayat level shows the wide gap between prescription and description. The process of bringing about women's empowerment through policy initiatives like reservation of seats is not enough in itself in the absence of complete revision of gender expectations in the parties. The above cases show how the basic capabilities regarding political participation of women is being thwarted thereby affecting the productive agency of women as political participants. Developing an overall judgement as to how social and systemic inequalities matter in reducing women's political capabilities are important to propound a feminist theory of gender justice and human development. Indeed it is needed to compare and measure the outcomes of women's political participation; but it must also be acknowledged that they are more prone to be subordinated and exploited in the electoral scenario specifically because of their gender. That women are going out to vote in large numbers, to campaign for their preferred candidates and even be candidates themselves can definitely be compared to make assessments about women's increased political presence. But such assessments should take

into account the prevailing political and social arrangements having aggressive patriarchal characteristics- on which depends women's free exercise of choice and preferences, their mobility and safety. Apart from political participation, what additionally has to be looked at is the choice to politically participate and expect to be respected in one's choice to politically participate in a certain way.

CHAPTER 3

FIELD WORK IN SOUTH 24 PARGANAS DISTRICT

Entering the Field

It was at Dakshin Durgapur, a village located near Uttar Radhanagar, where I met Runa Sardar (name changed) for the first time at the beginning of the month of August 2018. An ordinary humble lady in the thirties, always smiling, Runa *di* was preparing for the *Madhyamik* exams alongside her daughter, the first married woman with teenage kids in her village to do so.¹ She knew she was frowned upon by some. But she was thankful for the encouragement she received from her husband, her in-laws and her children in restarting her educational endeavour. When I met her and conveyed to her my desire to conduct field work activities in her village, she readily agreed to help me. She was already familiar with my fellow field investigator because of all the help she got from her in sharpening her English grammar skills! So when I told her about my topic of research and my desire to visit her village, she was more than happy to introduce me to the village folk.

Runa *di* directed me to walk down the platform and stand right in front of Radhanagar BNM High School. We had agreed about the meeting place in advance as the school could be easily spotted adjacent to the railway lines. As we walked down the narrow roads we frequently passed many ponds. People of the village live a subsistence lifestyle. They survive on what they grow on their land and what they catch from their ponds. None of it goes to the market for sale. The newly painted *mandir* catches my eye as we pass someone-storeyed *pucca*² houses besides a few mud huts. Runa *di* said, “এই নতুন রঙ করেছে ইলেকশান এর আগে...” (The *mandir* has been painted recently, just a few days before the elections started). It indicated two things, both of which were confirmed by her. Uttar Radhanagar at present is dominated by AITC. Even though AITC is in power, the presence of BJP is visible from the occasional lotus murals painted beside the *Jora Ghas Phul* on all the *pucca* walls in the village.³ The BJP supporters took extra initiative to paint the *mandir* before the elections.

It also indicated that I was entering the Hindu *para*. The entire village is divided into several *paras* (locality/area) and there are landmarks that separate the *paras*. For example, a newcomer to the village will see a banyan tree in the middle of a road as a tree and nothing else. For the villagers, the banyan tree marks the end of one *para* and the beginning of

¹ A centralised examination conducted by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, in West Bengal, India, at the end of the 10th standard of high school.

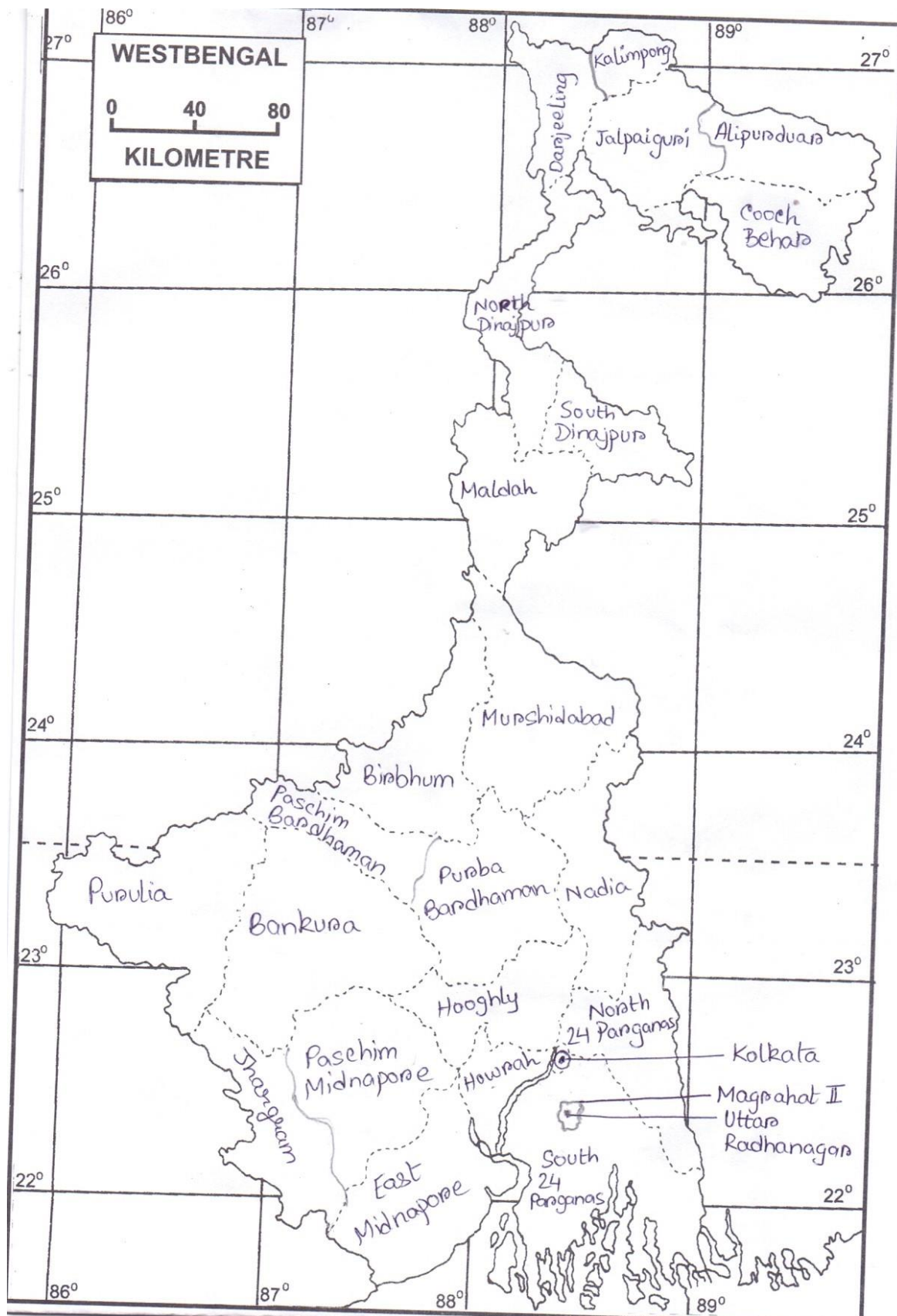
² *Pucca* houses refer to dwellings that are designed to be solid and permanent. The villages generally have very few *pucca* houses.

³ *Jora Ghas Phul* is the exclusive symbol of AITC, meaning “twin flowers in grass”.

another. They will take their bicycles and drop me exactly under that tree and not a step forward. While doing my field work I came across many such criss-crossing roads, trees and tube wells which marked the end of Hindu *para*, the beginning of Muslim *para* and sometimes a way toward the Christian *para*.

Runa *di* revealed that she unhesitatingly supported the CPM even though her father-in law supported a different political party. Which political party a family will support will depend on what the head of the household or the male members of the family decide it to be. So marriage into a household means adaptation to a new political ideology. On being asked as to whether she has had disagreements with her father-in law due to her Left tilt, she said that he displayed some anger at first when he came to know about it. But he had grown soft with time. She regularly attends political meetings arranged by the parties in her village. She even goes to Dharmatala with her female friends to attend the larger political gatherings. Most of the younger women of the village are not allowed to leave of their houses even on the pretext of work. Hence the ability to hold on to one's demand of going to a political gathering, far away from the village, without a male chaperone, was a proud moment of exercise of agency for Runa *di*.

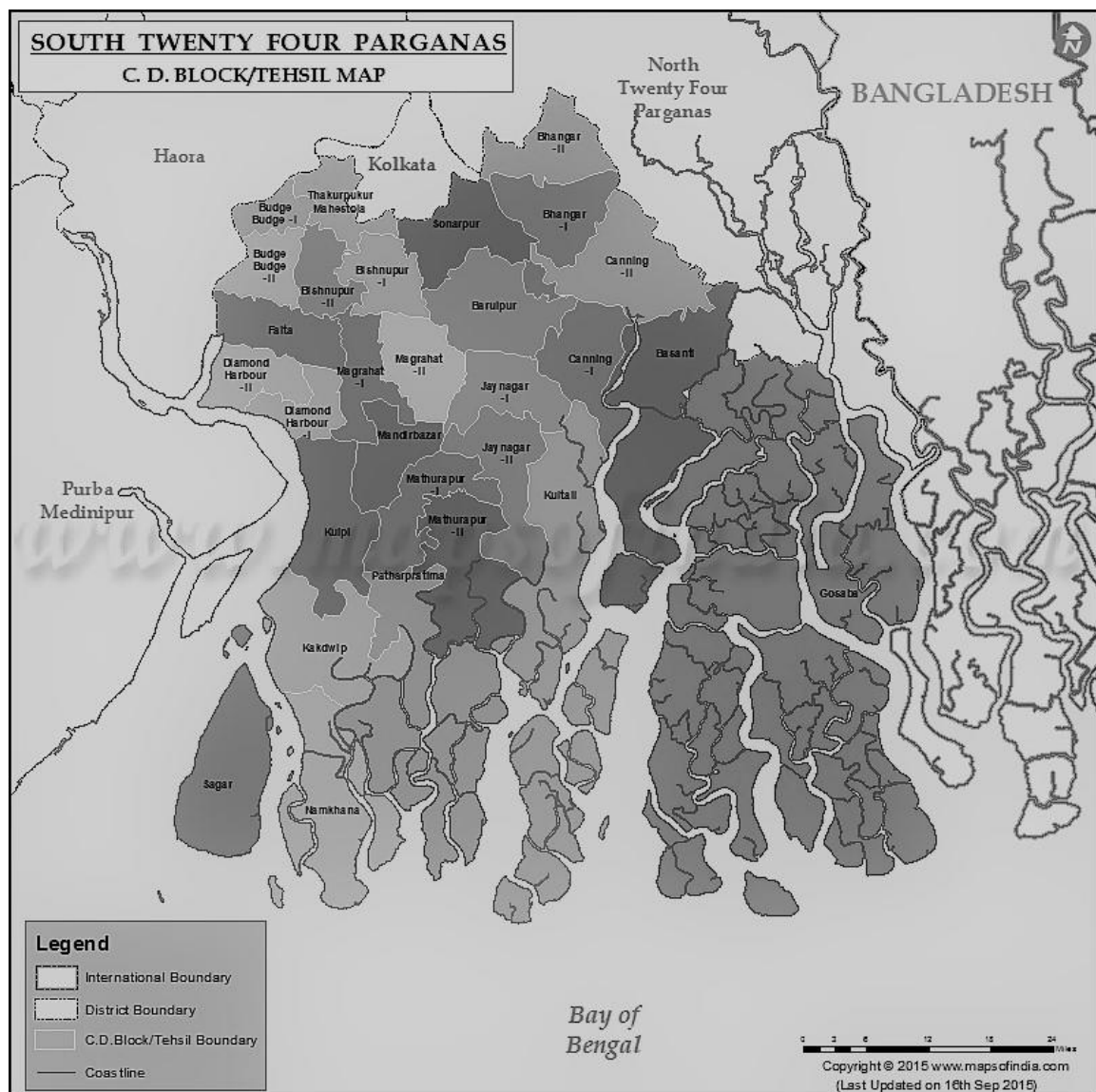
The next stage of familiarisation began when I introduced myself to Sobha Mandal (name changed). She was a member of the gram panchayat after the 2013 Magrahat East Panchayat elections. The present study has been conducted during the period of transfer of power from the old gram panchayat board to a new one. August 28, 2018, the first day of the field work was the day when the new panchayat board was formed, as informed by Sobha *di*. The Magrahat East Gram Panchayat has the three villages of Harishankarpur, Magrahat and Uttar Radhanagar under its jurisdiction. According to the 2011 Census the gram panchayat covers an area having a total population of 32,715 out of which 51% are males and 49% are females. Total number of members in the gram panchayat is 23 out of which three members are part of the Panchayat Samiti. The present Panchayat Pradhan position has been reserved for a woman. The village of Uttar Radhanagar has been selected for conducting the field investigation for the present study. According to the 2011 Census data, Uttar Radhanagar has about 1210 households. It has a total population of 6070 out of which male population is 3192 and female population is 2878. The SC population is 2295. The village is divided into *paras* (localities) in terms of caste and religion. Accordingly there is the Rajbanshi *para* or Singho *para*, Khan *para*, Sheikh *para*, Loskar *para*, Christian *para*, Pondogotto *para* etc.



Map 3.1: State of West Bengal

56% of males and 43% of females are literate in the village. The field work has been conducted in two such *paras* namely Hindu and Muslim *para* and in the Magrahat East Gram Panchayat.

The Magrahat East Gram Panchayat falls under the Magrahat II block. There is 1 Samiti, 14 Gram Panchayats and 214 Gram Sansads under Magrahat II block. The two blocks of Magrahat I and Magrahat II are located in the district of South 24 parganas. The district of South 24 Parganas has a total of 29 Panchayat Samitis, 310 Gram Panchayats and 4882 Gram Sansads.



Map 3.2: District of South 24 Parganas with Block Divisions

After conveying my desire to conduct focus group interviews with women voters in the area, Sobha *di* helped me to approach some women who lived near her house. Within half an

hour or so, a group of nine women gathered in her courtyard examining me and my fellow field investigator. As all the women sat in a circular manner on the floor, their objectification of me as an individual in possession of a certain cultural capital, made them offer me and my friend two stable plastic chairs.⁴ Refusing to sit on the chairs at the onset and instead joining them on the floor was particularly important for me as a feminist researcher because it is concomitant with my feminist ideology of how I look at power relations. The spirit of feminist research makes one take up an anti-hierarchist position while acknowledging the fact that power relationships cannot be eliminated altogether.

Getting Started with the Hindu Para

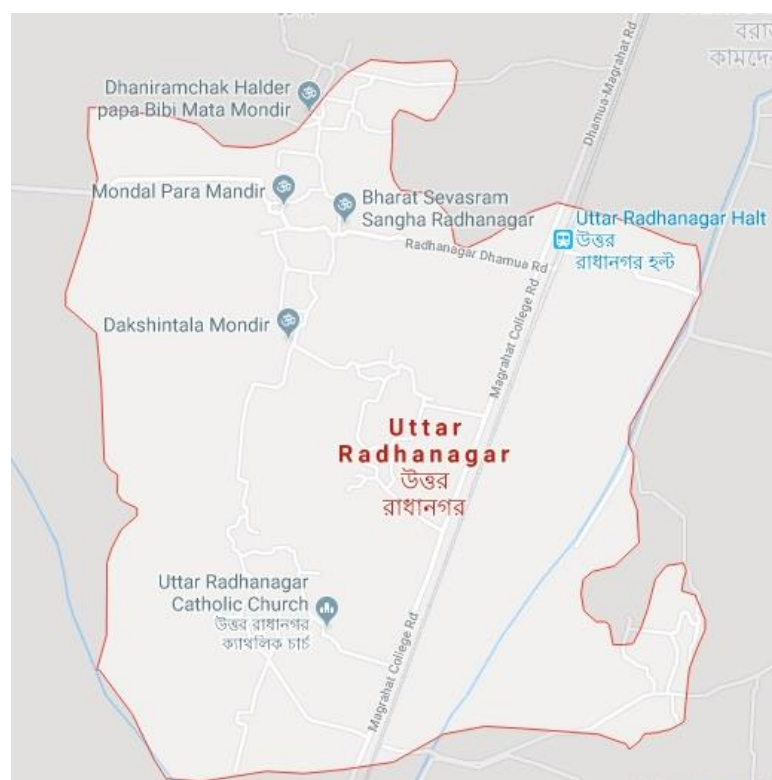
The focus group on the first day comprised of nine women in the age group of 18 to 65 years. The women above 40 years of age were unable to clarify their actual age. All the nine respondents were Hindus and belonged to SC. All of them were married and had more than one child. Out of the nine members one was a graduate. Most of them had discontinued their education and were just literate. One woman passed the twelfth examination after getting married. It can be assumed that she got married before reaching the legal age. An important observation from their conversation was that the boys were encouraged more to go to Magrahat College.

All of them were aware of the scheme of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Launched on 2nd October 1975 by the Government of India, ICDS offers a package of six services viz. supplementary nutrition, pre-school non-formal education, nutrition and health education, immunization, health check up and referral services. The beneficiaries under the scheme are in the age group of 0-6 years, pregnant women and lactating mothers.⁵ The

⁴ Capital may exist in objectified form (material properties). In the case of cultural capital, capital exists in the embodied state, legally guaranteed and represents a power over the field (at a given moment) and more precisely over the accumulated product of the past labour and thereby over the mechanisms tending to ensure the production of a particular category of goods and so over a set of incomes and profits. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups," *Theory and Society* 14, no.6 (Nov. 1985): 724

⁵ The services are provided by the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Department of Health and Family Welfare through Auxiliary Nurses and Midwives with the assistance of Anganwadi Workers. <https://icds-wcd.nic.in>

respondents were beneficiaries of the *Kanyashree Prakalpa*⁶. *Kanyashree Prakalpa* is a conditional cash transfer scheme implemented by the Department of Women Development and Social Welfare, Government of West Bengal. It aims at improving the status and well-being of the girl child by incentivizing schooling of all teenage girls and delaying their marriages until the age of 18. Recently at the World Forum, The Hague, the United Nations awarded the highest public service honour to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for this project of hers aiming at girl child empowerment.⁷ Apart from the *Kanyashree* scheme, the children of the women respondents also had bicycles from the *Sabooj Sathi* scheme.⁸ The children no longer had to walk long distances to reach their schools.



Map 3.3: Village of Uttar Radhanagar (Note:Scale 500m)

⁶ The scheme targets the economically vulnerable in two ways. An annual scholarship of rupees five hundred is granted to unmarried girls aged 13-18 years enrolled in classes VIII-XII in government recognised or equivalent school or vocational course. A one-time grant is ceded to girls turning 18 and enrolled in a government college or vocational course. <http://wbcmo.gov.in/kanyashree.aspx>

⁷ Indrajit Kundu. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/mamata-banerjee-un-public-service-award-kanyashree-netherlands-984439-2017-06-23>. June 23, 2017.

⁸ The government of West Bengal introduced a scheme titled “Sabooj Sathi” for distribution of bicycles to the students of class IX to XII in all government run/aided schools. The objective of the scheme is to encourage students to pursue higher education and to reduce drop-outs.

The village did not have electricity eight to nine years ago. Another major constraint was the roads which would get washed away whenever it rained. It created problems especially for the pregnant women and senior citizens. Cycles could not ply on them as a result of which men carried the women on hand made stretchers to the nearest hospital at Magrahat. It was only after AITC came to power, said the respondents, that firm roads were constructed and street lights were provided.

At the beginning of the conversation, the older women of the group were afraid to talk as they felt that they could not articulate themselves in ‘proper’ words. One respondent said, “*আমরা গুছিয়ে কথা বলতে পারি না ...*” (We cannot articulate our views properly). Because Sobha di was comparatively more articulate due to her past political background, she showed a tendency of steering the group discussion in ways that would hide the true intentions of the answers of the rest of the respondents. Although the dominance of her views or her voice went uncontested at first, the group discussion started to move in ways where initial subtle resistances to her views took the form of visible disagreements in the next hour and the next day as well. Access to such dialogic encounters and power differentials between women responding to each others’ views help to interpret the general nature of the ‘political’ from the perspective of the respondents.⁹ It was one of the reasons why focus group interviews were given prominence.

On being asked as to whether they vote regularly all of them answered in the positive. But what was the need to vote at all? While talking to the respondents, especially the younger members of the focus group, it was felt that they gave much importance to the activity of going out to vote. They wanted to be part of that urgency, the hustle and bustle of going to the polling station and standing in queues, talking animatedly and trying to understand who was winning the larger share of the votes. To them as voters, this was an important form of political participation. The act of being present at the heart of the village, huddled together with other women, not necessarily from their own classes and castes and trying to make sense of that social reality was how they accorded importance to voting. Voting as a deed was important to them as they proudly showed their stained finger to each other while suspiciously examining those who did not have the ink, even downright shaming them. “... the black vote mark on the finger is worn with pride as a testament to one’s participation, like

⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990): 20

a sacred thread around the wrist after a Hindu ritual, or the discolouration on a pious Muslim's forehead caused by years of bowing to the ground in prayer, a coveted stigmata.”¹⁰



Figure 3.1: Focus Group Discussion in the Hindu Para

At the same time voting as a social activity gave them the opportunity to look forward to get out of their houses without the need to give pretexts. As opposed to the everyday mundane household chores the women could involve themselves in a socio-political event, albeit in the manner of voting. While talking a young respondent said in this context, “আমাদের তো গিয়ে দেখতে হবে ওখানে কি হয়েছে... (We have to go there and see for ourselves as to what exactly is happening.)

The presence of nagging children, pulling at their *sarees* was a form of disturbance for the young mothers. As suggested by Campbell, the presence of young children requiring constant attention can serve as a barrier to the voting act.¹¹ From Campbell's works a direct relationship between female social roles and limited political participation has been found by

¹⁰ Mukulika Banerjee, “Sacred Elections,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no.17 (Apr.28-May 4, 2007): 1557

¹¹ Angus Campbell ed. *The American Voter* (New York, Wiley: 1960):488, in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 26

Bourque and Grossholtz.¹² Reduced political participation of women can be attributed to their primary social responsibilities like taking care of small children, the old and the disabled etc. No initiatives are taken by the men to divide household chores. But we should not assume that it is exclusively the gendered roles that women have been socialised to play which acts as a barrier to their political participation. It is true that the social and patriarchal culture may make the woman be contented with a particular lifestyle even though it is oppressive towards her. However if the woman living in a certain social circumstance is motivated to lead a life where she wants to develop her political interest and can look after her children simultaneously, opportunities should be made available so that she can have the freedom to lead the life she reasonably values.¹³

People differ in their abilities to convert resources into capabilities not because of their social roles but because their social roles are essentialised, imposed and naturalised.¹⁴ It makes the men think that they are not supposed to contribute in the housework. The respondent, who was annoyed with her child, did not disregard her social role as a mother. In fact she valued that specific lifestyle and simultaneously valued her ability to think about political issues. As a feminist researcher doing field work, I had to recognise and accept the fact that this young mother was giving her opinions from the perspective of her own living conditions. Even if it goes against the canons of certain feminist theories that hold responsible the very living conditions that force a woman to play gender based social roles, we have to recognise what they are for themselves specifically in those living conditions. As sociologist Georg Simmel put it, “Almost all discussions of women deal only with what they are in relation to men in terms of real, ideal or value criteria. Nobody asks what they are for themselves.”¹⁵ Momentary resistances against everyday social practices take on different forms which can serve to motivate the subjects in ways leading to greater political consciousness, even though they may or may not get opportunities to express it.

¹² Phillips, *Feminism and Politics*, 26

¹³ Otherwise it is also called the Capability Approach. Capability reflects a person's freedom to choose between different ways of living. It purports that freedom to achieve well being is a matter of what people are able to do and to be, and thus lead a life that they value reasonably.

¹⁴ Ingrid Robeyns, “Sen's Capability Approach and Gender Inequality: Selecting Relevant Capabilities,” in *Capabilities, Freedom and Equality: Amartya Sen's Work from a Gender Perspective*, ed. Bina Agarwal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72

¹⁵ Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 52

Therefore the motivations of the women socialised for a particular lifestyle has to be scrutinized to understand how the living conditions of the respondents shape them to negotiate with their everyday reality. The process of internalisation of social roles take place the moment a girl child is born. From their childhood, they have been socialised to give importance to their roles as wives and mothers. It does not clash with their ideas of political participation. It has a cognitive upper hand because of their historical conditioning. My position as a feminist researcher made me want to inquire how such internalisations co-existed with their nascent motivations and whether these motivations have had an effect in terms of increased political participation and political awareness. Indeed as the example of the young mother mentioned above shows, motivations can play an important role in appraising one's ideas of political freedom and political expression.

This young woman respondent at times, made all the other women laugh, helping me in easing the intra-group tensions that were visible at first. In the midst of teasing and laughter certain symbolic hierarchies were observed in terms of how the respondents held on to their positions of seniority within the group.¹⁶ The seniority could be seen in terms of age and body language (kinesics). The older women in terms of their sitting positions as part of the circle had a more frontal presence than their younger daughter- in laws. The younger respondents were shy and hid from a full frontal sight of the researcher but more so because of the presence of elders. However a different situation was observed on the second focus group interview. The same younger respondents, in the absence of their mother- in laws, had overcome their shyness and became more active and vocal in raising their views. Bodies are not alike; they are located in specific structures of privilege and power.¹⁷

For the elders in the group, the 'economic' was more important than the 'political'. Almost all the older women in the group worked as domestic helpers in and around Ballygunge area in Kolkata. Even though they contributed to the financial pool of the household, they felt that they were somehow ignorant if compared to the male members of their families. As already mentioned earlier, they felt that they could not articulate their views properly. On being asked as to how they defined the notion of politics one respondent replied,

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or The Economic World Reversed," in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 48

¹⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, "Conclusion: A Note on Essentialism and Difference," in *Feminist Knowledge, Critique and Construct*, ed. Sneja Gunew (New York: Routledge, 1990), 95

“শুধু আমার পাড়ায় নয়... পুরো গ্রামটার উন্নতি হোক...” (Politics means development of the entire village and not simply my locality). All the others agreed. Politics was not a struggle for power for the respondents. Politics for them had a more communitarian purpose. They expected the elected representatives to serve, not only their respective political parties but everyone in the village. For another respondent a village is not an isolated phenomenon like that of a city where no one really cares about what happens to the others. Politics for them was a means for caring for and learning about each others' problems. People engaged in deliberations based on their own experiences. Such exchange of experiences helped them in developing community bonding. As one respondent said, “গ্রামে সবাই সবাইকে নিয়ে একসাথে থাকতে চায়... নিজের নিজেরটা নিয়ে নয়...” (A village is a community of persons where everyone wants to stay connected to each other).

Do you differentiate a male elected representative from that of a female? I asked them. There was no difference between a male and a female elected representative for the respondents because both of them worked for the development of the village. It is the activities rather than the characteristics that matter, and what happens after the action rather than before it counts.¹⁸ There need not be a constant activity of responding, but there must be a constant condition of responsiveness, of potential readiness to respond.¹⁹ It was further probed as to what they meant by ‘development’ of the village. Water, sanitation and proper roads with street lights, one of the respondents answered. Due to high levels of toxicity in the water, for instance, the women had to travel far and wide for drinking water just a few years ago. The men of the village informed about this long-standing problem to the gram panchayat after which initiatives were taken by the ruling party to colour-code the hand-pumps. As Sobha *di* said, whenever there are problems in the village, the men submitted a written statement to the panchayat, after which aid is sent to work out the issue. These are the solutions that they expect from the panchayat as a whole and there is no point in differentiating leadership on the basis of gender. But it is the men who always take the initiative to inform the panchayat.

How did the respondents decide as to who they would vote for? Do you decide for yourselves, I asked, or do you take a common standing? Multiple responses could be

¹⁸ Rosemary Pringle and Sophie Watson, “‘Women’s Interests’ and the Poststructuralist State,” in Phillips, *Feminism and Politics*, 226

¹⁹ Hanna F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 233

registered as answers. According to one respondent, it was her personal decision. Even if she had been told who to vote for, the secrecy of the voting process made it entirely her own decision. Most of the other respondents disagreed with her. For them, it was not a personal decision; rather the whole family in concert with other families in the locality decided who they would vote for. The women voted as directed by their father-in law and their husbands. They did not have access to political information other than listening from the other room when the male members of the family discussed political matters.

Surprisingly the same respondent who gave more importance to her personal decision in voting matters now wanted to change her response. This can be regarded as a disadvantage or fallout of conducting focus group interviews. Even if the respondents challenged each others' views, the process of collective opinion formation may sometimes dominate or intimidate the minority not to speak their minds. Simultaneously it can also be argued that it is not a disadvantage of focus group interviews. Rather the respondents may want to occupy fluid positions to remain in the good eyes of others when the interviewer leaves the field, more particularly their social space. Every new position, in asserting itself as such, determines a displacement of the whole structure and that, by the logic of action and reaction, it leads to all sorts of changes in the position-takings of the occupants of the other positions.²⁰

During the time when political campaigns take place, the candidates come to their homes and talk to the male members. The women are generally not present on the scene and later they are just informed as to who they should vote for. Sometimes if the male members want, the elderly women come out from the confines of the kitchen whereby they are requested to vote for a particular party. Despite the fact that the candidates try to approach all the female voters, the usual practice is to approach the male, active head of the family, who wields authority over the younger members and the women in the family.²¹ "Since society assigns roles by sex, this differentiation is carried over into political roles... it has been asserted and accepted, without proper evidence, that men dominate and women are dependent at the primary level of community life- the family. This asserted dominance of the male is then extended to a wider realm. For example, women's political attitudes are assumed to be reflections of those of the father or husband. This unwarranted assumption about family life

²⁰ Bourdieu, "The Field," 58

²¹ B. S. Khanna and Satya Deva, 'Campaign and Voting in Punjab and Haryana', (Mimeographed), Department of Public Administration, Punjab University, Chandigarh, in *Symbols of Power: Studies on the Political Status of Women in India*, ed. Vina Mazumdar (Bombay: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1979), 71

and its relationship to the broader community is doubly damning because it suggests that it is women's preferences which give men control of politics."²²

What happens when there are political disagreements within the members of the family? Here too multiple responses could be registered. According to one Rupali Patra (name changed), “সব পরিবারে হয় না...” (Political disagreements do not occur in all families). When asked why she felt so, she said that there was no scope for disagreement as she had to listen to what her husband said. According to another respondent, more than the family it was in the locality that problems occurred. Some other respondents agreed with her. A candidate gets all the votes, not because he or she belongs to a certain political party but because he or she is known to all in their locality. In a way the candidate is chosen by the political party in such a manner that he or she is known to everyone in the *para*. His or her political ideology does not matter. Hence problems arise when another candidate from another locality come to their locality and ask for votes. Moreover the young and unemployed youth in the village are instigated by a certain powerful man- a man who must not be named- to start or engage in violence to strike fear and panic in the village. It is one of the reasons why young women are discouraged from developing any political interest in the village.

Even though the respondents feel that one must be significantly politically aware but the inherent violent nature of politics and fear of the one who must not be named (and who occasionally kidnapped girls in the village) made them think otherwise. At the same time respondents pointed out that, “বিয়ের আগে কোনমতেই রাজনীতি নয়...” (No politics before marriage) or “বিয়ের আগে বাবা মা বাড়ি থেকে বেরোতে দেয় না...” (Girls are not allowed to go out of their houses before marriage, except for studying). From their conversations with each other, it showed that it was only after they got married that they engaged in political conversations with their husbands and tried to develop some kind of political interest. When do you think the consciousness comes about the importance of voting? I asked. Such consciousness comes only after marriage, Rupali *di* replied.

For them as individuals marriage was an important step in their life cycle. But when it comes to their children, marriage was no longer a priority when compared to education. This was an interesting observation as I witnessed an inter-generational shift, according more importance to education than marriage. Especially the older women who had two children

²² Susan Bourque and Jean Grossholtz, “Politics an Unnatural Practice: Political Science looks at Female Participation,” in Phillips, *Feminism and Politics*, 23-25

said that no party or party based discussions take place with their children. Rather they are encouraged to study, be a graduate and if possible, to get a job in the city.

At the end of the second day, I concluded by asking whether women should participate in politics at all? One respondent, giving the example of Chief Minister of West Bengal, said, “মহিলাদের ছাড়া দেশ চলবে না ...” (The country cannot be run without women). Women need to participate more in politics as leaders because it gives them self confidence. Giving the example of Sobha *di*, one Lata *di* (name changed) said that, being elected in a political position gave her the confidence to come forward and resolve domestic disputes in their locality as well. It seemed that they equated political power with the overall psycho-social empowerment as a human being. Political power for them was not attached to one’s designation rather it strengthened the subject in the construction of her selfhood to deal with unforeseen circumstances both at home and at work, as felt by the respondents in the locality.

Moving on to the Muslim *Para*

The experience of focus group interviews in Muslim *para* was much different from Hindu *para*. Even entry in the Muslim *para* turned out to be more difficult. Neither Runa *di* nor Sobha *di* was keen to take me there. I tried to build up contacts with other people. But they backed away when they got to know that I was from Jadavpur University and was working on issues related to women’s political participation. I was working at a time when the 2018 Panchayat elections in West Bengal had just ended. The state was recovering from the abysmal collapse of law and order that led to injuries and death of many. Political violence has always made the panchayat polls in West Bengal a scary exercise.²³ And no one wanted to get involved in a situation where politics as a topic of research coincided with women’s lives. Furthermore one of my Professors at the University cautioned me not to venture out in the *para* alone as it had a history of women and child trafficking. All this created a sort of tension in me regarding how I would approach the field! Finally, after days of people hanging up their phones, I was helped in the matter by one of my juniors (and now a dear friend) from Jadavpur University. She stayed near Magrahat and informed me that the road towards Muslim *para* in Uttar Radhanagar was closed due to construction purposes. With her help, I

²³ Editorial, “Why Panchayat polls have become a scary exercise in Bengal”. *Hindustan Times*, May 14, 2018 Accessed online: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/editorials/why-panchayat-polls-have-become-a-scary-exercise-in-bengal/story-jj5VbXTVEIBgia7QHZIFWL.html>

came across the phone number of one panchayat office staff who gave me directions to go to Salim Khan's house (name changed). Salim Khan is at present an elected member of the Gram Panchayat.

Once again I anticipated that problems could crop up in the Muslim *para* if they got information that my friend was not only left leaning and politically active, but that her father was once a member of the panchayat and a well-known political leader in and around Magrahat. But the office staff that helped us in the matter was kind enough not to reveal it to Salim Khan. There was a chance that Khan would recognise my friend. But we took that chance anyways.

Before reaching Khan's house, news had already spread that we were coming to meet him. Some of the locals from the Hindu *para* had informed their friends in the Muslim *para* that we had conducted focus group interviews there and would probably go to their *para* as well. We encountered bikers passing by us, in full speed to make preparations from beforehand. When we reached Khan's house, we were informed that he had left for work moments ago. When we wanted to talk to his wife, men blocked our way and told us that his wife was unwell. She could not walk, one man said. Another woman said that she was bedridden. As my friend started to talk to them, I took the opportunity to look around the place. The very architecture of the house was unique. There was a single big doorway and courtyard. Around the courtyard were rooms which belonged to each of the brothers and their families. When we went to meet them, we stood in the middle of the courtyard where women were drying their laundry and washing pots and pans. From the very structure of the house it can be assumed that when there was need for discussions and decisions, the brothers gathered in the courtyard to exchange their views. But the women gathered in the courtyard only to partake in domestic activities.

The women initially showed much interest as we informed them of our desire to conduct women involved focus group interviews. But they backed away when the men present there gestured them to keep quiet. As we exited Khan's house I took the opportunity to talk to one of the locals in the nearby tea stalls. On being asked the purpose of our visit, his immediate reaction was, “এখানকার মেয়েরা অত ভোট দিতে যায় না...” (Women don't cast their votes as such). He tried to recover the situation moments later when he said, “হ্যাঁ ভোট না দিতে গেলে হবে? ভোট তো দিতেই হবে...” (Yes, it is necessary to go and vote). Others present in the tea stall did not really care much regarding our purpose of visit. Conversations with them

made us realise that the women were absolutely dismissed as political beings. Even their physical behaviour towards us as female researchers was that of aversion and antipathy. Most of the women did not go to the polling stations. Many of them did not have voter identity cards. The male members of the family often used the voter cards of the women who had it, to proxy vote. The present Panchayat Pradhan is a relative of Salim Khan and often visited Khan *para*. But generally women representatives only existed as proxy candidates to hold on to the seats for their men, said one local man at the tea stall. It turned out to be true when we visited the Gram Panchayat office later.

Two separate focus group interviews were conducted but the similarity in statements was astonishing. The first group mainly consisted of seven women who taught in the local Montessori school. All of them were above 30 years of age, married and lower caste Muslims. A significant part of their time was spent in the school for which they had been given permission from their families. That permission entailed with it the completion of household work before they could leave their homes. “অনেক ভোরে উঠি...” (I wake up early in the morning) one respondent said. She had to prepare her children before they were dropped off at their school by their father. She had to store water and make breakfast for all the members of the family. Then she had to prepare a part of the lunch, ready herself and finally she would be at the school on time to take the kids in.

The entire group as such had no political interest. Their male counterparts made no effort to make them politically aware. In fact the women did not want to ‘entangle’ themselves in politics. Rather what was again pointed out here as well was the importance of earning and contributing to the financial pool of the house. Instead of concluding that a low level of political interest is responsible for a low level of political participation among women in this *para*, we should attempt to understand their socio-structural constraints. The quality of political participation is defined by the quality of living. Political participation will be consequential and beneficial to those who will want to participate voluntarily, struggling in the process to develop their political agency. Otherwise it becomes a tool for political manipulation. Additionally poverty and deprivation of basic resources of living act as a fundamental disability for women to voluntarily develop any kind of political awareness. As one respondent said, “আমাকে গ্রামের বাইরে যেতে দেওয়া হয় না... গ্রামের মধ্যেই যদি সেলাইয়ের কাজ করতে পারতাম তাহলে কিছু রোজগার হতো...” (I am not allowed to leave the village. Financially it would have been of much help if the women of the village got

opportunities to sew clothes or do some other related activities). It was evident from their conversations that the realm of politics or thinking about the political had no place in their lives. In fact in the second focus group interview the respondents actively emphasized that women should not participate in politics. Apart from some women who were already there in the first interview session, more joined, giving me an opportunity to talk to eleven Muslim lower caste women voters on the second day, all of whom were housewives. “আগের চে সত্যি অনেক উন্নতি হয়েছে গ্রামে... কিন্তু আমাদের মত মহিলাদের তাতে কি..মেয়েদের রাজনীতি না করাই ভাল...” (Of course development has taken place in the village if compared to the past but it will not change anything for women like us. Generally it is not good for women to join politics). I probed further, “মহিলাদের কি কোন উন্নতি হয়নি, বলছেন তাহলে?” (Do you mean to say that no change has taken place in the living conditions of the women in the village?)



Figure 3.2: Focus Group Discussion in the Muslim Para

She felt unsure on how she would answer that given it was a group interview. “হ্যাঁ হএছে...গ্রামের উন্নতি মানে আমাদেরও উন্নতি...” (Yes... development of the village means our development). What do you understand by the word development? I asked. Having clean water and proper roads, she replied as the other respondents agreed. Do you think women’s

safety and security should also fall under the rubric of ‘development’? I asked again. The respondents were again a bit hesitant and unsure but ultimately answered in the positive.

On being probed as to why women should not participate in politics, one respondent said, “তাদের বুদ্ধি কম... সব কাজে ছেলেদের পরামর্শ নিতে হয়...” (They are not intelligent. They need men’s advice in everything they do). They have been conditioned to think that they need the advice of men and will not be able to take decisions on their own. Modern power functions by producing subjects, not simply repressing them whereby the subjects comply with their own domination.²⁴ That the social and patriarchal culture has conditioned them to think that they *need* the advice of men can be termed as the ‘normalizing effect of the disciplines’.²⁵

However the same respondent contradicted her statement some time later when she said that only educated women should take part in politics. One Sundari Bibi (name changed) said, ‘পড়াশুনা জানা মেয়েদের বুদ্ধি হয়...’ (Educated women are intelligent women). They equated women’s intelligence with education because education gives them the ability to decide upon matters autonomously. What if the men are uneducated? I asked them. The respondents take it as a given that the male members of their families were intelligent even if they were uneducated. The men were more intelligent because they had more access to the public sphere. They went out more, had a lot of friends and worked in a public setting. So should women be given more access to the public sphere then? I asked. Some respondents answered vigorously in the negative while others gave a confused look. A second respondent said that women taking part in politics tend to get ‘aggressive’. She referred to someone she knew before- who once got elected as a member of the panchayat. After joining politics, she started to beat up her husband and her in-laws. Such a person has become powerful enough to not care about her family. Therefore as an elected representative she will never be able to undertake welfare activities for her community. In that case, if men are in power, it will be more acceptable to them. “আমরা তাকে মেনে চলব... সে যা করবে ভালোর জন্যে করবে...” (We will accept and follow the men as they can do no wrong. But we cannot accept women who do wrong by us). Another respondent said that that education did not matter as the

²⁴ Jana Sawicki, “Queering Foucault”, in Gary Gutting ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 383

²⁵ *ibid*

primary responsibility of women were to look after their families. The family could not be put at stake by a woman for her political ambition.

Feminist claims to knowledge of gendered lives carry dreams of resistance, agency and emancipation across social divisions and the complexities of social existence. But the emancipation also raises numerous problems about how change for the better is conceived, by whom, for whom and why.²⁶ The socially accepted norms and values, blind acceptance of male authority, looking at compulsion as choice- work to assist the subject in making sense of the self. Subjectivity is not simply imposed externally. We take up and occupy the subject positions that our socio-historical context makes available to us: subjects are not only made, we make ourselves.²⁷ Thus the conditions of social existence coupled with lack of financial stability and superimposition of gendered responsibilities continue to create a vicious cycle from which the subjects have no scope to escape and some do not want to escape. Instead they try to embrace it and pass it down to the next generations. The social space plays a central role in the construction of the subjects and their selfhood. The shared knowledge that emerges from the habitual customs rooted in religious and political institutions and practices sustains and reproduces the selfhood overtime. The subject on the one hand has internalised the practical inequalities as given and on the other has reproduced it to develop social cohesion. Therefore politically active women would always remain aggressive for them because by being part of the public sphere they had transgressed the norms of Muslim social and institutional practices. However impulsive responses momentarily reveal their ways of rebelling. Attempting to locate their political interest then becomes a difficult task because ‘political’ in the strictest sense of the word takes on a different meaning inside the confines of their social space.

²⁶ Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland, *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*, (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 7-9

²⁷ Dianna Taylor, “Introduction: Power, Freedom and Subjectivity,” in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 7

(Re)Production of (Re)Presentatives

The fact that I was not allowed to meet the newly elected women representatives (EWRs) in the privacy of their houses meant that someone had to keep one eye on the EWRs and another on me. The all-seeing Eye is everywhere even if the literal CCTV camera is not. Everyone has to assemble under the same roof. Everyone is under inspection and surveillance, not by the presence of some physical being but by being present in themselves under that roof. The production of disciplined and docile bodies starts from the “distribution of individuals in space... Discipline sometimes requires enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony.”²⁸

“But the principle of ‘enclosure’ is neither constant, nor indispensable, nor sufficient in disciplinary machinery. This machinery works space in a much more flexible and detailed way. It does this first of all on the principle of elementary location or partitioning... Disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed. One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions,... Discipline organizes an analytical space.”²⁹

Therefore in the panchayat office the respective rooms have been constructed in such a manner that I cannot enter the room of the elected representative without being seen by the executive officers. The moment I entered the room of the newly elected Panchayat Pradhan, two men almost pushed my fellow field investigator aside and went to stand on either side. It seemed that she needed some kind of protection- protection not in any physical sense but as control on what she speaks. One of the officials repeatedly said that the EWRs did not know anything about anything and it would be futile to talk to them. At the same time he ordered the two men not to leave her side when I went to meet her. When I had called up the Pradhan a week ago to fix a date for a one-to-one interview her husband answered the phone. He said, “আমি এসব দেখাশোনা করি...” (I manage all of her affairs). Even if I assured him that it was just an informal interview and no politically motivated questions would be asked, he did

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 141

²⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 143

not budge. Instead he told me to meet him in the panchayat office where he would introduce me to her.

Before we were allowed to meet Lotika Bibi, we were made to sit in one of the executive officers' room where all manner of curious men entered and examined us silently. The officer asked me about my subject and academic background without checking my identity card (ID). I was in a dilemma as to whether I should refer to Women's Studies or Political Science because of all the contacts that I had lost before. When we showed our IDs as MPhil researchers from Jadavpur University the men seemed to get cautious. One person asked me, “কি চলছে আজকাল ওখানে?” (What's the hot news in Jadavpur University right now?) When I expressed my desire to talk to the Pradhan and some other EWRs, he said, “কোন লাভ নেই... ওরা কিছু জানে না... ওরা কিছু বলতে পারবে না...” (It's futile. They do not know anything. They cannot say anything). On insisting upon the importance of the matter, strictly for research purposes, they said that they would help us out.

It is not that the researcher can reduce the field to a pre-given social world where she will conduct her study. The entire process of how I as a female feminist researcher from Jadavpur University- a traditionally left-leaning institution accused of playing 'disruptive' student politics and taking anti-establishment stances now and then- has determined how the field will react to and interact with me. It is not only that the researcher gazes at the field. The field gazes back and reacts accordingly. Especially in the context of the present research topic, the field can be capable enough to make assumptions about the background of the researcher. For instance, the moment the executive knew about my academic background he decided to 'protect' the EWRs. He instantly assumed that I was a Left activist and would express my radical Left views to influence the respondents. Even though I clarified my position as a neutral researcher and a student, it did not matter as such. Their assumptions about the institution as a whole dictated their behaviour and speech towards me and my friend. There is no other criterion of membership of a field than the objective fact of producing effects within it.³⁰ The field is not a static entity where I can enter with a previously prepared fixed questionnaire and a firm objective in mind. The complexity of an animated social (dis)order, shifting its nature to temporarily allocate an alien urban middle class educated female researcher impacts the kind of answers that the researcher will acquire over a period of time.

³⁰ Bourdieu, “The Field,” 42

Therefore managing one's identities from before the time one enters the field becomes crucial in ascertaining whether the researcher has a field to have access to, at all.

On that day, five EWRs were called up for us to meet. Out of the five women, four were able to come. In one of the larger rooms in the panchayat office, one will not find circular spaces of deliberation and dialogue. Rather at the end of the room there is a large platform with a larger table and a set of high leveled wooden chairs. The rest of the room is set at a lower level with green plastic chairs set separately and in straight rows. Someone sitting on the chairs on the platform will have to look down when they speak and the elected members will have to look up and listen. It indicated not only a hierarchy of position but also a hierarchy of ability. A break in the disciplinary set instantly occurred when I started to round up the chairs so that we could sit face to face in a circular manner. That such a break had occurred could be understood when our discussion was cut short with the sudden entry of a group of men, immediately following which the women hurried to put the chairs back in their places.

The minute details of the very room changed the behaviour of those who gathered in the room. An occasional glance at the door, lowering one's voice when the clerk entered to set down the files, a nervous laugh when I told the respondents to be comfortable while talking. Power is at once visible and verifiable as proposed by Bentham. In Bentham's Panopticon the inmate will constantly feel that he is being spied upon. He must not know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.³¹

We were not given permission by the respondents to record their statements. Hence I had to take notes. At first three women joined us. All of them were newly elected. Two of them were elected in the reserved SC seat while the third woman was elected in the general category seat. All of them were housewives and belonged to joint families, Hindus and literate. One respondent said that she was a graduate. So why did you stand for the panchayat elections, I asked them? It was not their decision, they replied. “আমাকে কেউ চেনে না...” (Nobody knows me) said one respondent. Their husbands and their families were known to all. They were just proxy candidates holding on to the seats for their family members. They had not campaigned for themselves and had never gone to political meetings. They had no idea of the welfare schemes nor did they show any interest in learning about them. They did not want to learn about such schemes because it was pointless. They were not allowed to talk

³¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201

to anyone in political matters. They were not allowed to go out of their houses to perform their official responsibilities or to attend the panchayat meetings.

Questions were asked regarding their experience before and during the elections. “*ভয় লাগছিল...*” (I was feeling scared) one respondent said. On being probed the reason she said, “*এতো লোকের সাথে কথা বলতে হবে ভেবে ...*” (I thought I had to talk to so many people). Who did you talk to? I asked her. It seems that she hoped to talk to people. She said, “*অচেনা মানুষের কাছাকাছি যেতাম ...*” (I could have had the opportunity to meet new people). Ultimately she did not have to talk to anybody because the men of her family and the political party controlled and constructed her image as a political representative. Till that day of the interview she did not have to talk to anybody as she did not come to the Gram Panchayat. It was also felt that she wanted to talk to someone and she actually liked talking to me and my fellow investigator. Her husband attended all the meetings and she was not informed about the proceedings. Sometimes members of the same family got different types of information. For example she knew that a meeting would take place at a specific time; but she was not informed about the change of time. This was an important reason for her low level of political attendance. If the women members were invited somewhere in their official capacity they had the willingness to go but they were not allowed by their families and the party.

Do you think political parties are interested in supporting women candidates? In reply, the respondents said that the political parties supported women candidates only because of the provision of reservation. If they truly supported women, they would have worked to increase women’s political awareness in the villages. But no such efforts were made. Everything was determined by the men and the higher echelons of the political party. The women had no access to the party and hence they had no access to political power. The respondents talked about some other women candidates and elected members who were victims of domestic violence in their homes. What was the use of getting elected to a position of power, said one of the respondents, if they did not even have basic security in their own homes. “*কাজ করতে গেলে বাঁধা ... অধিকার জানতে চাইলে বাঁধা ...*” (There are obstacles if you want to genuinely work or if you want to know about your rights) she said.

One of my objectives as a feminist researcher was to interpret the embodied accounts of living of my respondents. Such embodied accounts and experiences were literally cut short when the fourth woman arrived. She had been reelected for a second time and her utterances

and gestures were not as candid as her peers. “আমি জানতাম আমি আবার ভোট এ জিতবো ...” (I knew I would win again) she said with confidence and conviction. So you campaigned for yourself? I asked her. She replied in the negative. She said that her family was very powerful in the village. Her official duties and responsibilities were performed by her husband. She had no problem with that because she had to look after the family and take care of her children. Her only objective was to hold on to the seat for her husband. The smiling face and the genuineness of her utterances almost shocked me for a moment. Government as an activity and as an art indeed consists in carrying out a rational practice where the activity is thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it is practiced.³² Here ‘government’ not only refers to the political structures and institutions. It designates the way in which conduct of individuals and groups might be directed.³³

Recovering fast I asked a general question to all of them. Why do you think a woman should be elected as a political representative? Do you think women play any role in politics? One respondent said, “শুধু যে আমরা দিয়ে যাব তা নয়... আমরাও কিছু ফেরত পেতে চাই ...” (It’s not that we will always ‘give’. We also want to get something back). For a moment I silently made the stereotypical assumption that she wanted to get love and praises from her supporters. But she actually wanted to get something back in return in the sense of profit and power. Immediately another respondent from the back pulled her *saree* which made her change her response. “... না মানে আমরাও কিছু ফেরত দিতে চাই...” (No we also want to give something back to the society). The hesitations in her utterances as she had to change her honest opinion were noticeable.

The respondent did not want me to think that even women can want wealth and power- the ingredients that we generally associate with politics. The standard of feminine political behavior is already defined by the general notion of politics as a masculine activity. Hence they wanted to prove to be true, my stereotypical assumption of feminine political behavior as that of being sensitive to one’s supporters and adopting a position of nurturance. This distortion is utilized by political scientists to still treat politics as a male endeavour and as a feminist researcher it was wrong of me to make such immutable assumptions. It shows that

³² Graham Burchell ed. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3

³³ Michel Foucault, “Afterword,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 221

we cannot really leave our prior dispositions and enter the field with a blank slate. What we can instead attempt is to make visible the sexual assumptions of mainstream research, thereby critiquing the supposed ‘neutrality’ of the public sphere while accepting the possibility that women can also want power and wealth, in spite of keeping themselves confined to self imposed sexual boundaries that their social world requires of them.

“মহিলাদের সব সময় নিচে রাখা হয়...” (Women are always placed in a position of inferiority) said one Radha Halder (name changed). She further said that they did not have any power in the confinement of their homes and therefore they did not expect to get any political power in the panchayat as well. “আমাদের উপর সিদ্ধান্ত চাপানো হয়...” (Decisions are imposed on us). People may talk about equality, they would be treated badly if they expressed or justified their political or moral stand. She was again pinched from the back to stop her from expressing her honest opinion. The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others.³⁴ It acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future.³⁵ The pinching stopped her from expressing any opinion at all from the next questions which were asked. She literally had a finger on her lips while the conversation moved on to the next point.

Assumptions of solidarity on the basis of gender among the EWRs become problematic because ‘dialogue’ as direct physical interaction may create obstacles in constructing such solidarities. When dialogue becomes physical and hierarchical, it no longer remains a dialogue; it becomes coercion. Therefore “the power relations that condition and limit dialogic possibilities need first to be interrogated. Otherwise, the model of dialogue risks relapsing into a liberal model that assumes that speaking agents occupy equal positions of power and speak with the same presuppositions about what constitutes ‘agreement’ and ‘unity’ and, indeed that those are the goals to be sought.”³⁶ The members of the group have an internal relationship of power, independent of me as an outsider. That relationship has to be kept in balance after I leave their social space. A relationship of power does not act directly and immediately on others. It is repetitious and omnipresent “not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point or rather in every relation from one point to

³⁴ Dreyfus, *Michel Foucault*, 219

³⁵ Dreyfus, *Michel Foucault*, 220

³⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 20

another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”³⁷

Do you want to work for the welfare of your community and village? I asked them. “ইচ্ছা আছে কিন্তু সব ইচ্ছা পূরণ হয় না...” (We hope for the best knowing that our wish to work for the community may not come true) one respondent replied while the others agreed with her. This can be seen in terms of what Bourdieu referred to as the confrontation between positions and dispositions. “Although position helps to shape dispositions, the latter in so far as they are the product of independent conditions, have an existence and efficacy of their own and can help to shape positions.”³⁸ However in the present case, the respondent has the disposition to work for something good but her disposition clashes with her position as a woman and as a EWR. Her position, being under control, works to repress her disposition as well as her will to politically express such disposition. In other words her disposition is not independent of her multiple positions. She has had to alter her disposition to bind it to her position.

Experience gathered from the above focus group interview makes us realize that there is no uniform category of ‘woman’ that cuts across boundaries of one’s socio-economic and political position. “Universal sisterhood, defined as the transcendence of the ‘male’ world... ends up being a middle class psychologised notion which effectively erases material and ideological power differences within and among groups of women.”³⁹ Identity is not only the product of how one constructs one’s selfhood in relation to others. It is also a product of how one constructs one’s selfhood in difference to others. A politics of difference implies the right to define oneself and the world according to one’s own interests.⁴⁰ Individual identity is produced from one moment to the next, according to certain exclusions and motivations of how one defines oneself and whether such definitions serve to fulfill their interests in differing moments of positionality. In this context even the act of withdrawing or remaining silent becomes a glaring manifestation of how the ideology of patriarchy works in concert with established notions of political power and how resistances to it become a political act. It

³⁷ Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, Robert Hurley trans. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 93

³⁸ Bourdieu, “The Field,” 61

³⁹ Chandra T. Mohanty, “Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience,” in Phillips, *Feminism and Politics*, 263

⁴⁰ Grosz, “Conclusion,” in *Feminist Knowledge, Critique and Construct* ed. Sneja Gunew, Sneja, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 340

is a fragmentary but a continuous process of identity formation created and mobilized in and through politics; it does not pre-exist politics.⁴¹

The fragmentary moments of resistance make stronger one's powers of disrupting the dominant historical discourse. Those disruptions were visible when some of the respondents momentarily tried to be active agents in voicing their protests against the symbolic systems of oppression. The unity of women is best understood not as given, on the basis of a natural/psychological commonality; it is something that has to be worked for, struggled towards in history.⁴² Uncovering alternative, non-identical histories which challenge and disrupt the spatial and temporal location of a hegemonic history has always been a primary objective of most feminist analyses of alternate lives. "However, sometimes attempts to uncover and locate alternative histories code these very histories as either totally dependent on and determined by a dominant narrative, or as isolated and autonomous narratives, untouched in their essence by the dominant figurations. In these rewritings, what is lost is the recognition that it is the very co-implication of histories with History which helps us situate and understand oppositional agency."⁴³

After concluding my interviews and thanking the respondents for taking the time to talk to me, my phone number was taken by a panchayat staff. They said that they would inform me of the date on which I could take the Pradhan's interview. I waited for two weeks before calling them up. They again told me the same thing and till today I have not received any calls. The executive officer's assistant even advised me to change the nature of my research topic in the future. The icing on top was when a male elected member of the gram panchayat told me and my fellow investigator, "তোমরা মেয়েরা এসব কি লাইন এ নেমেছ ..." (Why have you girls chosen this kind of a career?) Two young girls traversing the intimates of a remote village in heat and rain, just to talk about women and politics, especially their women who were 'ignorant' was unbecoming of us. Here again the male gaze made it plain that politics as participation and as a subject of research conducted by a female was not aesthetically pleasing for the society.

⁴¹ Menon, *Recovering Subversion*, 190

⁴² Mohanty, *Feminism and Politics*, 264

⁴³ Mohanty *Feminism and Politics*, 264

Informal vs. Formal Setting?

At the beginning of the present work it was assumed that there is a difference between conducting focus group interviews in formal and informal settings. Informal settings like the courtyard of the house are preferred because it is relatively open, neutral and not subject to intrusion of an authority. People will be able to engage and deliberate upon matters more freely without the risk of outsiders surveilling or judging them. Closed environments like the panchayat office for example do not give the respondents the comfort to open up during conversations. At the end of conducting the field work I realised that surveillance is not simply an external phenomena just as power is not simply concentrated at the top. “From top to bottom, in its overall decisions, and its capillary interventions alike, whatever the devices or institutions in which it relies, it acts in a uniform and comprehensive manner; it operates according to the simple and endlessly reproduced mechanisms of law, taboo and censorship”.⁴⁴ Power circulates in all kinds of social relationships and the body reacts to it in the form of application of self censorship whatever the social space is. The social space does not lie outside the economy of power and therefore the argument that informal settings (as opposed to formal ones) will be more open and free does not seem plausible.

What is essential in all power is that ultimately its point of application is always the body.⁴⁵ A face to face interview with Sobha *di* in her house revealed that even if she was outside the institutional structure of the panchayat, she was not outside the perpetual surveillance of social and institutional norms. The political institution as a structure does not play a role here. But the shared knowledge generated by the panchayat along with the norms of the social space of the subject leads to a form of self-surveillance.

“...power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy, that its effects of domination are attributed not to ‘appropriation’, but to dispositions...”⁴⁶ What I observed while talking to her was the self control she maintained while answering the questions. The answers that she gave was constrained by the environment of her house and by the fact that she was once a part of the gram panchayat. Even if we were sitting in the courtyard I could feel the presence of male members of her family in the adjacent rooms. Her

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 84

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the College de France 1973-1974*, J. Lagrange ed., G Burchell trans., (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan,2006), in Taylor, *Key Concepts*, 14

⁴⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 26

father-in law was sleeping on the other side of the courtyard. Sobha *di* carefully made all her utterances. She was no longer a member of the gram panchayat. She felt a bit sad about it but she said that she learnt a lot when she was part of it. What is the role of a EWR in the gram panchayat, I asked her. “গ্রামের উন্নয়ন করা ...” (To undertake development initiatives in the village) she replied. Especially if it is a woman candidate she needs to see whether the women are having any kind of difficulties in accessing scholarship and health related government forms, getting clean drinking water etc. She declared that she was the only one in her family to be engaged directly in political activities. She proudly showed me pictures of tree plantation drives where she could be seen planting trees with the other women in her village.

Did you decide that you would stand for elections? I asked her. She said that she did not decide it but she actively gave her consent when members of the political party came to her house. Apart from that she was immensely supported by her family and her community. Her neighbours and relatives actively encouraged her to stand for elections because they thought that she had the ability to work towards something good in the village. It shows that Sobha *di* as such did not have any prior idea of what she wanted to do if she became elected. The same thing was observed when I talked to the present EWRs. They thought of standing for nominations because the people of the *para* encouraged them. It was only after they got elected that they tried to learn and take initiatives with the help of the male members in the gram panchayat.

Uttar Radhanagar has a history of cases of trafficking.⁴⁷ Because Sobha *di* was talking about the importance of development of her village, I asked her whether there were issues and problems related to women’s security in her village. She completely denied that there were although she accepted the presence of a certain don. She did not open up about it. Her statements were partially confirmed by some other local women whom I talked to when I was returning home. They said that young boys from other political parties were locked in rooms and beaten up because they wanted to stop rigging of elections and vote jamming. It was initiated by a certain powerful person in conjunction with the political party. “আগে এত মারপিট হত না ...” (Political clashes did not take place before) Sobha *di* said. She felt that young boys nowadays get involved in political violence to earn money and power. They are

⁴⁷ Samita Sen and Iman Kalyan Lahiri, “Against Trafficking: Women in South 24 Parganas, West Bengal,” Jadavpur University: Kolkata. 2017-2018

not concerned about the women- the mothers and sisters of the victims who die in political skirmishes.

Do you think the political parties are interested in nominating female candidates? I asked her. “এরকম নয় যে দল চায় শুধু ছেলেরা দাঁড়াক...” (It is not that the party only wants to nominate male candidates) she said. The system of reservation and rotation of seats in the constituencies means that women will definitely have an opportunity to make their presence felt through their initiatives at the community level. Do you think women would have had the same chance if the system of reservation was not there? I asked her. Sobha *di* tended to deviate and once again stressed upon the fact that political parties are interested in supporting women candidates. Even after they were elected in the panchayat, their demands were considered by the authorities.

Positionality of a Female Feminist Researcher

According to Bourdieu, “... the social world can be represented as a space constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe in question, i.e., capable of conferring strength, power within that universe, on their holder. Agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions within that space... Inasmuch as the properties selected to construct this space are active properties, one can also describe it as a field of forces, i.e., as a set of objective power relations that impose themselves on all who enter the field and that are irreducible to the intentions of the individual agents or even to the direct interactions among the agents.”⁴⁸ The researcher cannot enter the field by denying the forces that constitute it. Neutrality cannot be achieved when the researcher stands in the open field and tries to understand its dynamism. The researcher is both the cause and the product of such dynamism. Especially in the context of field work, one cannot simultaneously search for embodied accounts of living by disembodiment one’s own multiple and fragmentary identities because it affects the field as well as the respondents. The identity of the researcher always influences the subjects. Consequently it shapes not only how the respondents interact with her but also how the researcher positions herself in relation to them.

⁴⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups,” *Theory and Society*, 14 no.6 (Nov. 1985) 724

In creating such positions the researcher also has to position herself with herself. Even if I am committed to my goals and identity as a feminist researcher, how I am working towards such goals in the field without jeopardising my project becomes important. For me as a female feminist researcher it was a constant process of self-censure, navigating political and patriarchal practicalities. It gives rise to numerous ethical issues but personal reflexivity becomes crucial in generating situated knowledges of social existence. It must be acknowledged that situations have had power over me because of which I failed to move in directions that I initially prepared myself for. But failures are as much part of the process of knowledge generation as are successes.

The timing and extent of researcher self-disclosure is vital in gaining the trust of the respondents. For example, after conducting the first focus group interview in Hindu *para*, I was asked various personal questions about my family. For them to be understood by me, I too had to be understood by them. To be part of their worlds I had to shed off the cloak of a stranger. Commitment to a scientific ethic of detachment is unlikely in this scenario. As a response these social interactions assured the respondents about my identity and helped to remove scepticisms from their mind. It was evident in the second focus group interview when they all started to treat me not as a researcher, but closely resembling their children.

Finally, taking up the position of a feminist researcher entails observing the 'unnatural' within the 'natural', the silences and hesitations and the intent behind such silences. To be fully aware of the substantive, the symbolic and the psychological researcher has to listen and see how power works its way through the language and body of the subjects. Working on the skills of engagement and socialisation then becomes imperative, not only to have prolonged access to the field but also to develop the ability to understand oneself as a researcher and as an individual.

CONCLUSION

The 73rd Amendment Act passed in 1993 constitutionally guaranteed women's political participation at the grassroots. It led to thirty three percent reservation of seats for women including women belonging to SC, ST and other backward classes, in all the three tiers of the panchayat. Currently in many states, reservations for women in the panchayats have exceeded the quota. The idea of affirmative action augments the right to equality by recognising the fact that some groups in our society who have been historically discriminated against owing to their caste, class, gender etc. need additional support to compete with the rest. Reservation of seats is definitely a step forward in the path of women's political empowerment in India and it must also be brought about at the Parliamentary and Assembly level especially for the political empowerment of lower castes and classes. But a formal right to stand for elections do not guarantee independence of decision making capabilities in the political institutions. The neutrality of the public sphere is built on the assumption that the democratic subjects, once they are outside of the privacy of their homes, will become rational political beings having political equality. But that 'becoming' will never take place because democratic subjects are first and foremost social beings who live and breathe structural and systemic inequalities. The same social and gendered inequalities that pervade intimate family relations control public relations and political institutions. In the family women are not allowed to take decisions independent of the advice or order of the male members. It is freely assumed that they will not be able to take decisions, regarding their own lives for that matter, without patriarchal dictates. When these assumptions continue to dominate history, it becomes a habit, a culture. Women and men become part of that culture, reproduce that culture and build social cohesion on the basis of that culture. All these get reflected back in the public political sphere.

Women have insignificant representation in the legislatures, local government bodies and within the party hierarchy. Even if they are members of local bodies due to the provision of mandatory reservation, they act as proxies to their male counterparts. In the panchayats they do not have autonomous decision making power. The study conducted by Participatory Research in Asia a few years after the passing of the 73rd Act referred to women who felt that the new provisions really changed nothing. They had won the elections only because the seats were reserved for them. The present work has been conducted 25 years after the passing of the Act. Yet the responses of the respondents in this study reflect the same opinions. Women still feel that neither their living conditions have changed nor they have had political empowerment. The quality of political participation is defined by the quality of living.

Reservation of seats is a procedural mechanism of empowerment; it neither guarantees a safe electoral system free of gendered inequities nor independence of decision making. Substantive empowerment requires massive changes in the living conditions and socio-economic status of women. Governance has to be engendered to make it more responsive and inclusive.

The ideals of democracy and equality have been formulated in terms of free consent of free democratic subjects. But such notions and the subjects themselves are part and products of patriarchal and social inequalities. The consent underpinning their existence as citizens is not isolated of their identities as social beings. The neutrality and universality of the political sphere is a masculine construction, never free of masculine insecurities. The all seeing Eye is everywhere which is at once external to the subject as well as self imposed internally. The democratic subject in the present study has been women voters, past and newly elected representatives. Their bodies have been the target of power which is repetitious, capillary and a product of masculine insecurities. When the body is combined with the norms of the social space prescribed by the patriarchy, democratic citizen-subjects are produced. Rationality does not produce neutral transcendental citizens. It is more a means of control, to produce citizens who will accept the dominance of rational democratic institutions and abide by it. Instead of building coalitions and solidarities, it is a means of denying diversity and embodied existence.

A transformatory politics demands locating the origin of consent and freedom so that questions can be asked regarding the nature of neutrality of the political sphere. The nature of democracy must be modified to advance a process of democratization and to accommodate resistance and dissent. Democratization is a process which can bring about changes in the production of institutional knowledge. It necessitates extension of social power to the marginalized by bringing about changes in institutional practices and behaviour. It is based on mutual recognition, coalition and collaboration, and deliberation. Feminist politics is a politics of resistance, challenging dominant forms of knowledge production and dissemination. Therefore knowledge produced through political public discussions to arrive at the common good must be challenged. Common good must aim at incorporating the voices of those who are silenced when public discussions take place. Common good should be inclusive of diversity, scarcity and marginality.

But it must also be acknowledged that feminist claims against liberal understandings of democracy is problematic as its vision of emancipation raises questions about whether the democratic subjects are entirely devoid of agency and capability if they are products of social power. After conducting the present work, it has been felt that agency is fragmentary, impulsive and a continuous process of negotiation. Democratic subjects in their political identities as citizens and their social identities as members of gendered and social stratification will continue to negotiate ideological and sexual differences. Locating agency in it will not always give instances of explicit results. But the agency to criticise, if not challenge, power will always be there because only democracy has the capacity to accommodate such criticisms in its way to democratization.

Appendix I

Questionnaire I

(Questionnaire prepared for the interviews of women elected representatives in Magrahat East Gram Panchayat)

1. Name of the Respondent
2. To which village do you belong?
3. What was your age as on your last birthday?
4. Do you belong to the
 - a. Gram Panchayat
 - b. Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti
5. Educational qualification
 - a. Graduate
 - b. Up to Higher Secondary education
 - c. Up to Primary education
 - d. Illiterate
6. Marital Status
 - a. Married
 - b. Unmarried
 - c. Widow
7. If married, what is your husband's occupation?
8. How many members are there in your family?
9. How many children do you have?
10. To which caste do you belong?
11. To which religion do you belong?
12. From which seat have you won?
 - a. General seat
 - b. Reserved seat
13. How many times have you won the gram panchayat elections?
14. Are any of your family members involved in any kind of political activity?
15. Has your family supported you both before and after the time you were elected as a gram panchayat member?
16. Have you attended any meetings or marches conducted by political parties?
17. Have you campaigned for yourself before the elections?
18. Do you think political parties are interested in nominating or fielding women candidates?
19. Do you attend gram panchayat meetings?
20. Are you allowed to express your demands and opinions in the gram panchayat?

21. What are some of the crucial problems in your village?
22. Are there women centric problems in your village?
23. What, in your view, are some of the functions of an elected representative?
24. What does 'politics' mean to you?
25. Do you think women should join politics?
26. Do you think politics empowers women in any way?

Questionnaire II

(Questionnaire prepared for the interviews of women voters in the village of Uttar Radhanagar)

1. Name of the Respondent
2. What was your age as on your last birthday?
3. Educational qualification
 - e. Graduate
 - f. Up to Higher Secondary education
 - g. Up to Primary education
 - h. Illiterate
4. Marital Status
 - d. Married
 - e. Unmarried
 - f. Widow
5. If married, what is your husband's occupation?
6. How many members are there in your family?
7. How many children do you have?
8. To which caste do you belong?
9. To which religion do you belong?
10. Are you or any of your family members involved in any kind of political activity?
11. Have you attended any meetings or marches conducted by political parties?
12. Do you vote?
13. Is voting important?
14. What, in your view, are some of the functions of an elected representative?
15. Do you think a female elected representative is different from a male elected representative?
16. Can you describe the political ambience in your village in the immediate pre-poll days?
17. Can you describe the political ambience in your village on the day of the panchayat election?
18. Have you faced any kind of problems while going to vote?
19. What are some of the crucial problems in your village?
20. Are there women centric problems in your village?

21. Do the gram panchayat members take any initiative to solve such problems? If so, how?
22. What does 'politics' mean to you?
23. Do you think women should join politics?
24. Do you think politics empowers women in any way?

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