

## **WOMEN AS POLITICAL LEADERS IN MUNICIPALITIES: A STUDY IN WEST BENGAL**

**Dr. Antara Ray**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**Department of Sociology**  
**Presidency University, Kolkata**  
**ray.antara@gmail.com**  
**antara.soc@presiuniv.ac.in**  
**Mob. 9836148323**

The constitutional Amendments 73rd and 74th were landmark additions to the Indian Constitution, aimed at decentralizing power and ensuring grassroots democracy. Amendment 73rd, passed in 1992, focused on establishing a system of local self-government for rural areas, known as Panchayats, while Amendment 74th extended this framework to urban areas through the creation of Municipalities. Both amendments were crucial in empowering local communities and promoting participatory governance across India. One significant aspect of Amendment 73rd was the reservation of one-third of seats for women in Panchayats, a historic move towards gender equality in political representation. This provision was further expanded to include urban local bodies under Amendment 74th, recognizing the importance of women's participation in decision-making processes at the local level. The implementation of reservation policies, particularly with regards to reserving one-third of local governance seats for women in India, has been met with both support and criticism. Proponents argue that such measures are necessary to address historical disparities and to promote gender equality in decision-making processes. It is believed that increased female representation at the grassroots level will not only empower women but also lead to more inclusive and holistic development. However, critics have raised concerns about the effectiveness of such policies in practice, pointing to challenges such as tokenism, inadequate support systems, and resistance from entrenched power structures. One of the primary challenges faced in implementing the reservation policy for women in local governance in India is the deep-rooted patriarchal mindset prevalent in many communities. This mindset often results in resistance from male counterparts who are reluctant to accept women as leaders or decision-makers. Additionally, the lack of adequate representation and resources for women in these positions poses another significant hurdle. Without proper support systems in place, women may struggle to navigate the political landscape and effectively fulfill their roles. West Bengal was one of the first states to adopt the provisions of 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment of Constitution. In 1995, for the first time during the municipal elections, constituencies were reserved.

## **Methodology**

The present paper is based on the work where data is being collected from Rajpur-Sonarpur municipality of South 24 Parganas. Samples are drawn from the women councillors, male councillors of the municipality, as well as from various residents of the wards of this municipality. Tools used to bring out the information are – semi-structured interview schedule, personal narratives and group discussions – applied both for women elected administrators, as well as local residents. The sample was selected purposively for the 15 women elected administrators and randomly through electoral roll for 160 local residents. These narratives and data that will be eventually collected will be collated with the objectives of this present work. The study also briefly interviewed 20 male councillors. These narratives and data that will be eventually collected will be collated with the objectives of this present work.

The current paper will concentrate on the Wards No. 2, 5, 6 and 9. These wards were chosen as they have a woman councillor for the last few years. 160 respondents are interviewed, 40 respondents from each ward, for the present work and the survey is still on. The present work has recorded and observed certain significant aspects regarding accountability, efficiency and transparency among elected representatives while interviewing the resident voters of this ward. Their opinion about the role of women councillors in facilitating their access, choices and usage of municipal services will be an important indicator about their performance since they are now legitimately participating in the process of decision making. The study also tried to interview five (5) women's organisation working in the district of South Twenty Four Parganas. Along with it, the study till now could only talk to the women's wing of TMC (Trinomool Congress) of the district.

Rajpur-Sonarpur municipality of South 24 Parganas is an outcrop of Kolkata Municipal Corporation, bifurcated due to high population growth following rapid urban developmental work. The reason for which this particular municipality and the ward was purposively chosen because this municipal ward and its adjoining wards are location of one of the most fast developing urban community with changing demography and habitation, resonating suburban, peri-urban traits alongside upcoming gated communities and posh housing complexes. The municipal representatives are expected to cater to the requirements of residents of all class and kind, which makes it an attractive site where one can study and attempt to understand the pressures and obligations of diverse expectations and broad-spectrum requirements across the population. It will also indicate how the women representatives recognize - what has already been achieved as well as what remains to be done by them to bridge the aspirational gap between demands of private wealth and necessity due to poverty in infrastructure.

The present study would attempt to draw its conclusions by completing the communication loop between the elected women representatives in municipalities, the citizens, and the officials working in the municipalities. Strategically, the respondents were communicated with more than one time so that missed points or arguments get completed, jargons and

official acronyms are avoided so that understanding is clear as to what information is being sought, and the questions have been kept clear, concise and limited in number.

### **Objectives**

The paper would like to examine if there has been any qualitative change in the decision-making process in the floor of municipality.

Further, on the basis of the analysis of the decision taken by the municipality, the paper would like to examine, how gender sensitive the decisions had been, as the case may be.

Finally, the paper would like to examine how the female elected representatives of the municipality perceive how much effective and successful their representation has been towards their empowerment of women in particular and gender balance in general.

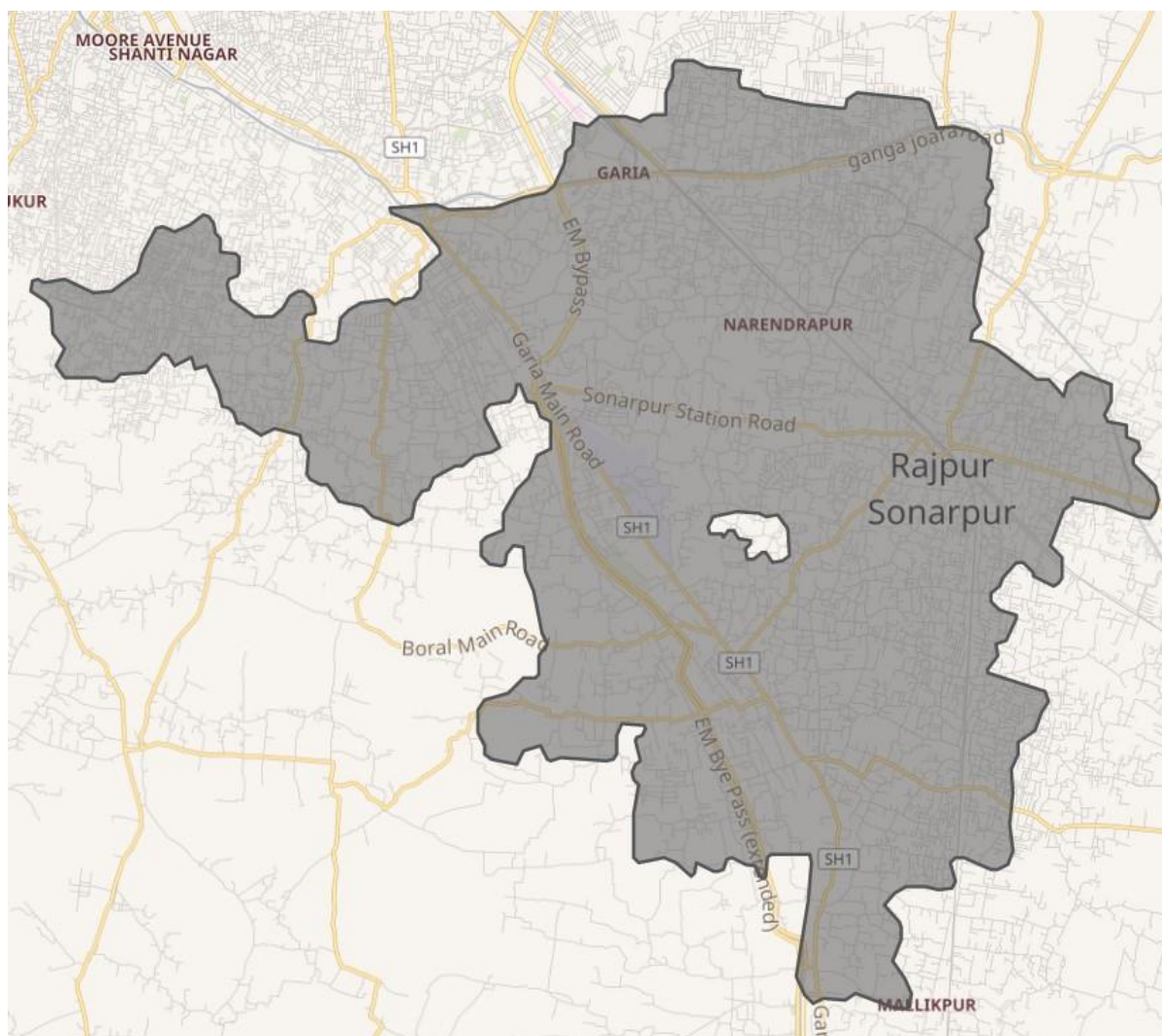
As an ancillary, it would also like to see the perception of women employees of the municipality about the changes that was brought about due to the 74<sup>th</sup> amendment of Indian Constitution that reserved one third seats for women representatives. The study will try to find out the level of awareness and understanding regarding the 74<sup>th</sup> amendment.

### **Description of Rajpur-Sonarpur Municipality**

#### **Map 1**



Map 2



Rajpur-Sonarpur Municipality is located in the district of South twenty Four Parganas and adjacent to Kolkata Municipal Corporation. The total population of the municipality according to 2011 data is 4,70,000 (Men:2,25,000, Women: 2,05,000 and Children:40,000). The present area is 49.25sq. km. and there exist a total of 35 wards. The Chairman and the Vice- Chairman are both men. The Chairman-In-Council has 7 posts where there exist two women, one is in charge of NULM (National Urban Livelihoods Mission), Environment and Social Welfare and the other is in charge of Electricity. Rest of the departments like Administration, Finance, Building Plan, assessment, Tax Valuation, Advertisement and Hoarding Assessment, Municipal Market, Conservation of Municipal Assets, P.W.D, Water Supply, Sports Information and Culture, Public Health, Health, Solid Waste and Transport,



Education, Mid-day Meal, disaster Management, Retiring and Green Police are looked after by the other male members. Out of 35 wards, 15 wards have women as councillors.

### **Women councillors and the reasons for joining Politics:**

One of the major aims of this paper is to see the implication of 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment of Constitution that has made provisions for one-third reservation of seats in Municipalities. Following T.K.Oommen, we can then say “if a substantial proportion of the population participates in diverse developmental activities at all levels in a society,” we can claim that in this society popular participation takes place. Further, Oommen explains (ibid. 174-176)

“Participatory development (PD) assumes that a self-conscious people, even if poor and oppressed, are capable of gradually transforming their environment through self-efforts. Governments, voluntary agencies and political parties may play a supportive role and should not dominate...The fact that the poor, powerless and oppressed are identified as the prime movers of PD implies self-conscious mobilization, which in turn assumes consciousness specific to these categories... In order that the oppressed are enabled to be involved in PD they should be liberated. There are three essential liberations to be attempted – cultural, material and gnostic...The persisting sharp division of labor between intellectuals and manual workers would get blurred insofar as the latter is rendered capable of influencing the process of theory construction both through their ‘praxis’ and ‘theories’... However, the ultimate success of PD is largely dependent on intellectual’s (experts, technocrats, bureaucrats) ability and readiness to learn from people. This entails willingness to undertake manual work at least as a learning process...PD can be carried on effectively at the micro level (village, block/taluka, district) only if both horizontal and vertical linkages are carefully developed and nurtured... PD at the grass roots should generate enough pressure from below so that the macro elite is compelled to incorporate these experiences as important inputs in policy decisions... PD proposes to enable people to reappropriate for themselves the right to decide the direction or thrust of development...(Thus it) recognizes the authenticity of people ’s conceptualization of development... That is, PD implies giving and taking, it is a participatory enterprise... PD prefers antyodaya as against sarvodaya.”

In the context of the above, therefore, we proceed here to examine how local governance in urban India has resulted in bringing about “consensual equilibrium fostering participatory culture.” (Ibid. p. 172). Towards that end, the first parameter that was used in this research to collect information from the women councillors with regard to their motivations and other reason that have paved the way towards their joining active politics, and fight in elections. While doing so and taking responses, it was significant to note that while interviewing the women councillors in this field that none of them belonged to a family with political background, but all these women had an inclination to do something of their own. Though having a woman Chief minister in the state of West Bengal, the current women councillors have always found it encouraging enough to join the political field, but the one third reservation of municipality seats cemented its way in the fulfilment of their ambition.

It has also been found that their husbands and other family members have encouraged them to actively participate in politics given the fact that it is difficult for the male counterparts to participate in the elections given the provision of reservation of women in the municipality. Therefore, most of the women councillors of this municipality strongly believe that this has helped them to gain seats of power in the political field by winning as a councillor. Not only that they believe that if there was no provision for reservation of women in municipality, and then it would have been extremely difficult to create a mark in this field of politics.

On the other side, the most of the male counterparts (Male Councillors) believe that 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment has resulted as a hurdle and barrier for many deserving male candidates in the field of politics. Though the male counterparts were not quite obvious with their words but the study observed that they feel female councillors are competent but not as enterprising as their male counterparts. They believe that women are often found to be too gullible and soft to take hard and difficult decisions. Also, they believed that women carry the burden of family and other responsibilities that they can never shrug off completely no matter what position they have reached in their political career. It was seen that despite several evidences of women being successful in various quarters of work that includes political field as well, the male counterparts are still biased about the efficiency and capability of their women counterparts. They are also of the opinion that if there wouldn't have been a reservation, it would have been very difficult for many women councillors to come to the position that they hold right now. Though there are few cases of successful women who are at par with men that they believe, but still according to them the numbers are pretty limited.

### **Regular Participation of Meetings of the Municipal Corporation:**

It is a common place understanding that women, due to their domestic involvements, many a times give less importance to the sphere of work. Therefore, here we tried to observe whether the women councillors attended meeting regularly or not that were held within the municipal corporations and also in the field within the jurisdiction of Rajpur-Sonarpur Municipality. The data here was gathered not only by talking to women councillors but also with the male councillors, chairman of the municipality board and other official staff working here.

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

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

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

#### **Participation in the decision Making of Municipal Corporation:**

74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act of Constitution made provisions for women's reservation in the Municipal bodies but then it becomes essential to understand if that has made inroads for women in participating in the decision making or not. The present study tried to understand the views and experiences of women councillors in this regard. For this purpose, interviews are conducted with the women councillors to record their views and within this period two policies are taken into account to understand the participation of women councillors in making decisions and its implementation other than regular policies of their wards.

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

Further, it was also seen that though women regularly attend the meetings and their opinion about the various policies and programmes are taken heed of, yet all the 15 women councillors have pointed out that it has not necessarily helped them to reduce bias, discrimination and torture based on gender, structurally wide spread in society. Though their family (prior or after marriage) have not come on their way, but political parties, irrespective of gender, bring hardship in their independence in decision taking. The women councillors are all graduates in terms of education and some of them are also service

holders like one woman councillor is a school teacher. Despite of being aware and educated all the women councillors believe in prevailing gender biases.

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

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

One may be reminded of the observation of Jo Beall here to understand the importance of experience of women in local governance:

Given that women experience and use the urban environment in different ways from men, they have different priorities in terms of services and infrastructure, for example with regard to transport, housing and basic urban services. Such priorities rarely feature in urban policy or investments. Policy-makers and planners, whether women or men, need to be gender-aware in order that women's needs and interests are addressed and women themselves are brought in to the planning process. For example, gender-aware urban planning would be sensitive to the increasing phenomenon of women-maintained households. Their particular vulnerability to poverty and their specific economic survival strategies will only be reflected in urban policy-making if categories like the "household" and the "neighbourhood" are disaggregated by gender and family type (Beall, 1996).



### **Awareness of Women Councillors with regard to the working of Municipal Corporations**

The study found that the women councillors are mostly not quite aware of fine-prints of various rules and regulations with regard to the working of municipal corporations. This is truer with regard to those who are newly elected councillors. The women councillors who are elected in their ward for a repeat time, they were little better equipped with the understanding of the working of the municipality. The working of municipality can include urban planning, registration of births and deaths, planning for social and economic development, solid waste management, sanitation related work, water supply, regulation of land usage and construction, making provisions for street lighting, parking lots, bus stops, fire services, improvement and upgradation of slums, making provisions of various urban amenities such as playgrounds, park and gardens, poverty alleviation, crematorium grounds, electric crematoriums, prevention of cruelty against animals and so on. But it has been found that most of the women councillors are unaware of the works under the purview of municipality. The few common works that all the women councillors are aware of are registration of birth and death, regulation of land and construction, maintenance of proper roads, sanitation and lighting. Other than these, the women councillors are either unaware or reluctant in the rest of the matters as they believe that other matters are of secondary concern and which is the view of all the women councillors.

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

### **Awareness of Women councillors with regard to Government Schemes for Women, Children and other marginalised communities:**

In continuation with the last section, where it has been found that women councillors are somewhat reluctant and unaware of the working of a municipality in its entirety, it became essential for the work to know and understand about the knowledge of women councillors

with regard to the various government schemes that are present in West Bengal for which provisions are there. In order to understand awareness and knowledge about those schemes, the present work for the time being has looked into certain schemes and provisions that are there. The following table shows the level of awareness and knowledge about such schemes:

Table 1

Sl. No.	Name of the Schemes	Known by the Councillors	Not Known by the Councillors
1.	Shabajsree <sup>1</sup>	0	15
2.	Khadyasathi <sup>2</sup>	2	13
3.	Shufal Bangla <sup>3</sup>	0	15
4.	Gitanjali <sup>4</sup>	0	15
5.	Nija Griha Nija Bhumi <sup>5</sup>	0	15
6.	Kanyashree <sup>6</sup>	15	0
7.	Shikshashree <sup>7</sup>	2	13
8.	Gatidhara <sup>8</sup>	0	15
9.	Lok Prasar <sup>9</sup>	0	15
10.	Sabala <sup>10</sup>	1	14
11.	Yubashree <sup>11</sup>	5	10
12.	Swabalamban <sup>12</sup>	1	14
13.	Shabajsathi <sup>13</sup>	0	15
14.	Swasthsathi <sup>14</sup>	15	0
15.	Anandadhara <sup>15</sup>	0	15
16.	Samabyathi <sup>16</sup>	0	15

From the above table, it can be observed that except the two schemes that are Kanyashree and Swasthasathi, none of the schemes are known completely by the women councillors in its entirety. Some of the schemes are known to some of the councillors but then they do not have any idea about the provisions of those schemes and therefore how to implement the schemes. Moreover, there are certain schemes where they are remotely aware of the provisions but do not know the names of it. While doing this study, interestingly it has been found that the two women councillors who are aware of the scheme Shikshashree, the education scheme of West Bengal Government, are those who are school teachers as well. While talking to the women councillors, the study found that out of 15 women councillors, 10 were of the opinion that they have heard of the schemes and whenever the state government ask to implement the schemes, they consult it with the chairman of the board and other members of the party to understand the schemes and it's implementation. Rest of the 5 councillors are the one who are re-elected in the municipality as councillors for the repeated times and are more confident with regard to understanding the policies and it's implementations. These 5 women councillors are much confident and are of the opinion that even if they do not know much about the names or the description of the schemes, still

they are aware that there exist some schemes for each and every sector and whenever needed, they can find it out and use it efficiently.

Through this survey, it can be concluded that there lacks knowledge about these schemes though provisions are being made by the state government but to implement and enact the schemes it requires proper sensitisation by the government which is lacking. At the same time, there also exists a lack of initiative by most of the women councillors.

### **Women Councillors and their relationship with Women Organisations and Women Centric Agendas**

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

Out of 15 women councillors only 2 were party members of TMC prior to becoming the councillor. Rest 13 women councillors were chosen by the TMC party for the election. They were selected on the basis of the following factors:

1. Clean image of the candidate.
2. Serving the party for considerable length of time
3. Popularity in the area or constitution.
4. Popularity in general in the district and at large like some well-known personality or local celebrity.
5. Educational background like teacher.
6. The background of the family like parents/siblings/in laws/husband is known and popular in the area and a supporter of the party.
7. Generational Residents (Living in the area for generations).

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

The women's organisation believe that a woman's issue is only taken up when it gets political in nature otherwise there is no fundamental change in the working of the women councillors with regard to the local governance. But the women councillors are of a different opinion. They believe that they give a lot of importance to the women's issues of their constituency and they always bargain their position within the municipality and given an opportunity in the higher levels of the party. They are always aware of the issues related to women in their areas and keep an eye on any kind of abuse. But the study found that none of the women councillors were a member of women's organisation prior to becoming the councillor. Infact they only became the member of women's organisation and that too of TMC's women's wing only after becoming the councillor.

### **Views of the Resident Voters of Ward No. 2, 5, 6 and 9 under Rajpur-Sonarpur Municipality**

Firstly, when the resident voters are asked whether the women councillors are approachable or not, they are of the opinion that in most of the times it is the husband/brother/husband of the councillor who meet them whenever they approach them with some of their problems or issues. Many a times, since some of the councillors are also working and have lack of time, so most of the times it is the husbands or some other male folk hold the meetings on their behalf. Almost all the residents have faced this that even if the woman councillor meets them, it was always the husband or some other menfolk that take the decision. Mostly it is the husband who dominates a decision making process and the women councillor always consults while taking a decision. This is a significant observation of the study that even though the woman councillor claims that they make the decisions but the responses of the residents show that still somehow patriarchy interferes in the decision making process as the husbands/brothers/fathers remain proxies of the women councillors.

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

Not only that, the resident voters are of the opinion that a woman councillor is more compassionate towards the problems of children and especially of those who are from economically poor background. Though the woman councillor takes the opinion of her male counterparts that include her husband mostly, but still she tries to help the children in

distress with regard to education and other factors. Furthermore, as per the resident voters, the woman councillors are also dutiful, compassionate and sympathetic towards the third gender. If needed they also listen to the problems of the third gender and deal with those with utmost care and attention. This is also the case with aged people and their problems like provision of health care facilities in local health centres. If required the women councillors try to make all the provisions and sign the papers diligently to accelerate the process of any kind of hospitalisations and medical concern. Therefore, according to the resident voters of these wards where women are the councillors, it has been stated by all the respondents that they are much more empathetic and compassionate towards the problems of women, children, aged and third gender.

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

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

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



## **Conclusion**

The first important issue raised by the paper is whether the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the representation of women led to the participation in governance and leadership. The study cannot deny that the preference of women, by the local residents as well as the political party, as a candidate for the post of councillor has increased as in the current area of work out of 35 posts, 15 posts are held by women that shows 43 percentage of the posts are occupied by women councillors. But the important question still remains whether that increases their participation in leadership or governance. Though the work is still continuing and intends to interview all the wards and more resident voters, but till now it can be deduced that the women bring the essence of being a woman into the leadership and governance. What kind of essence is still difficult to conclude but the study can say that they behave and take decisions differently than men. Though in some cases they show their aggression but in many other cases they are more compassionate and understanding and give more time in hearing the problems of the resident voters. The women councillors who are elected repeatedly are more aware and knowledgeable in understanding the work of the municipality rather than the one who are newly elected. But given an opportunity, they can learn fast.

An important question is being raised by many that whether women bring feminine qualities into politics! But the question itself is inherently problematic as it is hypothesised on the basis of the existence of certain feminine qualities, a conception based on the essentialist definition with regard to women that has always been an object of much debate within the feminist movement of both India and other parts of the world. But at the same time it is an important question to ask as to understand women as a resource in the political representation. In order to answer this question, it becomes essential to identify women's qualities and its impact in political life.

To address the problem in concern, the interviews of resident voters of both men and women have formed a consensus that women's specific qualities have to a large extent improved some of the aspects of municipal life. Many respondents have argued that women are more compassionate towards various kinds of issues of lives as a woman is also a mother and always are more caring towards the family. So qualities like patience, devotion, nurturing capacity are certain attributes that are indicated by the present work that the respondents feel make a significant difference within the working of the municipality and local governance.

According to Ashish Nandy, the material argument has always been strong and has an emotional appeal and this is more valid in case of Bengal where "matrifocal" character is principally invoked in Hindu cosmology (Nandy, 1990: 7-9). But at the same time it is a problematic argument as it relies upon the stereotypes that has been used in the past to actively exclude women from the field of politics by giving the same argument that since women have motherly instincts, so therefore they are too emotional, soft and will not be able to deal with harsh public affairs (Pateman, 1989). Furthermore, the deduction of women to mothers problematically legitimises women only to the conception of

motherhood and powerfully confines women's inclinations and freedom towards positioning their lives in other sectors.

The study found that given an opportunity a woman could bargain it's right and benefits for it's wards with enough force and determination and can also take strict decisions whenever that is required. Given an opportunity, women are able to manipulate the predictable behavioural patterns of genders to follow unwomanly ends. Moreover, the study has found that women who are the newcomers in the spheres of politics are disciplined in their activities to prove themselves though they lack informations about the working and policies of the state due to lack of proper guidance, training and initiative from the government. But at the same time, it has been observed that those who are re-elected are more experienced and have learnt the game by being in it for a significant period of time. Therefore, it could be said that the reservation of women in the municipality could bring leadership qualities and emancipatory behaviour among the women gradually but it requires more intervention from the government with regard to improving the functioning of women in the political sphere.

The 74<sup>th</sup> amendment has provided reservation for women in municipal corporations which has indeed increased women's participation in the field of politics. This has increased women councillors significantly in the area under study. It was believed that women will be given party tickets only to the reserved constituencies but it has been found in the current study that women are also given tickets to the unreserved constituencies as well that mark a significant value to the competencies of women and the need and demand of the public to have a woman councillor. This infact shows that women are also becoming a popular choice of many places rather than their male counterparts which is also been accepted by the men of political parties. They also believe that the way women reach out, the men cannot do that in a similar way. So many a times a woman is considered more appropriate for local governance. Even women are also fighting against male candidates and securing their wins. This has been the case at many places as well.

But unfortunately, the study did not find that having a woman councillor has improved women centric issues in the constituencies. Furthermore, the women did not take any significant initiative to take up issues pertaining to marginalised communities and children. The study did not locate any significant change in the issues that were taken into consideration earlier and now. The major issues that were taken care of are always been roads, electricity, water supply, sanitation and health. The work did not find any special mention or any special policies that being taken up or constructed by the women councillor to focus women, children or other marginalised communities. Infact it was observed that there are many policies that are created by the State and Central Government that these women are not aware of. They only take forward any kind of policies, when it is being constrained by the higher level of the state or central to make provisions for it's implementation. Otherwise, the study finds a gross lack of initiative and motivation among these women councillors to look for policies specific to women, children and marginalised communities. There are only few extremely popular policies of the state like Kanyashree and Shasthasathi that they are aware of and try to implement due to the coercive nature of the

state government. They also take into account the Swacha Bharat Abhiyan sincerely as it is a major policy of the central government. But the study did not find any significant change or initiative by the women councillor in this regard that has made a change by being a woman. The study also feels that it is also a lack from the higher echelons of the government that do not take any initiative to educate and spread awareness among the councillors so that they can take up and try to implement the existence of various policies.

### **Suggestions**

The present work indicates that connectivity of local bodies with other state actors remain weak. The forces of globalization have not yet infused sufficient transformation in the internal work process of the local bodies. These reasons have been cited as the cause for poor service delivery, and retainment of socially exclusionary forces.

Niti Ayog, in its report (Reforms In Urban Planning capacity in India, 2021, p. XV-XIX) states that'

“the transfer of the urban planning function from States/UTs to elected urban local governments did not happen as was envisaged through the Constitutional (Seventy-Fourth amendment) Act 1992. Many agencies are involved in urban planning, implementation, infrastructure development at the city as well as State levels. The existing framework has become complex, which often leads to overlapping of functions, lack of accountability and coordination, time delays, resource wastage, etc... Observing India's urbanization through Western lens has become a practice. Experience has shown that such objectivity diminishes the motivation and confidence needed to generate innovative solutions for indigenous problems. Indian cities are different from their Western counterparts in terms of culture, demography, lifestyle and so on. Adopting Western practices without tailoring them to suit Indian needs is not advisable... The platforms for citizen participation and their awareness about the process of urban planning and development are limited. There is a perceptible communication gap between planning agencies and the people, who are the ultimate beneficiaries... Due to the planning process being highly technocratic in nature, the public's participation in it is limited. While it is important to maintain the master plans' technical rigour, it is equally important to demystify them for enabling citizen participation at relevant stages... It is important to enlighten the city leadership about the significance of urban planning and public policy to achieve integrated development, mobilize finances, ensure affordable housing, and make cities more economically productive, liveable as well as inclusive.”

The above observation of the Advisory Committee actually indicates the gaps and lags in urban local governance, of which the women representatives are a part, therefore, has to be evaluated in the given skewed setting.

Broadly though, the present study concurs with the observation of Devaki Jain (Jain, 1996: 16), where she states that 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments brought transformation in elements of empowerment, self-confidence, political awareness and affirmation of identity. Women's entry inverted the conventional hierarchies of caste and class, and challenged traditional ideas of male authority and supremacy. They brought in non-competitive or cooperative ethic as they were drawn to work together across party lines and seemed to have similar interests. By superseding class and party line, they have opened up possibility for politics to have not only new faces but also a new quality. Change in governance is also evident from the issues that are been taken up like water, alcohol abuse, gambling, education, health, child marriage, child labour and domestic violence. Further, as was observed by Esther Duflo and Raghavendra Chattopadhyay (2001), the present study also did find that increased participation of women in urban local bodies have brought about change in investment priorities – especially in the issues related of house hold sanitation, and education and health of children. (World Bank Webcast: Women's Leadership and Policy Decisions: Evidence from a Nationwide Randomised Experiment in India, Nov'2001.)

Women are trying to go above the poverty line, pollution line and power line. The myths about women's participation in politics and in taking responsibilities are exploding. We are actually witnessing popular participation at last taking place in India. Participatory development in reality is taking place. Nevertheless, continuous training regarding their roles and responsibilities, and availability of information regarding government acts, rules and regulations, procedures, government programmes and schemes are the basic necessities that can create an enabling environment for women leaders, as integral, and not peripheral stake holders, thus, turning them into a critical mass in creation of a just society. Devaki Jain, however, point out, "Ironically, it is developmental assistance agencies which often provide vigorous examples of patriarchal obstruction to people-led development. UN agencies, for example, are often obstacles to efforts to shift power structures from the civil service to the citizens. The procedures of donor bureaucracies require the continued presence of central government and central machineries for negotiations and accountability." (Jain, 1996: 03&17.)

Final plea, if one may offer is that the experiences of women at the grass root level, if taken seriously, can be a motivating force, and propelling the society towards ensuring representation to women in legislature and parliament.

### Notes

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

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



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

## References

1. Beall, Jo, Urban Governance: Why Gender Matters, 1996 March , extracted from <https://www.gdrc.org/u-gov/doc-whygendermatters.html> , UNDP Gender in Development Programme.
2. Palanithurai, G., The Genre of Women Leaders in Local Bodies Experience from Tamil Nadu in The Indian Journal Of Public Administration, Vol.XLVII, No1, Jan-Mar, 2001, pg.39
3. Oommen, T.K., (1990), State and Society in India, studies in nation-building, Sage, New Delhi, pg.156.
4. REFORMS IN URBAN PLANNING CAPACITY IN INDIA, Advisory Committee Final Report, Niti Ayog, Government of India, September 2021, p. XV-XIX
5. Jain, Devki, (1996), Panchayati Raj: Women Changing Governance, Kali, pg.16

6. World Bank Webcast: Women's Leadership and Policy Decisions: Evidence from a Nationwide Randomised Experiment in India, Nov'2001.
7. Ghosh, B. (1996), "West Bengal", in Present Status and Future Prospects of Panchayati Raj in India, New Delhi, Institute of Social Sciences.
8. Government of India (1955), Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Delhi.
9. Government of India (1974), Towards Equality, Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Delhi.
10. Government of India (1988), National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988-2000, Delhi.
11. Mukhopadhyay, A. (2000), "Mayor-in-Council: The Calcutta Perspective", in A. Ghosh (Ed.), Mayor-in-Council System in a Comparative Perspective, New Delhi, Institute of Social Sciences.
12. Nandy, A. (1990), At the Edge of Psychology. Essays in Politics and Culture, Delhi, Oxford University Press.
13. Pateman, C. (1989), The Disorder of Women. Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory, Cambridge, Polity Press.
14. The West Bengal Municipal Act, 1993 (1994), Calcutta, Book-N-Trade.
15. Ray. Antara, (2018), Interface of Caste and Public Policy: A Case of West Bengal (Unpublished; Invited Lecture on 10<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> December, 2018 at Institute of Public Policy, National Law School of India, Bengaluru).