




## CASTE DYNAMICS AND SUBALTERN PARTICIPATION IN GRAM SANSAD: A STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN WEST BENGAL

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

The Gram Sansad is an important part of India's system of grassroots democracy. The Panchayati Raj system set it up as a constitutional body. Its purpose is to give people a place to directly participate in government, hold elected officials accountable, and work together to set local development goals. Based on the basic ideas of democratic decentralisation, the institution shows the possibility of self-governance that is open to everyone and encourages participation. This study offers a critical, human-centered analysis of the Gram Sansad's functioning in West Bengal, concentrating on caste dynamics and the traits of subaltern participation. The article asserts that, although the Gram Sansad provides a superficial democratic structure, substantial participation by marginalised socioeconomic groups is profoundly constrained, as demonstrated by constitutional stipulations, political theory, and an extensive analysis of interdisciplinary research. Deeply rooted caste hierarchies, which are linked to class differences, political favouritism, and everyday institutional practices, continue to shape who has access to, representation in, and power in local government. As a result, involvement often appears symbolically instead of promoting meaningful discussion or empowerment. This study places the Gram Sansad within extensive discourses on democracy, social justice, and power, thereby facilitating a critical reassessment of participatory governance in caste-stratified rural societies such as India.

**Keywords:** *Gram Sansad, Caste Hierarchy, Subaltern Participation, Panchayati Raj; Local Governance; West Bengal*

### Introduction

The pursuit of democratic enhancement through decentralisation has been a significant concern in India's political development since independence. The first talks about community development made it clear that residents need to be involved in decisions that directly affect their lives. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 made Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) a part of the Constitution. The amendment recognised local self-government as the third level of Indian democracy. Its goal was to make government more efficient while encouraging people to get involved, be accountable, and promote social justice at the local level. The Gram Sansad is different from the other groups set up under this framework in that it has a special and symbolic role. It includes all the adult voters in a community and is a formal example of direct democracy. In normative democratic philosophy, this kind of forum is the clearest example of popular sovereignty. People in the village are expected to use the Gram Sansad to talk about their development priorities, look at how the Gram Panchayat works, and have a say in how public resources and welfare benefits are given out.

Democratic institutions work in the real world, where they are surrounded by people. Power structures that control participation, discourse, and the visibility of voices affect how they work. In rural India, caste, class, gender, and political affiliation have a big impact on how people participate. Because of this, the Gram Sansad often shows how things are now instead of going beyond them.

West Bengal offers a particularly insightful framework for examining these dynamics. People often point to the state's long history of land reforms, political activism, and decentralised government as a good example of grassroots democracy. But caste still has a big impact on rural social and political life, even if it's not always obvious. Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other marginalised groups often encounter systemic barriers that impede their substantive participation in local governance. This paper analyses the impact of caste hierarchies on participation in the Gram Sansad in West Bengal and argues that democratic institutions cannot be evaluated solely on their formal structure. It is important to look at them in the context of the social structures in which they work.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

**Subalternity and Power:** Antonio Gramsci's idea of the subaltern refers to social groups that are left out of dominant power structures and political stories. Subaltern groups are economically, culturally, and politically marginalised, lacking the institutional means to articulate their interests in arenas dominated by social and political elites (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 12–15). Their marginalisation is thus structural rather than incidental.

In India, being a subaltern is closely related to being excluded because of your caste. Researchers from the Subaltern Studies Collective have shown that mainstream political discourse often hides or takes away the power of marginalised groups, making their voices less heard or completely silenced in mainstream institutions (Guha, 1982, pp. 3–7). Caste serves as both a social identity and a historically entrenched system of power embedded in quotidian practices, norms, and institutional structures.

Louis Dumont's analysis of caste hierarchy underscores its enduring nature despite legal and institutional reforms. Even though there is formal equality, social norms continue to support hierarchical relationships in both obvious and subtle ways (Dumont, 1980, pp. 66–72). Caste affects access to land, work relationships, social status, and political power in rural administration, which in turn affects how people participate in democratic organisations like the Gram Sansad.

The concept of the "subaltern," articulated by Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies collective, provides a vital framework for analysing participation in the Gram Sansad. Subaltern populations are those situated socially, politically, and geographically outside hegemonic power structures, often rendered "mute" by the prevailing narratives of the elite. In rural Bengal, the subaltern includes not only Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) but also landless labourers and marginalised women, whose perspectives are frequently excluded from official narratives and decision-making processes. In her thesis "Land, Labour, Dispossession, and Politics among Scheduled Tribes in India: Framing an Adivasi Agrarian Question," scholar Rajanya Bose (2022) explains the internal differences among subaltern communities. Bose notes that Adivasis are not a uniform group; for example, in West Bengal, Santhals may be landless but work in urban construction, while Lodhas are landless and face harsher conditions. This difference changes the way they act in politics. For example, Santhals may put welfare demands from the ruling party first, but Lodhas are often left out of this kind of advocacy altogether.

**Participatory Democracy and Its Limits:** Supporters of participatory democracy say that getting people involved makes democracy more legitimate, politics more effective, and social and economic equality (Pateman, 1970, pp. 42–45). Participation is acknowledged not merely as a means to improve governance outcomes but as a transformative process through which citizens cultivate democratic skills, self-confidence, and political engagement.

However, critical scholarship warns against blindly praising involvement. Researchers such as Cornwall (2004, pp. 75–79) contend that participatory spaces are socially constructed environments shaped by existing power dynamics. Formal inclusion does not automatically translate to substantive influence. On the other hand, participatory forums may maintain inequality through informal exclusionary practices, leading to what is often referred to as symbolic participation. This study uses a critical participatory approach that sees the Gram Sansad as a political battleground instead of a neutral or inherently democratic body.

### **Review of Literature**

Political science, sociology, and development studies have all looked at decentralisation in great detail. According to Rondinelli (1981, pp. 138–141), the main benefits of decentralised government were better service delivery, more responsive administration, and more efficient administration. People thought that India's Panchayati Raj Institutions were ways to make development more democratic and help people who were already on the fringes, especially through constitutionally required reservations (Mathew, 1994).

However, subsequent empirical investigations reveal a more complex situation. Bardhan and Mukherjee (2006, pp. 45–49) demonstrate that decentralised institutions often succumb to elite capture, thereby limiting their redistributive potential. Formal participation does not inherently lead to substantive empowerment, especially for socially marginalised groups. Research on caste and local governance highlights the persistent exclusion despite constitutional safeguards (Pai, 2001, pp. 2611–2613).

Researchers in West Bengal have thoroughly examined the political economy of panchayat governance. Bhattacharyya (2009, pp. 61–64) asserts that while decentralisation fostered political awareness and participation, party structures often dictated resource distribution, constraining independent subaltern agency. Mohanty (2010, pp. 112–116) asserts that participatory institutions frequently reflect broader societal inequalities rather than addressing them. Even though there is a lot of writing on the subject, the Gram Sansad as a place for discussion has not been studied enough. This research aims to fix that.

### **The Legal Framework of Rural Governance in West Bengal**

The law says that the Gram Sansad must meet at least twice a year in West Bengal. Its official duties include discussing local development projects, deciding who will get social services, and judging how well the Gram Panchayat is doing its job. It is meant to be a place where people can talk about things, be open, and be held accountable by their peers.

In real life, Gram Sansad meetings often have a lot of procedural formalism. Different villages have very different attendance rates, and meetings are often held just to meet legal requirements instead of to encourage real conversation. Usually, elected officials or party operatives set the agenda, which makes it hard for people to talk or disagree on the spot. People often make decisions outside of official meetings through informal conversations, which hurts the Gram Sansad's ability to think things through.

The West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973 is the main law that governs rural areas in West Bengal. It is a comprehensive law that aims to make Panchayats work as efficient self-governing bodies. This Act set up a three-tier system: the Zilla Parishad at the district level, the Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and the Gram Panchayat at the village level. The Gram Panchayat is made up of a group of mauzas or parts of mauzas that are next to each other. The 1994 Amendment created the Gram Sansad, which is very important for the democratic legitimacy of this system because it makes sure that the people in each ward are directly represented.

The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973, Section 16A, says that the Gram Sansad is made up of all the people who are on the electoral rolls for a Gram Panchayat constituency. The Gram Panchayat must meet twice a year, in May and November, to give residents a chance to advise and inform them on issues related to economic growth and social justice. The Gram Sansad's legal duties include putting local development projects first, finding people who will benefit from poverty relief programs, and carefully looking over the Gram Panchayat's annual budget and spending.

The 2003 Amendment went into more detail about how these groups work. It made the Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS) a permanent executive branch of the Gram Sansad. The GUS is a group made up of elected officials, opposition candidates, and representatives from non-governmental organisations and self-help groups. Its job is to make sure that the benefits of rural development projects are shared fairly. The goal of this framework is to decentralise execution while still holding the Gram Sansad community as a whole accountable.

### Structural Comparison of Deliberative Bodies in West Bengal

The following table provides a comparative overview of the various local governance institutions and their functional jurisdictions as prescribed under the West Bengal Panchayat Act and its amendments.

Institution	Jurisdictional Level	Frequency of Meetings	Statutory Composition	Core Mandate
Gram Sansad	Electoral Ward (Constituency)	Bi-annual (May and November)	All registered voters in the ward.	Beneficiary identification, local plan vetting, social audit.
Gram Sabha	Gram Panchayat	Annual (December)	All registered voters within the Gram.	Review of annual plans and budgets across all Sansads.
Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS)	Gram Sansad Ward	Functional / Monthly	Elected members, opposition, NGO/SHG reps.	Planning, execution, and project maintenance.
Block Sansad	Block / Panchayat Samiti	Half-yearly and Annual	All GP members and Panchayat Samiti members.	Guidance on economic development and social justice.
Zilla Sansad	District / Zilla Parishad	Annual	All members of Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishad.	Strategic planning and district-level oversight.

The legislative system has strict quorum rules to stop a small group of powerful people from taking over these groups. For a Gram Sansad meeting to start, at least ten percent (10%) of the total members must be present. If a quorum is not reached, the meeting must be adjourned and rescheduled, which means that at least 5% of the people must be there. Even with these legal protections, the actual attendance often falls short of these standards. This shows that there are socio-economic barriers that keep the subaltern from participating in these formal “invited spaces.”

### Historical Development and the ‘Class-over-Caste’ Discourse

The political dominance of the Left Front, which ruled West Bengal from 1977 to 2011, has a direct impact on the development of local government in the state. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] led the state in focusing on a developmental model based on land reforms and democratic decentralisation. This was done to gain support from the poor rural population, who made up 74% of the population.

“Operation Barga,” which started in 1978, was the most important policy of this time. It gave tenure security to about 1.4 million sharecroppers (bargadars) and redistributed more than 1.1 million acres of land. This movement was mostly about class struggle. It wanted to break the power of old landlords and raise the status of the working classes to end the “agrarian impasse.” In this political talk, caste was often seen as a less important or fading identity than the more “progressive” identity of class.

Nonetheless, the scholarship of researchers like Dayabati Roy (2012), in the paper “Caste and Power: An Ethnography in West Bengal, India,” contends that this class-centric emphasis effectively muted the distinct issues related to caste. Roy's ethnographic study reveals that while the Left administration permitted the dominant class paradigm to eclipse communal affiliations, caste remained a marginal yet significant factor in rural mobilisation. The long-held belief that caste doesn't matter in Bengal has been challenged more and more as researchers have shown that the caste system hasn't gone away; it's just changed to fit the power dynamics of the political party and the Panchayat.

### **Caste Dynamics in Local Governance**

In rural West Bengal, caste is a basic organising principle, but it takes on different forms depending on the area’s history and politics. Dominant caste groups often have power over land, local markets, and political groups. These forms of social and economic power make it so that local governments, like the Gram Sansad, don’t all have the same amount of power. Economic weakness makes caste-based marginalisation of subaltern groups even worse. Dependence on powerful organisations for work, money, and social security stifles free speech and makes it harder for people to act politically on their own. Social norms also make it harder for people to get involved, especially women from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups. Exclusion operates not only through overt discrimination but also through subtle behaviours such as silence, intimidation, and the monopolisation of discourse.

### **Subaltern Participation: Between Presence and Voice**

A common idea in participatory government is the difference between being there in person and being involved in a meaningful way. People from marginalised communities can go to Gram Sansad meetings, but their input is often ignored, overlooked, or pushed to the side. People who can’t read or write, don’t know official language, or are afraid of social penalties are less likely to take part.

Women from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe backgrounds face heightened challenges due to the interplay of caste and patriarchy. Their participation is frequently enabled by male relatives or reduced to a superficial presence. Even when women express their opinions, their input may go unnoticed in conversations that are mostly made up of men. Nonetheless, instances of subaltern assertion—often supported by collective mobilisation or external assistance—exhibit the intrinsic democratic potential of the Gram Sansad.

**Empirical Examination of Involvement in Gram Sansads:** The effectiveness of the Gram Sansad as a platform for direct democracy is best evaluated through empirical data concerning meeting attendance and deliberative characteristics. The study “Participatory Practices in Rural Areas: A Study of Gram Panchayats in West Bengal” by Debabrata Samanta and Narayan Chandra Nayak (2013) looks at participation in 120 Gram Panchayats across 10 districts. The results show that people are “less and less” interested in these “invited spaces.”

The West Bengal Human Development Report backs up this trend. It shows that the average number of people who went to Gram Sansad meetings went down from 16% in 1997 to 12% in 2001, and then stayed around 15% by 2008. The research classifies general practitioners based on their attendance rates, revealing that approximately 46% of the examined units demonstrated low attendance (below 15%). There are many reasons why people aren’t participating, such as the Gram Panchayat’s failure to include members in real decision-making and the “unparalleled political affiliation” of voters who may feel disconnected from an organization that is seen as an extension of the ruling party.

**District-Level Attendance Statistics and Correlations:** The participation rates vary significantly across different districts, influenced by local socio-economic conditions and political mobilization. The following table summarizes attendance data from field reports in Jalpaiguri and Birbhum districts.

District	Study Site (GP / Area)	Average Attendance Rate	Women’s Attendance	Key Observations
Jalpaiguri	Turturikhanda & Garalbari	8.00% - 11.00%	~4.00% - 5.50%	Positive correlation with education and SHG membership.
Birbhum	Illambazar GP	7.00%	20.00% of attendees	Volatile political atmosphere; police presence often required.
Birbhum	Bahiri-Panchsowa GP	Data Unavailable	Not recorded	Only one meeting held in 2013-14; minimal citizen engagement.
Purba Medinipur	250 Households Survey	Varies by awareness	Varies	Attendance improved by landholding size and political affiliation.

The data shows a big difference between men and women, with women’s attendance often recorded at about half of men’s. In Jalpaiguri, women from SC and ST categories showed lower attendance than women from the general caste. This shows that the intersection of caste and gender creates two barriers to participation. Being a member of a Self-Help Group (SHG) makes it much more likely that women will go to and take part in meetings. This suggests that different types of organisations can help people get involved in formal governance.

### **Democracy, Caste, and the Institutional Paradox**

The data highlights an intrinsic paradox of grassroots democracy. The Gram Sansad is based on democratic ideas of inclusion and participation, but it works in a society that is based on hierarchy and exclusion. Participatory institutions often embrace and normalise caste affiliations rather than dismantling them.

This problem doesn’t just show that institutions have failed. Instead, it shows how hard it is to make procedural changes without also making big changes in society. Democratic deepening requires institutional frameworks and social conditions that enable

marginalised groups to exercise agency without fear or dependence. Participation should be seen as a social norm rather than just a way for institutions to work together.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment mandated that one-third of all seats and chairperson positions be designated for women, alongside reserved seats for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) members in proportion to their population. This policy was meant to make sure that people who are on the fringes of society have a strong voice in local government. The outcomes of these reservations in West Bengal have incited intense academic debate regarding whether these appointments represent genuine empowerment or mere “tokenism.”

The “tokenism” hypothesis suggests that local elites, often the spouses or relatives of female candidates, routinely choose designated candidates to act as proxies, while actual decision-making authority remains with traditional power-holders. Qualitative research in villages predominantly led by upper castes often indicates that female or lower-caste Pradhans lack autonomy and are subordinate to party leaders. Conversely, the “agency” argument, supported by econometric studies such as those by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004), asserts that reservations lead to policy decisions that better reflect the preferences of marginalised groups. In West Bengal, female Pradhans were demonstrated to allocate more resources to infrastructure related to water and roads—priorities frequently expressed by women—while investing less in non-formal education.

The move from the Left Front to the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in 2011 was a turning point in West Bengal’s political history. It led to a shift from policies based on class to policies based on caste. Mamata Banerjee’s government has increased reservation rights for OBCs, especially among Muslims, by adding 97 Muslim castes to the OBC lists of Categories A and B. This method marks a shift toward the “electoral consolidation of caste interests,” which was mostly missing during the Marxist period. Despite this change, “political gatekeeping” still makes it hard for subalterns to get involved. People in rural West Bengal often think of the Gram Panchayat as being in line with the political party in power. People who support the opposition may not go to meetings because they are afraid of violence or think that their concerns won’t be heard by a biased group. This means that the Gram Sansad is used for the “ceremonial administration of social tranquillity” instead of real conversation.

**Comparative Impact of SC/ST and Women’s Reservations:** The impact of reservations on the targeting of welfare programs and the provision of public goods varies significantly depending on the group for whom the seat is reserved.

Reservation Category	Impact on Investment and Targeting	Resource Allocation Trends
SC / ST Pradhan	14% greater investment in public goods for reserved villages.	10% higher share of public goods (water, sanitation) built specifically in SC/ST areas.
Female Pradhan	Increase in women’s meeting participation from 6.9% to 9.9%.	Improved targeting of IRDP credit; however, sometimes poorer targeting of employment grants.
Joint (SC/ST Women)	Mixed effects; improvement in village-average benefits.	Potential for deterioration in some dimensions of intra-village targeting due to multiple barriers.

The data suggests that SC reservations are particularly effective at correcting historical biases in resource allocation, where higher-level governments traditionally allocated fewer benefits to villages with high SC/ST populations. When the Pradhan position is reserved for an SC member, the village as a whole often sees a significant increase in per capita benefits, as well as improved targeting to female-headed households.

## Conclusion

This study has thoroughly examined caste dynamics and subaltern participation in the Gram Sansad of West Bengal. The Gram Sansad represents a notable democratic progression within India’s Panchayati Raj system; however, its transformative potential is constrained by entrenched socioeconomic frameworks. To get more people from lower castes involved, we need to do more than just change the way institutions are set up. We need to teach people about politics, get them involved in social movements, and keep fighting against caste-based power structures. Subsequent research incorporating meticulous fieldwork and comparative analysis would augment comprehension of the varied trajectories of grassroots democracy in India. The democratic potential of participatory institutions can only be fully realised through sustained engagement.

The study of Gram Sansads in West Bengal reveals a substantial discord between the legislative tenet of direct democracy and the sociological reality of caste and political power. The West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973 created a strong legal basis for decentralisation. However, the real practice of participation is heavily influenced by the Left Front’s class-neutral strategy in the past and the current shift toward identity-driven mobilisation. Subaltern participation in the Gram Sansad is limited by economic necessity, educational disparities, and the gatekeeping functions of political parties. Reservations for women and SC/ST individuals have significantly facilitated the redistribution of resources to marginalised communities; however, they have not entirely eliminated the entrenched systems of “elite capture” and patronage that characterise rural politics. The TMC era has made caste a more visible and important part of government. However, the basic “agrarian question” of land and labour still limits the opportunities for the subaltern in the “invited spaces” of local democracy. To empower the subaltern in the Gram Sansad, we need to do more than just include them in formal institutions. We also need to change the social and economic conditions that keep the rural poor dependent on traditional and political elites, like who owns land and who can go to school. The Gram Sansad can only become a real place for social justice and direct public sovereignty if these basic differences are fixed.

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