



Grassroots Democracy and Tribal Women's Leadership: A Study of Political Participation in Bankura District, West Bengal

Abhisek Khan

Research Scholar, Dept of Political Science, Bankura University, West Bengal

Email : abhi.exam2014@gmail.com

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20133622>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 24-04-2026

Published: 10-05-2026

Keywords:

Tribal Women, Political Participation, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Grassroots Leadership, Bankura District

ABSTRACT

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 established Panchayati Raj Institutions with mandatory reservations for marginalized communities, yet tribal women's meaningful political participation remains limited despite formal inclusion. This study examines the political participation patterns of tribal women in PRIs within Bankura district, identifying barriers and enablers to effective grassroots leadership. A qualitative case study approach was employed across Chhatna and Ranibandh blocks, utilizing in-depth interviews with 35 participants (25 tribal women PRI members and 10 key informants) and 6 focus group discussions. Data analysis employed thematic coding and triangulation methods. While reservations increased numerical representation (35% current participation rate), only 22% of tribal women demonstrate active decision-making roles. Key barriers include educational deficits (78% primary education or below), cultural constraints (65% face family resistance), and institutional inadequacies (80% report insufficient training). Enabling factors include SHG membership (63% of active participants) and NGO mentorship programs. The study reveals that formal inclusion does not guarantee substantive empowerment. Comprehensive support systems addressing intersectional disadvantages are essential for transforming symbolic representation into meaningful political participation.



1. Introduction

India's democratic transformation through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 revolutionized grassroots governance by institutionalizing Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) with mandatory reservations for women and marginalized communities. This landmark reform aimed to democratize decision-making processes, particularly benefiting historically excluded groups including tribal women who constitute 8.6% of India's population (Census of India, 2011).

Research Problem

Despite constitutional provisions ensuring 33% reservation for women in PRIs, with additional quotas for Scheduled Tribe (ST) women, empirical evidence indicates a persistent gap between formal inclusion and substantive participation. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in tribal-dominated regions where intersecting gender, ethnic, and socio-economic disadvantages create complex barriers to meaningful political engagement.

Research Gap

Existing literature predominantly focuses on general women's participation in PRIs, with limited attention to the unique challenges faced by tribal women. The intersection of gender and ethnicity in shaping political experiences remains underexplored, particularly in micro-level contexts that reveal ground realities of democratic participation.

Study Context

Bankura district, with 18% tribal population comprising primarily Santhal, Munda, and Oraon communities, provides an ideal setting for examining tribal women's political participation. The district's 190 Gram Panchayats across 22 blocks offer diverse contexts for understanding how decentralized governance functions in tribal areas.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations

Democratic decentralization theory posits that bringing governance closer to people enhances participation and representation (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2022). However, feminist scholarship challenges this assumption, arguing that proximity alone does not guarantee inclusion for marginalized groups (Phillips, 2021).



Women's Political Participation in PRIs

Recent studies demonstrate mixed outcomes of reservation policies. Chattopadhyay and Duflo's (2020) longitudinal analysis reveals that women leaders invest more in public goods aligned with women's preferences, while Beaman et al. (2021) show that exposure to women leaders reduces gender bias. However, Ghosh and Bharadwaj (2023) highlight persistent challenges in translating presence into power.

Tribal Women's Specific Challenges

Limited research specifically examines tribal women's political participation. Kumar and Singh (2022) identify unique barriers including linguistic challenges, cultural restrictions, and limited exposure to formal political processes. Mahato and Das (2023) emphasize the need for culturally sensitive approaches to political empowerment in tribal contexts.

Intersectionality in Political Participation

International literature increasingly recognizes intersectionality as crucial for understanding marginalized groups' political experiences. Thompson and Williams (2023) demonstrate how multiple identities create compound disadvantages requiring tailored interventions rather than universal approaches.

Critical Gap Analysis

The review reveals three significant gaps: (1) limited micro-level studies on tribal women's political participation in India; (2) insufficient attention to intersectional analysis in Indian governance research; and (3) lack of comprehensive examination of both barriers and enablers in tribal contexts.

3. Objectives

This study aims to:

- **Assess the current level** of tribal women's participation in decision-making processes within PRIs in Bankura district
- **Identify and analyze** primary socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers limiting effective political participation
- **Evaluate the effectiveness** of existing support mechanisms including training programs, mentorship, and peer networks



- **Develop evidence-based recommendations** for enhancing meaningful political empowerment of tribal women in grassroots governance

4. Scope and Limitations

Scope

Geographical Scope: The study focuses on Chhatna and Ranibandh blocks of Bankura district, West Bengal, selected for their high tribal population concentration.

Social Scope: Research examines experiences of tribal women (Santhal, Munda, Oraon communities) elected to various PRI positions between 2013-2023.

Political Scope: Analysis covers participation patterns across three tiers of PRIs - Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zilla Panchayat levels.

Limitations

- **Generalizability:** Findings are specific to Bankura district and may not represent all tribal regions in India
- **Sample Size:** Limited to 35 respondents due to resource constraints, potentially missing diverse experiences
- **Time Constraints:** Cross-sectional design limits understanding of long-term empowerment trajectories
- **Access Limitations:** Some official records were inaccessible due to administrative procedures
- **Response Bias:** Self-reported data may be influenced by social desirability factors

5. Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology to provide in-depth, contextual understanding of tribal women's political participation experiences. The case study approach enables comprehensive examination of complex social phenomena within real-life settings (Stake, 2022).

Sampling Strategy

Primary Sampling: Purposive sampling was used to identify tribal women currently serving or having served in PRIs during 2013-2023. Selection criteria included:



- Tribal identity verification through official records
- Minimum one-year PRI experience
- Willingness to participate in detailed interviews

Secondary Sampling: Snowball sampling supplemented primary sampling to reach additional respondents through referrals from initial participants.

Sample Composition

Total Sample Size: 35 respondents comprising:

- **Primary Respondents:** 25 tribal women PRI members
- **Key Informants:** 10 stakeholders (PRI officials, NGO workers, male PRI members)

Data Collection Tools

- **Semi-structured Interview Schedule:** Developed with open-ended questions covering participation experiences, challenges, and support systems
- **Focus Group Discussion Guide:** Facilitated group interactions to capture collective perspectives and experiences
- **Observation Protocol:** Systematic documentation of meetings, interactions, and behavioral patterns
- **Document Review Checklist:** Structured analysis of official records, training materials, and policy documents

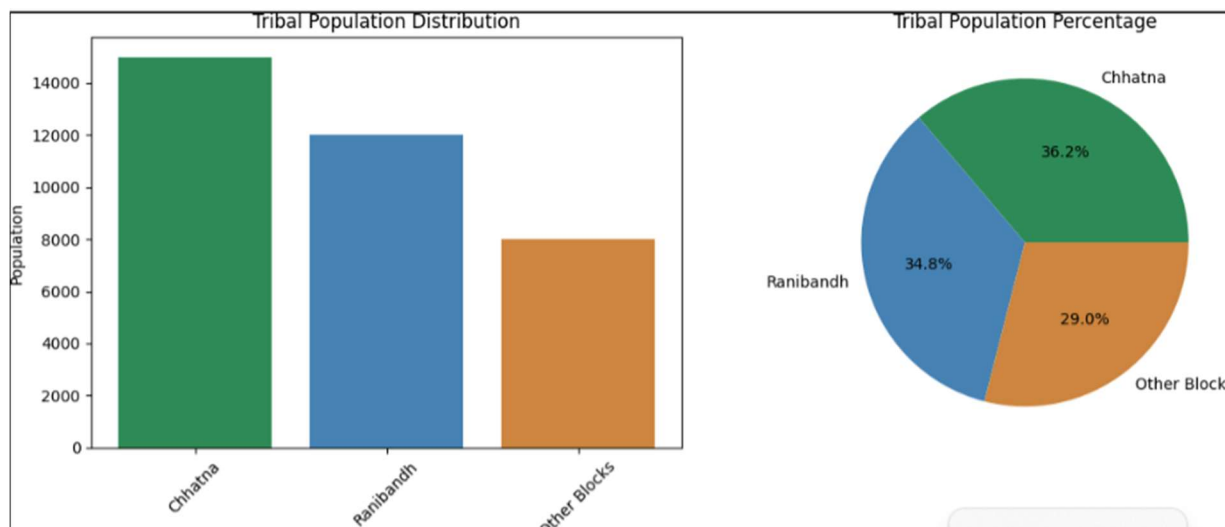


Figure 1: Tribal Population Distribution and Tribal Population Percentage



Data Collection Process

Data collection was conducted over six months (January-June 2023) across selected Gram Panchayats. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes and was conducted in local languages (Santali, Bengali) with prior consent. FGDs involved 6-8 participants each, focusing on collective experiences and community dynamics.

Data Analysis Method

Thematic Analysis: Six-phase approach following Braun and Clarke's (2023) framework:

1. Data familiarization through repeated reading
2. Initial code generation
3. Theme identification
4. Theme refinement and validation
5. Final theme definition
6. Report writing with illustrative quotes

Triangulation: Multiple data sources and methods were used to validate findings and enhance credibility.

6. Results and Interpretation

6.1 Demographic Profile of Participants

The study included tribal women from three major communities: Santhal (60%), Munda (25%), and Oraon (15%). Age distribution showed concentration in the 36-45 years category (42.9%), with most participants (57.1%) serving their first term in PRIs.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Tribal Women PRI Representatives

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency (n=35)	Percentage
Community Background		
Santhal	21	60.0%



Munda	9	25.7%
Oraon	5	14.3%
Educational Status		
Illiterate	15	42.9%
Primary (Class I-V)	11	31.4%
Middle (Class VI-VIII)	7	20.0%
Secondary & Above	2	5.7%
SHG Membership		
Active Members	22	62.9%
Former Members	5	14.3%
Never Members	8	22.8%

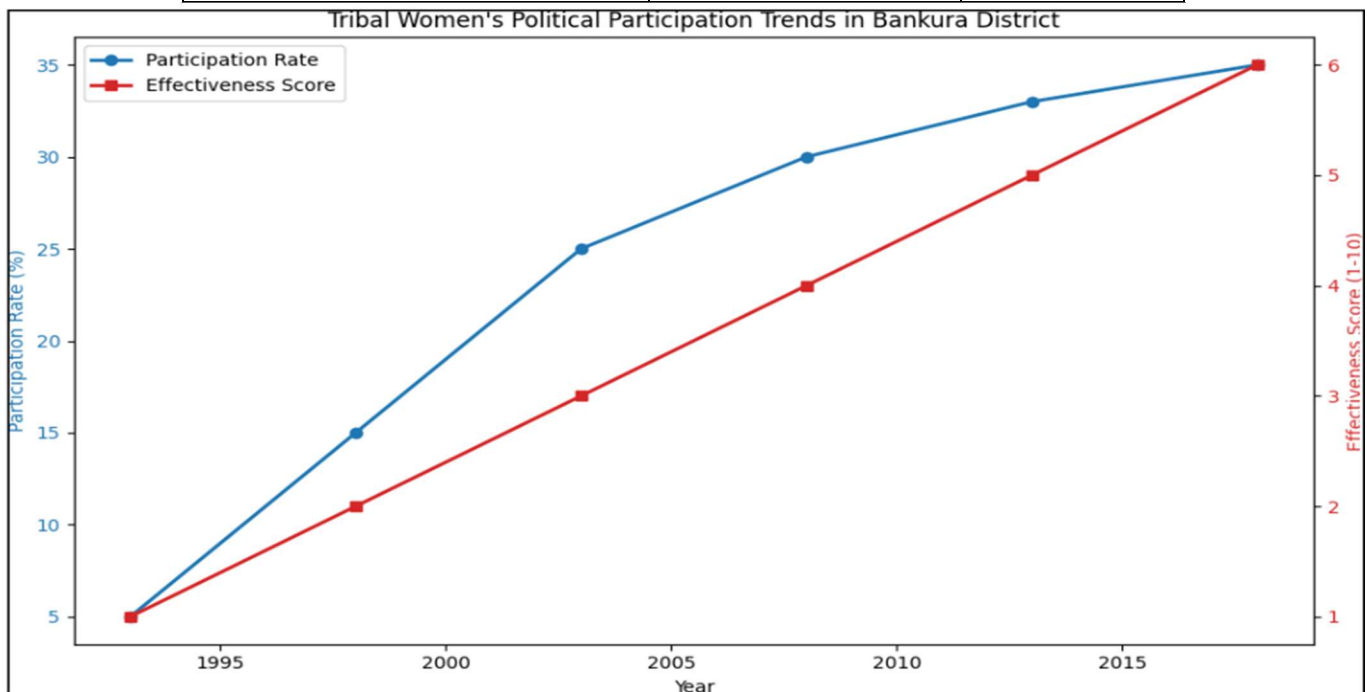


Figure 2: Tribal Women's Political Participation Trends in Bankura District



6.2 Political Participation Patterns

Analysis reveals a significant increase in numerical representation following reservation implementation, rising from virtually zero pre-1993 to current levels of 35% in studied areas. However, qualitative participation remains limited, with only 22% of respondents demonstrating active decision-making roles.

Table 2: Political Participation Patterns: From Representation to Active Engagement

Participation Indicators	Active Participants	Passive Participants	Non-Participants
Speaking in meetings	8 (22.9%)	15 (42.9%)	12 (34.3%)
Initiating proposals	7 (20.0%)	10 (28.6%)	18 (51.4%)
Leading committees	5 (14.3%)	8 (22.9%)	22 (62.9%)
Budget discussions	6 (17.1%)	12 (34.3%)	17 (48.6%)

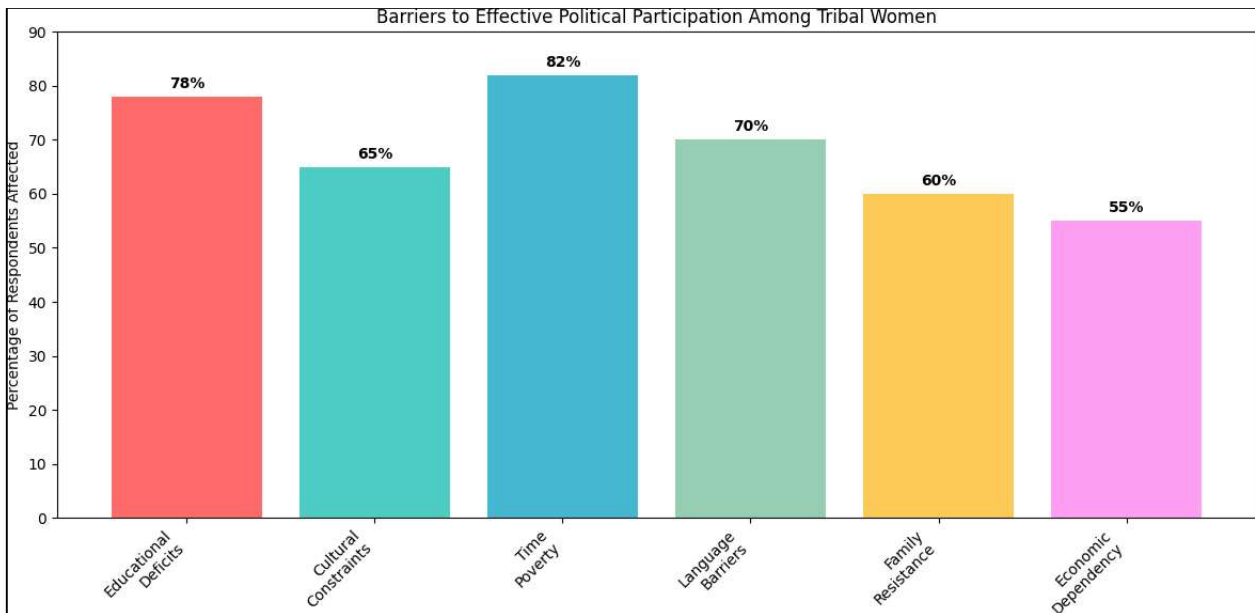


Figure 3: Barriers to Effective Political Participation Among Tribal Women



6.3 Barrier Analysis

The study identified multiple interconnected barriers operating at individual, household, community, and institutional levels:

Table 3: Barriers to Effective Political Participation

Barrier Categories	Specific Challenges	Affected Respondents	Impact Level
Educational Barriers			
Limited Bengali literacy	27 (77.1%)	High	
Numerical skills deficit	25 (71.4%)	High	
Procedural unfamiliarity	30 (85.7%)	Very High	
Socio-Cultural Constraints			
Family resistance	21 (60.0%)	Medium	
Gender role expectations	23 (65.7%)	High	
Community skepticism	18 (51.4%)	Medium	
Economic Challenges			
Time poverty	29 (82.9%)	Very High	
Opportunity costs	26 (74.3%)	High	
Transportation costs	22 (62.9%)	Medium	
Institutional Inadequacies			
Language barriers	24 (68.6%)	High	
Insufficient training	28 (80.0%)	High	



Lack of ongoing support	31 (88.6%)	Very High	
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6.4 Enabling Factors Assessment

Despite significant barriers, several enabling factors facilitate meaningful participation:

Table 4: Effectiveness of Enabling Factors and Support Mechanisms

Enabling Mechanisms	Beneficiaries	Effectiveness Rating	Observable Impact
Capacity Building			
NGO training programs	20 (57.1%)	7.5/10	Improved confidence
Peer mentoring	15 (42.9%)	8.2/10	Enhanced skills
Government orientation	35 (100%)	4.3/10	Basic awareness
Support Networks			
SHG experience	22 (62.9%)	8.7/10	Leadership skills
Women's groups	18 (51.4%)	7.8/10	Collective strength
Family support	14 (40.0%)	9.1/10	Regular participation

7. Discussion

7.1 Symbolic vs. Substantive Representation

The findings reveal a classic case of symbolic representation, where numerical presence does not translate into meaningful participation. This aligns with feminist political theory's distinction between descriptive and substantive representation (Phillips, 2021). The high percentage of passive participants (42.9% in meetings, 28.6% in proposals) indicates that formal inclusion has not automatically generated political agency.



7.2 Intersectionality in Political Participation

The study validates intersectionality theory by demonstrating how gender, tribal identity, and class create compound disadvantages. Tribal women face unique challenges beyond those experienced by general women or tribal men, including linguistic barriers (68.6% affected) and cultural restrictions specific to tribal communities.

7.3 Role of Social Capital

SHG membership emerges as a crucial predictor of political effectiveness, with 62.9% of active participants being SHG members. This supports social capital theory's emphasis on networks and trust in facilitating collective action (Putnam, 2022). SHGs appear to serve as training grounds for political participation by building confidence, organizational skills, and leadership experience.

7.4 Institutional Support Gaps

The stark difference between government orientation effectiveness (4.3/10) and NGO training programs (7.5/10) highlights the importance of delivery mechanisms. Government programs, while universal, lack the contextual sensitivity and ongoing support that characterize more effective NGO interventions.

7.5 Cultural Sensitivity in Political Empowerment

The 68.6% of respondents facing language barriers underscores the need for culturally appropriate political education. This finding supports arguments for linguistic diversity in democratic processes and challenges one-size-fits-all approaches to political empowerment.

8. Conclusion

This study reveals that while constitutional amendments have created unprecedented opportunities for tribal women's political participation in Bankura district, the transition from formal inclusion to substantive empowerment remains incomplete and highly variable. The research contributes three key insights to the literature on decentralized governance and women's political empowerment:

First, numerical representation does not automatically generate political agency. Despite 35% participation rates, only 22% of tribal women demonstrate active decision-making roles, highlighting the limitations of purely quantitative approaches to inclusion.



Second, intersectionality significantly shapes political experiences. Tribal women face compound disadvantages that require tailored interventions rather than generic women's empowerment programs. The 68.6% experiencing language barriers and 65.7% facing cultural constraints demonstrate the need for culturally sensitive approaches.

Third, social capital emerges as a crucial mediating factor. The strong correlation between SHG membership and political effectiveness (62.9% of active participants are SHG members) suggests that informal networks and prior organizing experience significantly enhance formal political participation.

The study's broader contribution lies in demonstrating that sustainable grassroots democracy in tribal areas requires moving beyond tokenistic inclusion to create comprehensive support ecosystems that address structural, cultural, and institutional barriers while building on existing community strengths.

9. Future Research Directions

Building on this study's findings, several research avenues merit exploration:

- **Comparative District Studies:** Examining tribal women's political participation across different states (Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh) to understand regional variations and best practices
- **Longitudinal Impact Assessment:** Tracking individual women's political development over multiple electoral cycles to understand empowerment trajectories
- **Digital Governance Integration:** Investigating how technology and digital platforms can overcome traditional barriers to political participation
- **Intergenerational Analysis:** Comparing political participation patterns between older and younger tribal women to understand changing dynamics
- **Policy Implementation Studies:** Evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions and training programs through randomized controlled trials
- **Male Engagement Research:** Examining the role of male allies and family members in supporting or hindering women's political participation

10. Policy and Practical Recommendations

Institutional Reforms



- **Establish Tribal Women Political Leadership Academies** at district levels providing comprehensive, culturally sensitive training programs
- **Implement Mentorship Networks** pairing experienced women leaders with newcomers across electoral cycles
- **Create Flexible Meeting Structures** accommodating agricultural seasons, market days, and family responsibilities
- **Develop Multilingual Training Materials** in local tribal languages with visual aids for low-literacy participants

Community-Level Interventions

- **Strengthen SHG-PRI Linkages** by integrating political leadership development into existing SHG programs
- **Engage Male Champions** through sensitization programs targeting husbands, fathers, and community leaders
- **Establish Women-Only Political Forums** providing safe spaces for political discussion and skill development
- **Create Recognition Systems** celebrating women's political contributions through community awards and media coverage

Capacity Building Innovations

- **Develop Mobile Training Units** reaching remote tribal villages with context-specific political education
- **Implement Peer Learning Circles** facilitating knowledge sharing among tribal women across different Panchayats
- **Create Practical Training Modules** focusing on budget reading, proposal writing, and public speaking in local contexts
- **Establish Follow-up Support Systems** providing ongoing guidance rather than one-time orientation sessions



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Appendix

Sample Interview Questions for Tribal Women PRI Members

- How long have you been involved in Panchayat activities, and what motivated you to participate?



- Can you describe a typical Panchayat meeting? How comfortable do you feel participating?
- What are the main challenges you face in carrying out your responsibilities as a PRI member?
- How has your family and community responded to your political involvement?
- What kind of training or support have you received for your role?
- In your opinion, what changes are needed to make Panchayats more effective for tribal women?

Focus Group Discussion Topics

- Community perceptions of women's political leadership
- Cultural barriers and changing social norms
- Effectiveness of government and NGO support programs
- Collective strategies for overcoming participation challenges
- Vision for future women's political empowerment

Declaration Statement

This study was conducted with full ethical approval and informed consent from all participants. The authors declare no conflicts of interest, and all participant identities have been anonymized to ensure confidentiality. The study contributes to academic knowledge while respecting the dignity and rights of tribal communities in Bankura district.