# Breaking Barriers: Understanding the Challenges of Women's Participation in Rural Local Self-Governance in the Indian State of Tripura

**Rupak Biswas**

Research Scholar,
Department of Political Science,
MBB University, Agartala & Assistant Professor,
Department of Public Administration,
Assam Don Bosco University (Assam, India)
E-mail: rupakbiswas320@gmail.com

*Abstract:*

*This study highlights the barriers to women's participation in the rural local self-governanceinstitutions in the state of Tripura. Though progress has been made through statutory efforts regarding gender equality, women's active presence in grassroots-level political institutions is still very uneven, especially in rural areas. Thus, this study aims to explore the specific challenges faced by women in participation in the Gram Panchayat proceedings while considering their capacity to contribute to inclusive governance. The present study highlights the need forcapacity-building initiatives for women leaders and the promotion of gender-inclusive governance practices at all levels. By adopting a comprehensive strategy that integrates policy reforms, community education, and leadership training, to address existing barriers and pave the way for more equitable representation in rural self-governancein Tripura.*

*Keywords:* *Women's Participation, Women Empowerment, Inclusiveness Governance, Rural Development*

**Introduction:**

Local self-government systems play a vital role in decentralizing governance, ensuring that decision-making processes are more accessible to citizens, and promoting a more inclusive approach to development. In rural areas, where a significant portion of the population resides, the effective participation of women in local governance is particularly crucial. Participation in decision and policymaking is important because the absence of participation leads to a disconnection between people's needs and the service provided (Guha & Chakrabarti, 2019).

Women's involvement in Gram Panchayats can foster inclusive, gender-sensitive decision-making and ensure that development policies address the specific needs of women and marginalized

groups. However, despite advances in rural governance in India through statutory legislation, the participation of women remained nominal and almost ineffective (Ghosh, B. N, 2008). Hence, meaningful participation of women in these systems remains a significant challenge, particularly in states like Tripura. Tripura, located in India's northeastern region, has made considerable progress in the area of rural development. Yet, gender-based disparities persist in women's participation in local self-governance (Tseer, et al. 2024). While the state has implemented various initiatives aimed at empowering women in political processes, women in rural areas continue to face significant barriers to accessing and engaging with local governance structures. These challenges are particularly pronounced in underdeveloped villages such as Chantail, located in the Unakoti District. Chantail village, approximately 4 km from the district headquarters of Kailashahar, offers both a locational advantage and natural beauty, yet it grapples with multiple developmental challenges. With a total population of 4,476 residing in six wards as per the 2020-2021 government data, the village faces systemic issues such as poverty. The village's governance is further weakened by weak political leadership and the poor implementation of rural development programs, which collectively hinder progress. These challenges are compounded for women, who face additional socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers to participating fully in local governance processes. This article examines the specific barriers that women in rural Tripura, particularly in Chantail village, face in engaging with the governance of Gram Panchayat. It explores the socio-political dynamics that hinder women's participation and offers suggestions for addressing these barriers. Understanding the lived experiences of women in rural governance contexts is critical to identifying strategies that can enhance their participation, foster gender-sensitive governance, and promote sustainable development at the grassroots level.

**Literature Review and Research Gap:**

Several research papers on Women's Participation in Local Self-Governance highlighted the multifaceted barriers hindering women's participation in Gram Panchayats across India. These barriers are-

Adhikari (2023) found that middle-aged women are more actively involved in local politics in Tripura's Gram Panchayats. The study highlighted the effectiveness of the reservation system in facilitating political empowerment for weaker sections of society. However, it also exposed challenges faced by Women Elected Representatives (WERs), including gender discrimination and lack of decision-making power. The author emphasized the need for continuous training, awareness programs, and structural changes to empower women in Panchayati Raj Institutions effectively. Pandey (n.d) revealed that most WERs are middle-aged, mature women with low educational attainment. The study identified several constraints faced by WERs, including low education, balancing household chores with official responsibilities, caste discrimination, and traditions and

customs.

Mishra & Mishra (2016) highlighted that women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is often influenced by family and community dynamics, with many women acting as proxies for male family members. The study also noted the complex governance landscape created by the coexistence of traditional village institutions and modern PRIs. Zende (2011) has identified restraining factors for Dalit women's participation, including caste-based patriarchal structures, village politics, and failures in state machinery and legal tools. He proposed intervention strategies including effective training, policy-level changes, and mass sensitization campaigns to enhance Dalit women's participation in local governance.

Sukumaran & Lingaganesan (n.d) in their study found that the educational level of women council members significantly influenced their power utilization, with more educated members focusing on development works and village sanitation. Narayanan (2003) demonstrated how women leaders often prioritize social development issues like health, sanitation, and education, which are sometimes overlooked by male counterparts. Riang et al. (2024) revealed that women representatives are taking proactive steps to combat alcohol and drug issues in their communities, demonstrating the potential of women's empowerment and participation in local governance to effect meaningful change.

While these studies provide valuable insights into women's participation in local self-governance across various Indian states, there is a lack of specific focus on the unique challenges faced by women in rural Tripura's Gram Panchayats in the present context. Additionally, there is a need for research that explores targeted policies and strategies tailored to the socio-cultural context of Tripura to enhance women's active participation in decision-making processes.

**Objectives:**

1) To identify the barriers that women face in actively engaging in rural local self-government institutions like Gram Panchayats and

2) To suggest policies and strategies for effective women's participation in the governance of gram panchayat

**Research Questions:**

1) What are the key socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers that prevent women from fully engaging in the governance of Gram Panchayats in rural Tripura?

2) How can targeted policies and strategies be designed to overcome these barriers and enhance women's active participation in the decision-making processes of Gram Panchayats?

**Research Methodology:**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the challenges faced by women in their participation in Gram Panchayats in Tripura. A purposive sampling technique is employed to

select key respondents. The study focuses on two primary groups: elected women representatives and women residents of Gram Panchayats, to gain insights into their challenges and experiences. A total of 40 respondents were interviewed through semi-structured interviews.

**Data Collection Methods:**

Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with elected women representatives and women from the Gram Panchayat area to explore their unique challenges and perspectives on political participation.

**Data Analysis:**

Thematic analysis was utilized to categorize the responses into key themes, including sociocultural barriers, economic dependency, and institutional constraints.

Ethical Considerations: Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study.

**Scope and Limitations**:

The study is geographically focused on Chantail Gram Panchayats in Tripura, which may not fully represent the diversity of women's participation across Northeast India.

**Importance of Women's Participation in Local Self-Governments:**

Women's participation is essential to the success of the local self-government. The participation of women in rural local self-government can contribute to long-term development. Women frequently have distinct perspectives on development issues, such as health, education, and infrastructure, which can help in well-rounded policy formulation and execution. By incorporating women, the local government may guarantee that programs address women's specific needs and ambitions, resulting in more effective and sustainable outcomes.
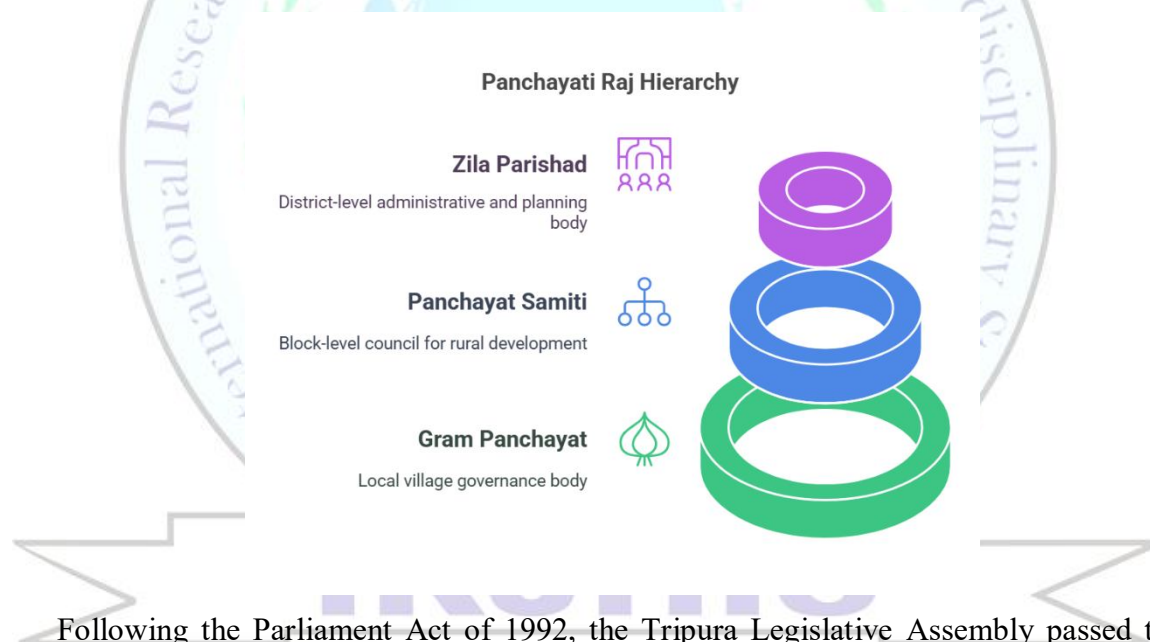
Women's engagement in local self-government can substantially contribute to achieving social fairness. Women leaders, as representatives of their communities, are more sensitive to the concerns of marginalized groups such as women, children, and the elderly. Their active participation can lead to legislation that promotes social inclusion and uplifts of underprivileged populations. Local self-government organizations are critical platforms for democratic participation at the grassroots level. Increasing women's participation can strengthen governance by diversifying leadership, encouraging collaborative decision-making, and increasing transparency and accountability. A more diversified leadership style can bring new viewpoints and unique solutions to the table.

**Development of Rural Local Self-government Institution in Tripura:**

The system of local governments or Panchayats has been an essential part of India's village administration since times immemorial. However, little is known about the structure, status, power, election, and finance of these bodies. However, over time, many developments occurred during

different periods in the local government system. In particular, after India's independence, many committees were set up to study issues related to rural development in India, and these committees suggested some significant recommendations. In 1957, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee suggested the scheme of 'democratic decentralization' which had become known as the Panchayati Raj, and recommended setting up a three-tier Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI). In the year 1986, the L.M Singhvi committee recommended giving the recognition of constitutional status to the PRI. As per the recommendations of various committees, the government under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi introduced the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha in 1989, but it could not be passed in Rajya Sabha. Later, Prime Minister P.V Narasimha Rao considered the matter of bringing PRI within the ambit of the Indian Constitution, and finally, the Parliament of India constitutionalized the PRI through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992. This came into force on April 24, 1993. This act mandated the representation of at least one-third of women through election (Siddaling, R. n.d).

This Act also provided for the creation of the three-tier system of the Panchayati Raj Institution-Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zila Parishad at the district level.



Following the Parliament Act of 1992, the Tripura Legislative Assembly passed the 1993 Tripura Panchayat Act. The Act contained a provision for establishing a Gram Panchayat for rural areas in Tripura outside the Sixth Schedule Area. It is entrusted with the duties and responsibilities of undertaking development programs at the grassroots level.
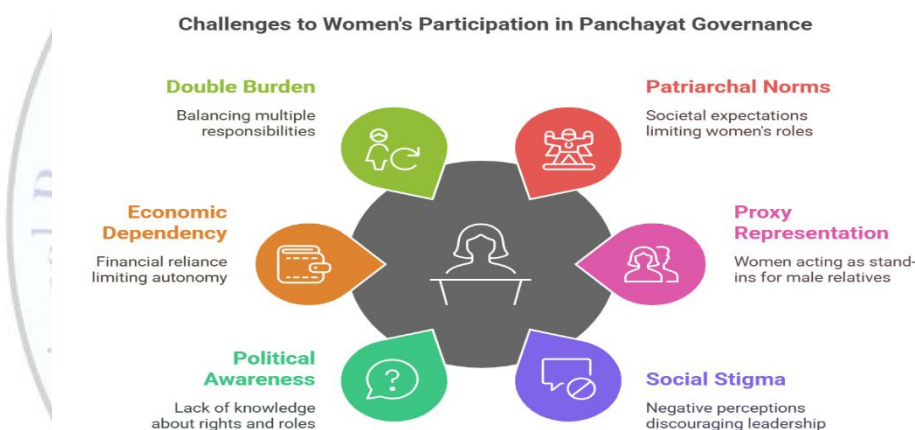
**Chantail Gram Panchayat:**

According to the 2011 census, Tripura has a total population of (3673917) approximately 36.74 lakhs. In the Unakoti District, 91 villages include gram panchayats and village committees. Chantail village is one of the underdeveloped villages in Unakoti District. It is approximately 4 km

from the district headquarters of Kailashahar. Presently, Chantail Gram Panchayat is divided into six wards for convenience of governance. As per the 2020-2021 government data, the total population residing in these six wards of this village is 4476. The village is blessed with a locational advantage at a distance of just 4 km from the district headquarters and with natural beauty and greenery. However, it is struggling with various problems. The major barriers to the development of Chantail village include weak political leaders, corruption, and poor implementation of rural development programs.

## Key Challenges to Women's Participation in Panchayat Governance: Reflection from the Chantail Gram Panchayat:

Based on the interview conducted from September to December 2023, involving 60 women (10 women from each ward), identified significant barriers to their active participation in the governance of the Gram Panchayat in Chantail. These challenges reflect the intersection of socio-cultural, economic, political, and structural constraints that limit women's involvement in grassroots democratic processes.



Challenges to Women's Participation in Panchayat Governance

**Double Burden** — Balancing multiple responsibilities

**Patriarchal Norms** — Societal expectations limiting women's roles

**Economic Dependency** — Financial reliance limiting autonomy

**Proxy Representation** — Women acting as stand-ins for male relatives

**Political Awareness** — Lack of knowledge about rights and roles

**Social Stigma** — Negative perceptions discouraging leadership

**Socio-Cultural Barriers –**

One of the primary barriers identified is patriarchal societal norms, where deeply ingrained gender roles discourage women from engaging in political decision-making. In many cases, women are expected to prioritize household duties over participating in public life, restricting their ability to be active in governance.

Another significant issue is proxy representation, where women elected as representatives often serve as stand-ins for male relatives. In such cases, decision-making is primarily in the hands of husbands or other male family members, undermining the autonomy and authority of female representatives.

Furthermore, the study revealed that social stigma and resistance act as deterrents for women aspiring to leadership positions. Women often face resistance from their families and communities, with negative social perceptions that discourage them from asserting their political rights or pursuing

leadership roles.

## Political and Institutional Barriers –

The lack of political awareness and training is another key challenge. Many women, particularly in rural areas, are unaware of their rights and responsibilities within governance frameworks. The absence of structured training programs further hampers their ability to participate effectively, leaving them unprepared to engage in decision-making processes.

Moreover, the male-dominated political environment is a significant constraint. Local governance structures, including political parties, are largely male-dominated, creating an atmosphere where women feel marginalized and excluded from leadership roles. This discourages women from pursuing political careers or engaging meaningfully in decision-making.

## Economic and Practical Barriers –

Economic dependency is a major hindrance to women's participation. Many women remain financially reliant on male family members, such as husbands or fathers. This dependency limits their autonomy and makes it difficult for them to engage in political activities or contribute financially to campaigns, further hindering their involvement in governance.

Additionally, the double burden of household chores, child-rearing, and agricultural work leaves rural women with little time or energy to engage in political activities. The lack of support systems, such as childcare or household assistance, exacerbates this challenge and contributes to their limited participation in governance.

## Institutional Barriers –

Finally, the ineffective implementation of gender-responsive policies remains a critical barrier. While policies exist to promote women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions, their implementation is often weak and lacks robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms. This failure to enforce policies effectively means that women's rights are not always upheld, undermining the potential for their full participation in governance.

## Recommendations:

To enhance women's participation in Gram Panchayat governance in Tripura, several policy measures and interventions are proposed, addressing both systemic and individual barriers that limit women's engagement in political leadership.

First, gender sensitization programs should be conducted at the community level to challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender equality in governance. Such programs will raise awareness about the importance of women's involvement in decision-making processes and help in breaking down social and cultural barriers that restrict their participation.

Second, capacity-building initiatives are essential to equip elected women representatives with the necessary skills and knowledge. Organizing training programs focused on leadership,

governance, and legal rights will enhance their ability to effectively represent their communities and make informed decisions.

Third, economic empowerment plays a crucial role in enabling women to become more independent and confident in political participation. Providing financial support and livelihood programs can help women achieve economic stability, which will further support their active involvement in politics and governance.

Fourth, to prevent proxy representation, there is a need to strengthen monitoring mechanisms. These mechanisms will ensure that male relatives do not control the decision-making process of elected women representatives, thereby ensuring that women have a genuine voice in governance.

Fifth, improving education and skill development for women is critical in enhancing their decision-making capabilities. Increased access to education and skills training will build women's confidence and allow them to engage more effectively in leadership roles within the Panchayat system.

Sixth, establishing women's support networks is vital to provide a space for peer learning and mutual support. Self-help groups and women's collectives can be effective platforms for women to exchange experiences, gain confidence, and encourage one another in their governance roles.

Seventh, encouraging male allyship is necessary for creating an inclusive and supportive governance environment. Involving men in gender sensitization programs will foster greater understanding and cooperation between genders, facilitating a more collaborative approach to governance.

Eighth, strengthening gender-responsive policies is critical to ensuring effective implementation of reservation policies and accountability mechanisms within Panchayati Raj Institutions. These policies will ensure that women are adequately represented and that their participation in governance is actively supported.

Finally, to alleviate the burden on women, it is important to focus on reducing household responsibilities. Promoting shared household duties and providing childcare facilities will allow women to dedicate more time and energy to their governance roles.

By implementing these measures, Tripura can create a more supportive and inclusive environment that enables women to actively contribute to Gram Panchayat governance, thereby strengthening local democracy and improving the representation of women in political processes.

**Policy implications:**

Enhancing women's participation in local governance is not just a matter of gender equality but a pathway to achieving comprehensive development, sustainable governance, and a more just society. To ensure a better and more inclusive future for Tripura, it is crucial to focus on encouraging women's active involvement in local administration. This calls for the enactment of supportive laws,

capacity-building initiatives for women leaders, and the promotion of gender-inclusive governance practices at all levels. By adopting a comprehensive strategy that integrates policy reforms, community education, and leadership training, we can address existing barriers and pave the way for more equitable representation in rural self-governance.

**Conclusion and Future Directions of Research:**

The participation of women in Gram Panchayats in Tripura is still significantly hindered by socio-cultural barriers, economic dependence, and institutional challenges. Despite existing policy frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality in local governance, their weak implementation and limited awareness among the communities exacerbate these issues. Consequently, gender-responsive policies need stronger enforcement mechanisms, and greater awareness is essential to empower women to fully engage in the democratic process.

For understanding more comprehensively the challenges of women's participation, there are several key research areas needs to explore. First, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of current gender-responsive policies in Panchayati Raj Institutions, identifying gaps in implementation and assessing their real-world impact on women's participation. Comparative studies across different states in Northeast India would provide valuable insights into regional variations and highlight best practices for overcoming barriers to women's involvement in local governance. Moreover, examining the role of digital literacy and technology-based interventions offers a promising avenue for research on how these tools can enhance women's empowerment in rural governance settings.

Expanding the geographical scope of future studies to encompass multiple Northeast Indian states, and employing quantitative surveys alongside qualitative methods, would further enrich our understanding of the issue. Research could also focus on assessing the long-term effects of recent policy interventions on women's participation in local governance, particularly in light of changing social and political landscapes. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach that includes policymakers, civil society organizations, and grassroots movements. A collective effort is crucial to foster an inclusive governance system where women are not only able to participate but can also exercise their democratic rights fully.

**References:**

1) Adhikari, I. (2023). Panchayati Raj Institution In Tripura: Role of Women with reference to Gram Panchayat. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research.

2) Ghosh, B. N. (2008). *Women in Governance in Tripura*. Concept Publishing Company.

3) Guha, J., & Chakrabarti, B. (2019). Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through decentralization and the role of local governments: A systematic review. *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, (22), 1-21.

4) Mishra, A., & Mishra, D. K. (2016). Gender, ethnicity, and grassroots governance in

Arunachal Pradesh, India. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, *22*(2), 147-164.

5) Narayanan, Y. (2003). Women aiding sustainability in local self-governance in India. In *International Sustainability Conference*.

6) Pandey, R. Women's Leadership: Towards Gender Mainstreaming in Local Self-Governance Institutions.

7) Riang, S., Pathak, P., Kaur, S., Kaur, R., Yadav, D., & Narayan, S. (2024). Empowering Women to Combat Drug and Alcohol Issues through Participation in Local Self-Governance: A Study.

8) Siddaling, R. (n.d) *Women and Political Awareness: A Sociological Study of Representatives of Local Self Government*. Lulu. com.

9) Sukumaran, N., & Lingaganesan, C. (n.d), Local Self Government and Women Empowerment: A Sociological Analysis. *Small*, *155*, 51-66.

10) Tseer, T., Suaka, D. Y., & Awinpoka Akurugu, C. (2024). Unveiling Inequalities: Gender-Based Discriminatory Practices and Women's Political Engagement in Northern Ghana. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 1-13.

11) Zende, S. (2011). Process Of Active Political Participation and Empowerment of Dalit Women Participating in Local Self Governance in Maharashtra, India An Exemplary Of Inclusive Grassroots Democracy.