



## Women's Participation in West Bengal Politics : A Comparative Analysis of the Left Era and the Trinamool Congress Era

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### Abstract:

*This research paper presents a comparative analysis of women's political participation in West Bengal during two distinct political eras: the Left Front regime (1977–2011) and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) administration (2011–present). Historically, the Left Front laid the foundation for women's mobilization through its cadre-based organizational structure and the implementation of 33% reservation in Panchayats in 1993. However, women's roles remained largely confined to party discipline and grassroots activism, with limited representation in top-tier decision-making bodies.*

*In contrast, the TMC era, led by Mamata Banerjee, shifted the paradigm toward a 'charismatic and beneficiary-oriented' model. By increasing Panchayat reservation to 50% and launching direct-benefit schemes like Lakshmir Bhandar and Kanyashree, the TMC has successfully cultivated a distinct 'women's vote bank.' This period is marked by higher visibility of women in parliamentary politics and greater financial agency. Despite these advancements, both regimes face persistent challenges such as 'proxy politics', gendered political violence, and the 'glass ceiling' within party hierarchies. The study concludes that while the Left Front provided the structural base for political socialization, the TMC transformed women into a decisive and independent political force in West Bengal.*

**Keywords:** *Women's Political Participation, West Bengal Politics, Left Front vs. Trinamool Congress, Panchayati Raj Reservation, Gendered Populism, Empowerment and Proxy Politics.*

### 1. Introduction:

In the long history of Indian politics, West Bengal occupies a unique and highly significant position. From the armed movements against the British to the formation of a post-colonial democratic structure, politics in Bengal has consistently been a carrier of progressive ideas. However, alongside this progressiveness, a fundamental question has always persisted: to what extent has women's participation in mainstream politics and policy-making been effective? Although the Constitution of India guarantees equal rights for women, breaking through the walls of a male-dominated political culture remains an ongoing process (Basu, 2010).

In West Bengal, two major political eras or "zamana" can be identified—one being the extensive Left Front Era from 1977 to 2011, and the other being the Trinamool Congress Era from 2011 to the present. This paper presents a comparative analysis of women's political empowerment under these two distinct political frameworks.

Historically, the roots of women's participation in West Bengal politics lie in the Tebhaga Movement and later the food movements. The core principle of the Leftist ideology emphasized class struggle, often prioritizing class inequality over gender inequality. Consequently, at the beginning of the Left Front era, women's entry into politics was primarily cadre-based and strictly adherent to party discipline (Sen, 1989). In a revolutionary step, the Left Front government implemented 33% reservation for women in Panchayats through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1993. As a result, thousands of women entered rural governance as elected representatives for the first time. However, researchers have noted that this participation was often affected by "proxy politics," where women held official positions, but real power was exercised by their husbands or other male family members (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

In contrast, the rise of the Trinamool Congress under Mamata Banerjee in 2011 brought a new dimension to politics in Bengal. This was not merely a change of government, but a transformation of political culture led by a woman leader. During the Trinamool era, women's participation was no longer limited to following party directives; it became a powerful element of vote-bank and identity-based politics. The Mamata Banerjee government increased women's reservation in Panchayats to 50% (Government of West Bengal, 2012). A distinctive feature of the Trinamool era is the recognition of women not just as voters, but as a politically conscious and independent social group. This is reflected in programs such as Kanyashree, Rupashree, and Lakshmi Bhandar, which directly involve women with the government and enhance their bargaining power in political decision-making (Bhattacharyya, 2016).

A fundamental theoretical difference between the Left and Trinamool eras is evident. Women's politics during the Left era was mass-organization centric, where women were mobilized through the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). The emphasis was on the party structure rather than individual leadership. In contrast, in the Trinamool era, women's politics relies more on charismatic leadership, with Mamata Banerjee herself emerging as the primary symbol of women's empowerment (Nielsen, 2021).

The primary aim of this paper is to examine both the administrative successes and limitations of these eras. During the Left Front era, did women merely hold positions in number only, or did they exercise real influence? And in the Trinamool era, is the surge in women's participation merely driven by government subsidies and party loyalty? A comparative discussion of these two periods will help us understand the extent to which women have been established as active political actors in West Bengal politics.

The theoretical framework of this study emphasizes both the Politics of Presence and the Politics of Outcomes. Phillips (1995) argues that mere representation is not sufficient; what matters is the extent to which that representation influences policy-making. Using this criterion, we will evaluate the differences between the Left Front and Trinamool eras. Subsequent sections will provide a detailed discussion of structural changes, legislative initiatives, and social impacts during these two political periods.

## **2. Women's Position During the Left Front Era (1977–2011): Organizational Strength and Structural Limitations**

The rise of the Left Front to power in West Bengal in 1977 marked the beginning of a long-lasting chapter in Indian politics. While leftist parties, guided by Marxist-Leninist ideology, theoretically advocated gender equality and women's emancipation, in practice class solidarity often took precedence. Women's political participation during these 34 years of Left rule can be analyzed along three main dimensions: the role of mass organizations, empowerment at the grassroots through the Panchayati Raj system, and the patriarchal structure of party leadership.

The primary vehicle for politically mobilizing women under the Left was the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). This organization was not merely a branch of the CPI(M); it served as a strong platform for rural and semi-urban women to assert their rights. Membership of AIDWA grew significantly

during the 1980s. Historian Tanika Sarkar (1991) notes that the Left succeeded in transforming women from the image of “housewives” to “political workers” or cadres. The organization actively engaged in literacy campaigns, improving rationing systems, and opposing domestic violence. However, critics argue that these organizations ultimately failed to develop an independent feminist movement beyond the party line (Basu, 1992).

One of the most notable administrative achievements of the Left Front was the radical reform of the Panchayati Raj system in 1978. However, real opportunities for women emerged in 1993 with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which reserved 33% of Panchayat seats for women. West Bengal was highly active in implementing this law, resulting in thousands of rural women—many of whom had never crossed the threshold of their homes—participating in political decision-making as Sarpanches, deputy Sarpanches, or members.

Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) demonstrated that women’s reservation in Panchayats in West Bengal changed local development priorities. Women were more likely to invest in drinking water, health, and children’s education. Yet beneath these successes lay a darker side of proxy politics. In many cases, decisions were made by the elected woman member’s husband or male family member, locally referred to as the “Panchayat Pati.” This meant that despite numerical representation, women’s qualitative power in governance was limited (Ghosh, 2003).

The Leftist ideology assumed that eliminating class inequality would naturally resolve gender inequality. Consequently, the Left Front prioritized class solidarity over separate women’s emancipation. When women participated in land movements or industrial protests, they were seen primarily as “workers,” not as women with distinct interests. Researcher Kumar (1993) argues that while Left parties utilized women politically, they did not adequately address women-specific issues such as the division of domestic labor or patriarchy. Party discipline and appeals to Democratic Centralism often suppressed women’s voices within the party.

The biggest limitation of the Left era was the near absence of women at the highest levels of decision-making. Although millions of women were involved in mass organizations, women’s representation in the CPI(M) politburo, central committee, or state committees was negligible. Only a few names stand out in the 34 years of Left rule—such as Nirupama Chattopadhyay, Chhaya Ghosh, or later Kankanjali Ghosh. Ray (1999), in *Fields of Protest*, notes that while Leftist women activists in cities like Kolkata enjoyed more autonomy, they were still subjected to internal patriarchal structures. Even within the state cabinet, women were often assigned minor ministries, and access to key decision-making committees was strictly controlled, creating a “glass ceiling.”

Despite these limitations, women in West Bengal during the Left Front era became highly politically aware, more so than in many other states of India. Women engaged in discussions on global politics to local economies through neighborhood associations and study circles. Yet, this awareness was often constrained by party narrowness. Women’s organizations often remained silent in cases of attacks on opposition female activists or political retaliation if speaking out went against party interests (Bhattacharyya, 2009). Movements such as Morichjhapi and later the Singur-Nandigram protests, where women faced police repression, highlighted the moral and ethical limits of women’s politics under the Left.

From 1977 to 2011, women’s political participation in the Left Front era was fundamentally structural. Through Panchayat reservations and mass organizations, women stepped outside their homes and entered the broader political arena—a form of mass mobilization. However, this empowerment largely remained under party discipline. Women succeeded as political workers, but their development as independent leaders was limited. It is on this foundation that the subsequent Trinamool era observed a new transformation in women’s political participation.

### 3. The Trinamool Congress Era: A New Horizon (2011–Present):

The political shift in West Bengal in 2011 was not merely the fall of one party and the rise of another; it marked a profound qualitative change in the state's political culture. Under Mamata Banerjee's leadership, the rise of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) brought a paradigm shift in women's political participation. Unlike the cadre-based structure of the Left Front era, women's empowerment under the TMC revolved around two pillars: personal leadership and direct public welfare. A key feature of this period was the presence of a woman as the state's administrative head. Mamata Banerjee, India's only current female Chief Minister, has had a deep psychological impact on the women of West Bengal through her political struggle and everyday life. Nielsen (2021) notes that she presents herself as "Didi" (elder sister), creating a form of familial and social legitimacy in politics. While women in the Left era were part of party discipline, under the TMC they have found political agency as followers of a strong female leader.

After coming to power, the TMC amended the Panchayat Act in 2012, increasing women's seat reservation from 33% to 50% (Government of West Bengal, 2012). This bold step, rare among Indian states, multiplied the numerical presence of women in rural leadership. Bhattacharyya (2016) observes that this increase in reservation enhanced the confidence of grassroots women not only as members but also as decision-makers (Sarpanches or chairpersons). While the problem of proxy politics was not fully eliminated, the 50% reservation institutionalized women's bargaining power.

One of the most significant channels of women's participation during the TMC era has been government Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) programs:

- **Kanyashree & Rupashree:** These programs support girls' education and prevent child marriage while instilling a sense of state recognition among women.
- **Laxmir Bhandar:** Introduced after the 2021 Assembly elections, this program provides direct cash to homemakers, giving them a degree of financial independence beyond the household, which translates into political leverage (Roy & Mukherjee, 2022).

These initiatives have helped create a new type of **gender-based voter cluster** or women's vote bank. Data from the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha and 2016 and 2021 Assembly elections show that female voters' support for the TMC has been significantly higher than male voters (CSDS-Lokniti, 2021).

At the national level, the TMC has also set a unique precedent in nominating female candidates. In the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections, around 40% of TMC candidates were women, the highest among any national or regional party in India (Election Commission of India, 2019). Leaders such as Nusrat Jahan, Mimi Chakraborty, Mahua Moitra, and Kakali Ghosh Dastidar entering Parliament demonstrate the party's effort to position women not only as voters but also as national-level representatives.

The TMC era has also seen an unprecedented rise in the number and activity of Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Through the Anandadhara project, millions of rural women have accessed microcredit. These SHGs have become a crucial local organizational base for the TMC. Political analysts note that these groups are not merely economic units but small centers of political solidarity (Sen & Ganguly, 2019). Women now collectively engage with administrative offices to assert their demands, enhancing their civic awareness.

However, this success raises some serious questions. Critics argue that this empowerment primarily produces beneficiaries, and unlike the Left era, political ideology plays a smaller role, with grant-based loyalty being more significant. Concerns also remain about the security of women who face political violence. Scholars such as Manranjan Bapari have noted that conflicts over control within the TMC often reduce women to mere pawns. Furthermore, despite Mamata Banerjee's supreme position in the party, male dominance remains strong in second- and third-tier leadership levels (Basu, 2018).

The Trinamool Congress era has opened a new horizon for women in West Bengal politics. It has transformed women from invisible cadres into visible voters and leaders. Government programs providing financial security and the 50% Panchayat reservation have fostered a new political aspiration among women. Compared to the institutional structure of the Left Front, empowerment under the TMC is much more personal and emotionally driven, fundamentally changing the gender equation in Bengal's politics.

#### 4. Comparative Analysis: Left Front vs Trinamool Congress (1977–2024):

In West Bengal's political history, the 34-year Left Front rule and the over 13-year Trinamool Congress (TMC) rule have each offered distinct models of women's political empowerment. A comparative analysis of these two models highlights three key dimensions: organizational structure, leadership development, and the impact of welfare-oriented politics.

**Organizational vs. Charismatic Model** – During the Left Front era, women's politics was primarily cadre-based and organizational. The All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) was the main driver of women's political consciousness. The Left mobilized women within a structured framework, where party ideology was prioritized over personal ambition (Basu, 1992). In contrast, the TMC model emphasizes charismatic leadership and personal influence. Mamata Banerjee herself is the primary inspiration. Under the TMC, women became more active politically through direct loyalty to the leader and as beneficiaries of government projects, rather than within a rigid organizational hierarchy.

**Qualitative and Quantitative Changes in Representation** – The 33% reservation in Panchayats in 1993 during the Left Front was a historic initiative. However, participation often remained nominal; at the grassroots level, male family members or local male influencers, often referred to as 'Panchayat Pati,' held substantial sway. Under the TMC, this reservation was increased to 50% in 2012. Studies show (Bhattacharyya, 2016) that this policy has generated political ambition among women. Women now contest not only reserved seats but also general seats. At the parliamentary level, about 40% of TMC candidates are women, far exceeding the Left Front era, demonstrating greater access to higher politics.

**Class Struggle vs. Identity Politics** – For Leftists, women were primarily part of the working or peasant class, and gender identity was subordinated to class. While women participated in major movements, their specific concerns were often neglected. The TMC, however, recognizes women as a distinct political group or identity. Programs like Laxmir Bhandar and Kanyashree reinforce women's gender-based identity. Surveys by CSDS-Lokniti (2021) show that women in West Bengal now vote independently of male family members—a practice rare during the Left Front era.

#### Comparative Table: Left Front vs. Trinamool Congress Eras:

Sl. No.	Comparison Aspect	Left Front Era (1977–2011)	Trinamool Congress Era (2011–Present)
1	Main Driver	Party ideology & mass organization (AIDWA)	Leader's charisma & government programs
2	Reservation Policy	33% Panchayat reservation (1993)	50% Panchayat reservation (2012)
3	Voting Pattern	Decisions influenced by male family members or party cadres	Emergence of independent "women's vote bank"
4	Economic Empowerment	Through cooperatives & literacy campaigns	Direct cash transfers (DBT) & SHG expansion

5	Type of Leadership	Theoretical & bureaucratic	Emotional & direct/Populist
6	Parliamentary Participation	Relatively low and limited	Significant increase in candidates in Lok Sabha & Assembly
7	Reservation Policy	33% Panchayat reservation (1993)	50% Panchayat reservation (2012)

**Administrative Impact and Social Evolution-** The Left Front's success lay in bringing women outside the home and cultivating a collective consciousness, a form of long-term political socialization. The TMC era builds on this foundation, introducing Politics of Outcomes. Under the Left, women were path-followers in politics; under the TMC, they have become decision-makers.

Critics argue that Left-era empowerment was ideologically stronger, while TMC-era empowerment is often dependent on financial incentives, which can be unstable in changing political contexts (Nielsen, 2021).

Both eras share a negative similarity: the use of women in political violence. In the late Left Front period (Singur–Nandigram), women participated in resistance, facing repression. Similarly, TMC-era Panchayat elections have seen comparable conflicts. Neither period fully ensured women's comprehensive security beyond party loyalty.

In summary, the Left Front era was a period of women's political mobilization and solidarity, whereas the TMC era represents women's political visibility and agency. The Left created the infrastructure, and the TMC has leveraged it to transform women into a formidable political force.

## 5. Challenges and Obstacles: Barriers on the Path to Empowerment

Although women's participation in West Bengal politics rose from the Left Front era to unprecedented heights under the Trinamool Congress (TMC), this long journey has not been free of challenges. Across both periods, structural, social, and psychological obstacles have shaped women's political empowerment and active participation. These challenges can be broadly categorized into three areas: proxy politics, the gendered dimension of political violence, and institutional patriarchy.

**Proxy Politics and Lack of Effective Power** – Despite reservation of seats for women in Panchayats and municipalities (from 33% to 50%), the problem of proxy politics has remained a major challenge. Research shows that in many cases, even after women are elected, their husbands, fathers, or brothers effectively exercise power. During the Left Front era, this was referred to as the 'Panchayat Pati' culture, which has not been completely eliminated under the TMC (Ghosh, 2003). Lindberg (2014) notes that political parties often field women candidates without prior political experience so that male leaders can wield influence through them. Consequently, numerical presence exists, but substantive representation often remains elusive.

**Political Violence and Intimidation** – One of the darker aspects of West Bengal politics is persistent political conflict. Political violence has posed a significant barrier to women's independent participation. In the late Left Front period, such as during the Singur and Nandigram movements, women faced brutal police and political violence, deterring many from mainstream politics (Bhattacharyya, 2011). Similarly, under the TMC, attacks or intimidation of women candidates during Panchayat and Lok Sabha elections are regularly reported. NCRB and various human rights reports indicate that families' women are still targeted to suppress political opposition, creating an unsafe political environment (Basu, 2018).

**Glass Ceiling and Gender Disparities in Party Leadership** – Although the number of women has increased under the TMC, male dominance persists in top party leadership and decision-making committees.

During the 34 years of the Left Front, women's representation in the CPI(M) Politburo or Central Committee was negligible. Likewise, under TMC, despite Mamata Banerjee being at the helm, most core committees and district leadership remain male-dominated. Sen (2019) argues that Indian political parties prefer seeing women as workers or vote banks, but hesitate to give them space as policy makers. This constitutes a glass ceiling, limiting even capable women from reaching top positions.

**Populist Politics vs. Genuine Self-Reliance** – TMC initiatives like Laxmir Bhandar or Kanyashree provide economic security to women, yet many analysts view them as creating beneficiaries rather than independent political actors. Critics argue that if women vote primarily based on government subsidies, this reflects economic obligation rather than true political consciousness (Roy, 2021). Similarly, in the Left Front era, although mass organizations fostered women's solidarity, it often resulted in ideological captivity under party discipline.

**Social and Familial Barriers** – In a patriarchal society like India, political participation is personally challenging for women. Politics requires irregular hours and often staying outside the home at night—circumstances still not easily accepted in many rural and semi-urban households. Ray (1999) shows that female activists face a double burden: political struggle against opposition and maintaining traditional gender roles at home. This dual pressure leads many talented women to leave politics midway.

**Misogyny in Digital Spaces** – A new challenge today is attacks on women political activists via social media. Trolls, obscene remarks, and character assassination increasingly create psychological stress, discouraging especially younger women from entering politics.

Analysis of these challenges reveals that in both the Left Front and TMC eras, women have approached power but structural barriers to reaching the centre of power remain intact. Until internal democracy within political parties improves and societal attitudes evolve, full empowerment cannot be achieved through legislation or reservations alone.

## **6. Conclusion: Transformation and Future of Women's Empowerment in West Bengal Politics**

The evolution of women's participation in West Bengal politics is not merely a chronological shift but a history of profound social and structural transformation. A comparative analysis of the long Left Front era (1977–2011) and the Trinamool Congress era (2011–present) reveals that despite differences in political ideology and strategy, women have become an indispensable and decisive force in Bengal politics. This transformation can be broadly seen as a journey from organizational solidarity to personal and economic empowerment.

During the Left Front rule, women's political activity was primarily institutional and structured. Guided by Marxist ideology, women emerged as a disciplined cadre force. The 1993 Panchayat reservation was a historic milestone that brought rural women out of their households into administrative chairs. Sarkar (1991) notes that while the Left Front raised political consciousness among women, they largely remained under party discipline, positioned as followers rather than decision-makers. Access to higher leadership was limited, and under the overarching ideal of class struggle, gender-specific demands were often secondary. Nevertheless, the political space created for women during this era was critical, marking the first sustained process of women's political socialization in Bengal (Basu, 1992).

In contrast, the post-2011 TMC era added a personal and identity-based dimension to women's political participation. The rise of a strong female leader like Mamata Banerjee has fostered a psychological confidence among women. Nielsen (2021) observes that by presenting herself as a "Didi" (elder sister) or family figure, Banerjee has created a unique political space for women. Under TMC, women have emerged not only as political workers but also as a distinct voter group. The 50% Panchayat reservation (Government of West Bengal, 2012) and direct benefit schemes such as Laxmir Bhandar and Kanyashree have

consolidated women's political loyalty. A hallmark of this era is that women now possess direct economic power, enhancing their bargaining capacity in politics, a phenomenon scholars describe as gender-based populism (Bhattacharyya, 2016).

However, this comparative analysis also reveals unresolved questions and ongoing challenges. In both eras, proxy politics or the patriarchal control behind elected women has not been fully eliminated (Ghosh, 2003). The culture of political violence continues to pose barriers to a fear-free environment for women. Studies show that intimidation or harassment of family women to suppress political opposition still occurs, creating a significant obstacle to independent participation (Basu, 2018). Additionally, while women's numerical representation in decision-making bodies has increased, their status as true decision-makers is not yet fully established. The invisible glass ceiling within party structures remains a major challenge.

Looking ahead, there is no room for regression in the political position of women in West Bengal. Women are no longer mere beneficiaries; they have become organizers in politics. CSDS-Lokniti (2021) surveys show that women now can vote independently from male family members. True empowerment, however, will be achieved only when political parties recognize women not merely as a vote bank but as intellectual and administrative leaders. Elected women representatives at the TMC level require more administrative training to work independently and effectively.

In conclusion, if the Left Front era laid the foundation for women's political participation in West Bengal, the TMC era represents a visible edifice built upon that foundation. The Left constructed the structure, and TMC has transformed it into an unassailable political force for women. Combining the lessons from both eras will be key to building a violence-free, inclusive, and genuinely gender-equal political culture. West Bengal's women are no longer silent spectators of politics; they are now makers of history, and their progress offers a model for other Indian states to emulate.

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