

Negotiating Terrain in Local Governance: Freedom, Functioning and Barriers of Women Councillors in India

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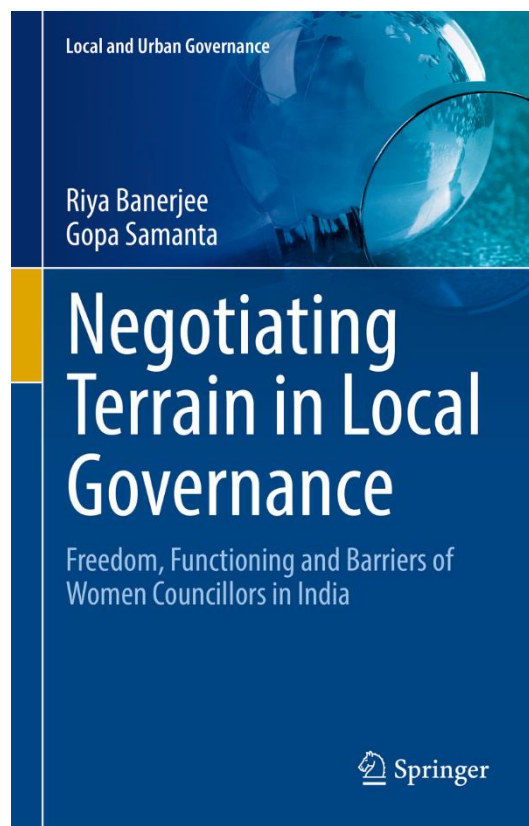
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Riya Banerjee and Gopa Samanta's book *Negotiating Terrain in Local Governance* exemplifies how women in India, particularly in West Bengal, struggle to position themselves in governance through the realisation of freedom and functionality. The authors begin the book with the premise that women's status and participation in governance are improving. However, there is still gender injustice that needs to be addressed through organised pressure, practical training, and the establishment of a support system for change.

The authors base their argument on data collected from Women Councillors in four West Bengal districts: Darjiling, Balughat, Raniganj, and Hugli-Chinsurah. Women councillors face difficulties in their careers due to political inexperience, immobility, poor education, bureaucratic regulations, and a lack of information or knowledge. They carry out their responsibilities in both family and politics. The authors claim that the book is unique in two ways, and readers will undoubtedly agree. First, it focuses on women in urban local governance, revealing how women's mobility in the public sphere is limited; second, the book does not attempt to reveal the outcome – empowerment – but rather the process and the feelings and experiences that women in governance go through. The book is divided into nine chapters and follows research methodology systematically and logically.

The first chapter attempts to conceptualise the research objectives in the context of women's reservation and governance (political participation). The researchers relied on Allart's writing on the Model of Having, Loving, and Being. West Bengal's governance strategies are presented with the help of urban studies to examine the role of political parties in decentralisation and women empowerment. After briefly discussing women's agencies and intervention in West Bengal's history, the authors attempted to sketch women's empowerment in Bengal. This has aided in establishing their position on why such research is required in the current situation.

The sketch of the profile of councillors with the socioeconomic, cultural, and political backgrounds of women councillors elected is well presented, which aids readers in understanding the research. It is a good method to relate the experience of councillors to the theory of Erik Allardt's Swedish Model of Welfare.

The authors were able to discuss the freedom and functioning of women councillors from the perspectives of political, socioeconomic, transparency, and protective security freedoms enjoyed, particularly by women in governance at various levels, by expanding on the critical and reflective writing. The authors discovered that women councillors' freedom and functioning behaviours vary depending on the local socio-cultural conditions as guided by the history of work and agency. As seen in recent gender studies on women, freedom, and empowerment, the authors used gender framework analysis to describe how women can carry out their responsibilities in an empowered manner. Additionally, the authors include both male and female participants to present their points of view.

The gendered perspectives of women councillors in West Bengal are significant considering the community's progressive march. The authors attempted to position themselves based on the data received, stating that women's functioning is primarily determined by local socio-cultural perspectives, particularly when society is governed by patriarchy. The authors argue that any assessment of women's roles must be done through the lens of gender perspectives held by the rest of society. The authors present a systematic and captivating explanation that is guided by the data—collected from major cities in West Bengal. As expected, there has been no significant advancement in their roles in society despite them holding councillors roles and ably discharging their duties in governance. Their participation would promote freedom regardless of caste, education, background,

marital status, or political affiliation remains a casualty at the above intersections.

Readers interested in women and governance from an Indian perspective will benefit from this book. The authors presented perspectives on women in governance through the lens of 'having, loving, and being, in addition to a critical reflection on the current situation from a historical-socio-cultural and political perspective. The authors additionally offer commentary on aspects of the 73rd and 74th

Amendment of the Constitution of India in general and West Bengal specific to four districts Darjiling, Balughat, Raniganj and Hugli-Chinsurah. The findings focused on transparency and protective security of women in governance, functioning of women councillors involved in decision-related to development work, women empowerment. The book under review expands knowledge in geography related to urban life and space that focuses on women in governance.