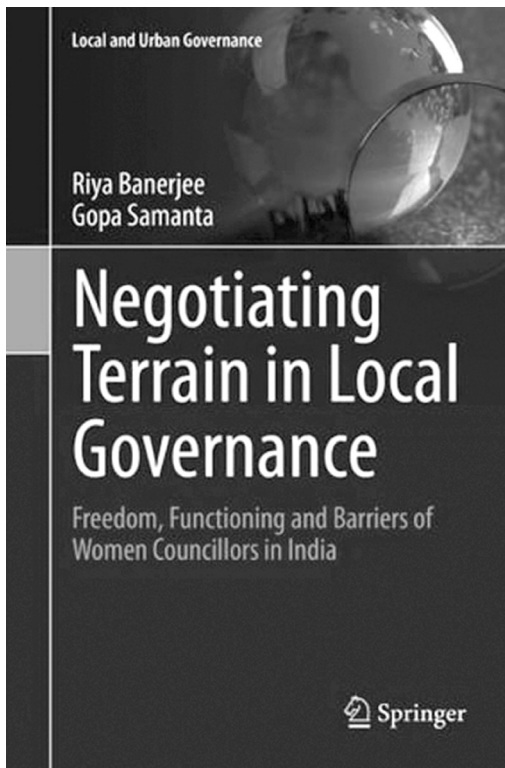


Book Review

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

Riya Banerjee and Gopa Samanta (2020), Springer Nature, Switzerland AG, 2020. pp 213



Public and institutional spaces the world over continue to be overtly masculine despite significant changes in their structure and content in recent times largely driven by feminist movements since the last century forcing democracies to make concessions conceding women a larger space in decision

making. These changes, however small and inadequate, have brought women to tread on the new terrain of governance even in tradition-bound societies deeply entrenched in patriarchal values and traditions. This seems true in the Indian context as well where politics and governance are perceived to be primarily a man's role despite voting rights to women in the election of representatives to various bodies and women's stellar participation in the freedom movement. The perception has been deep-seated despite isolated examples of women elected as representatives to legislative assemblies, as members of parliament, or even occupying the highest executive position as the Prime Minister. The situation however has undergone substantive changes with the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Constitution of India recognising and protecting local governments and providing reservation to women as elected representatives in such local bodies. The book under review specifically addresses itself this new development in India, a country that has traditionally denied women many of their rights, especially their role in politics and governance. The central idea of the book revolves around the changes in women's social and political spaces with their increased political participation in urban

local governance. The findings are based on empirical research carried out in four cities of West Bengal, a provincial state located in Eastern India. The research rests on the triangulation between the two complementary approaches—feminist and pragmatic—and employs both quantitative and qualitative methods of research which the authors claim to be post-positivist.

Many studies have sought to measure the level of empowerment of women achieved through reservation for women in local governance whether in rural local governance or metropolitan or big city local governments and have found some changes to have taken place in terms of their empowerment. The present research however differs from such studies in two important ways. First, it has examined the situation in urban local governance in the context of small cities where the society is more orthodox compared to the metropolitan cities. Secondly, the book emphasizes the journey of these women not strictly limited to their empowerment after joining urban local governance. The book provides a fresh perspective on a comprehensive attempt to analyse, discuss and assess how the socio-cultural spaces of women councillors change with their participation in urban governance and more importantly, how they navigate in hitherto unknown terrain.

The book is completed in nine chapters. The first chapter familiarises the reader with the conceptual background based on the existing literature, the fundamental research question, the objectives, selection of the study area with a brief introduction of the selected cities, and the research process contextualising the issue. The research process exemplifies the selection criteria and

the methods of field research. The conceptual background of the work rests on broad issues of women's involvement in politics, participation in governance, the importance of reservation accorded to women, rethinking proxies, and above all the question of women's agency when they assume the all important role in governance.

The second chapter lays down the framework of the field research by discussing the strategies and pathways of urban local governance for this field based research in the state of West Bengal. It is one of the more progressive states with a relatively long history of decentralization even before the enactment of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act. The urban governance reforms led by various international institutions have also been pursued relatively early in the state. The chapter however brings out how the process of decentralization is diluted by the political parties in power through a very strong centralized model of political structure controlling urban local governments.

The third chapter turns the attention of the reader to the history of women's development and empowerment programmes in India in the specific context of women's reservation in urban local governance and also discusses the situation of women in local governance in the country as a whole. The study then quickly moves on to discuss the status and condition of elected women representatives in local bodies in West Bengal using a quantitative measures of the ratio between the observed and expected participation in local governance and their representation in different political parties of the state. This chapter illustrates that cities with a pre-existing history of women's agency and emancipation are better places for women to

work as councillors and to wield this power effectively.

The fourth chapter compares the role of both men and women councillors with their social, economic, cultural, and political background in the selected cities of Darjiling, Balurghat, Raniganj, and Hugali-Chinsurah. The profile includes family background and personal information such as position, responsibilities, caste and age distribution, and nature of elected seats, especially for the women councillors. The purpose of this profiling was to assess their degree of freedom and functioning. The issue of women's emancipation and empowerment was assessed in the chapter by making use of relevant qualitative methods such as interviews, long conversations, and focus group discussions. The interviews and conversations were conducted both at the more formal location of their offices as well as at their residential premises to understand the differences in two sharply contrasting social spaces.

The fifth chapter studies the changing socio-cultural spaces and quality of life of the women councillors linked to their participation in city governance. This has been explained with reference to 'Having, Loving, Being: An Alternative to the Swedish Model of Welfare' written by Erik Allardt in the book *The Quality of Life* edited by Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. The analysis of time-use surveys shows that after joining as councillors, women face the double burden of household work and official responsibilities as councillor in urban governance. The authors found women councillors not a fixed category, but as highly unstructured and complex in their response to their multiple roles as homemakers and as councillors.

The sixth chapter evaluates the freedom and functioning behaviour of women councillors by scrutinising their responses in each of the cities. Categorised into four types-political, socio-economic, transparency and protective security the authors looked at freedom from multiple angles. Likewise, functions of women councillors have been classified based on their work such as decision-making, developmental works, implementation of women's empowerment programmes, and so on. The chapter concludes that the situation of women's emancipation varies widely over spaces, depending on the local socio-cultural conditionalities and the history of women's work and agency in multiple intersectionalities.

The seventh chapter uses a gender lens to make comparisons between the work of women and men councillors, to understand the gendered nature of local representation in city management. A very important part of the chapter is devoted to an analysis of the varying perception of male councillors on the capability of the women councillors in executing their responsibilities to understand how patriarchal values continue to restrict women's potential and agency.

The eighth chapter addresses an even more important aspect concerning citizens' perception and their assessment of the local representatives- both women and men councillors. Interestingly the analysis revealed citizens' perception regarding the capacity of women councillors varying greatly depending on the socio-cultural and gender background of the respondents. It helped to understand the complexity hidden within the system of perceiving the capabilities of their local representatives and also the extent to which the entrenched patriarchal forces have

affected the mindset of the citizens many of whom still have doubts about the capacity of women to run the governance system.

The inference of the study in the final chapter is based on the discussion on the findings of the capability and barriers faced by women councillors, and the gendered perception of citizens about their capacity. It concluded that intersectionality becomes an important factor in making the 'women councillor' a fluid category, rather than fixing them into one box opposite to the men councillors. Similarly, the study shows how caste, education, family background, marital status, household size, past experience in politics and current affiliation to a political party also become important factors that affect the capability of women councillors, especially in terms of their freedom and functioning.

Women will have to continue their struggle on an uneven and unequal field and have had to face several roadblocks while joining local-level governing bodies. They however have begun to carve out their own ways and means to navigate through the

traditionally male-dominated workspaces, such as municipal offices. The real strength of the book lies in identifying those spaces which women are exploring in the newly emerging fields of governance to which they are increasingly exposed to. The book is well-written, nicely crafted, and convincingly argued. The work is multidisciplinary and brings together innovative research with theoretical, methodological and empirical ground-breaking contributions on gender studies.

The book contains research studies with policy relevance in the field of sub-national territorial governance, at the local and regional levels and tries to connect with national and supranational tiers. The book explores the new modes of territorial governance with perspectives on gender inequality and carries a special value for scholars and students of gender studies and scholars working in various other social sciences.

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