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**Title-**

**“A Case Study of Women Beginnings: From Homemaker to Elected  
Representative”**



**Banani Adak**

**(Member of Kowgachi 1 Gram Panchayat, North 24 Parganas, West  
Bengal)**

### **Abstract**

The growing presence of women in rural governance reflects a gradual but meaningful shift in India’s democratic landscape. Yet, for many women, especially those rooted in domestic roles, political participation remains a difficult and often contested journey. This case study focuses on the lived experience of Banani Adak, an elected representative of Kowgachi-I Gram Panchayat in the Barrackpore-I Block of North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, whose entry into local governance challenged both social expectations and gendered boundaries.

Coming from a modest socio-economic background, Banani Adak spent much of her early life managing household responsibilities and engaging informally with community issues. Her

exposure to everyday problems—such as inadequate civic facilities, limited access to welfare schemes, and the marginalisation of women’s voices—gradually shaped her interest in public life. Rather than entering politics with ambition for power, her motivation emerged from a sense of responsibility toward her surroundings and the people she interacted with daily.

As a Panchayat member, her approach to leadership remained closely tied to the community. She prioritised open dialogue, listened to local concerns, and encouraged women to participate in village meetings and decision-making processes. Small but consistent efforts in improving infrastructure, facilitating access to government programmes, and addressing social welfare concerns strengthened her credibility at the grassroots level.

Banani Adak’s journey was marked by resistance and skepticism, particularly within a male-dominated political environment. Gender bias, doubts about competence, and social pressure posed continuous challenges. However, persistence, sincerity, and sustained engagement enabled her to overcome these barriers and earn community trust.

This case study demonstrates that women’s leadership at the grassroots level is not merely a product of policy intervention but also of lived experience, resilience, and social commitment. Banani Adak’s story offers valuable insight into how ordinary women can become agents of change, contributing to more inclusive and responsive local governance.

**Key Words:** Grassroots leader, Female Participation, Rural Governance, Public Sphere, Political Space.

### **Introduction:**

Nestled within the socially rich and evolving rural landscape of North 24 Parganas district in West Bengal, the Kowgachi-I Gram Panchayat represents a space where tradition and development coexist in complex ways. The region is home to communities that continue to face everyday challenges related to basic infrastructure, social welfare, and equitable growth. Emerging from this context is Banani Adak, an elected member of the Gram Panchayat since 2023, whose leadership reflects the changing face of grassroots governance.

Banani Adak’s political journey stands apart from conventional narratives of local leadership. She does not belong to a political family, nor did she enter public life through influential networks. Instead, her entry into politics was shaped by her close engagement with community life and her familiarity with the concerns of ordinary residents. Elected from Ward No. 13 of

Kowgachi-I, her mandate was built on trust, accessibility, and a shared understanding of local needs rather than political symbolism.

As a woman representative in rural West Bengal, her role extends beyond formal administrative responsibilities. Her leadership is deeply personal, shaped by social expectations, cultural norms, and everyday interactions with villagers. Since taking office, she has been actively involved in addressing issues related to sanitation, primary education, livelihood opportunities, and women's welfare. Her approach to these areas prioritises practical solutions and sustained dialogue over short-term visibility.

What makes Banani Adak's leadership particularly distinctive is her empathetic engagement with the community. She remains approachable, listens attentively to grievances, and encourages collective participation in local decision-making processes. Equally important is her firm resistance to patriarchal control within political and social spaces. By asserting her voice and authority, she challenges gendered assumptions about leadership and creates space for other women to participate more confidently in governance.

Her journey illustrates how grassroots leadership rooted in lived experience can contribute meaningfully to inclusive rural development. Banani Adak's story is not merely one of political success, but of social transformation, demonstrating how ordinary women can become agents of change through persistence, integrity, and community trust.

## **Methodology:**

This case study adopts a qualitative research approach in order to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and practices associated with women's leadership at the grassroots level. Qualitative methods were considered most appropriate as they allow for an in-depth understanding of social processes, interpersonal dynamics, and contextual factors that shape local governance.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted with the subject of the study, Banani Adak, as well as with her family members, local constituents, and fellow Panchayat representatives. These interviews provided multiple perspectives on her leadership journey, community engagement, and decision-making processes. Semi-structured interview schedules were used to allow flexibility while ensuring consistency across interactions.

Participant observation formed another important component of the study. The researcher attended Panchayat meetings and community initiatives to observe interactions, participation

patterns, and leadership practices in real-life settings. This method helped in understanding informal power relations and everyday governance beyond official records.

In addition, document review was undertaken to supplement field data. Panchayat records, local development reports, and government data related to implemented projects were examined to contextualise interview findings and verify claims. Secondary sources, including scholarly literature and government publications on women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions, were also reviewed. The triangulation of multiple data sources enhanced the credibility and depth of the study.

### **Objectives of the Case Study**

The primary objective of this case study is to examine the conditions and processes that enable women representatives to enter, participate in, and exercise leadership within Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at the Gram Panchayat level, despite the structural, social, and cultural constraints they often encounter. By focusing on lived experience rather than institutional design alone, the study seeks to understand how women negotiate barriers related to gender norms, household responsibilities, and political resistance while performing public roles.

A second key objective is to explore the ways in which women's participation and leadership in PRIs contribute to changes in local self-governance and influence various dimensions of their personal and social lives. The study investigates how political engagement reshapes women's sense of self, agency, and social identity, both within the public sphere and inside the household.

To achieve these objectives, the case study examines several interrelated aspects of women's leadership. These include the development of self-confidence and personal initiative over time, the motivations behind contesting local elections, and the extent to which women experience freedom of speech and expression in political spaces. Attention is also given to the nature of Gram Sabha meetings, particularly women's participation, visibility, and influence during deliberations.

Further, the study explores women's interactions with administrative systems, their involvement in decision-making processes, and the resulting shifts in empowerment within the family. Finally, it analyses leadership practices at the Gram Panchayat level, including teamwork, coordination, and cooperation with multiple stakeholders such as co-representatives, officials, and beneficiaries. Together, these dimensions provide a holistic understanding of women's leadership in grassroots governance.

## **Background:**

Banani Adak's journey into public life began in a rural village of West Bengal, shaped by modest means and strong social values. She was raised in a middle-class household where financial resources were limited, yet principles such as honesty, diligence, and community service formed the foundation of everyday life. Her family environment encouraged responsibility and social awareness, creating an early sensitivity toward collective well-being. Although her husband later served as the Upa Pradhan of Kowgachi-I Gram Panchayat, her identity and leadership evolved independently through sustained community engagement rather than inherited political privilege.

Balancing education with domestic responsibilities, Banani Adak emerged as an educated and culturally inclined woman with a strong interest in music and social issues. Managing household duties alongside personal development was not without challenges, yet these experiences strengthened her organisational skills and resilience. From an early age, she was inspired by narratives of social reformers and local change-makers, which shaped her understanding of leadership as service rather than authority.

Her active participation in women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) proved to be a decisive phase in her leadership development. Through these groups, she gained firsthand exposure to collective decision-making, financial literacy, and grassroots mobilisation. The everyday struggles shared by women in these forums—ranging from livelihood insecurity to limited civic amenities—deepened her commitment to social action.

Her entry into formal politics was driven less by ambition and more by growing frustration with persistent governance failures. Deteriorating roads, inadequate public health services, and the systematic neglect of women's concerns in local decision-making spaces compelled her to seek change from within the system. Supported by fellow SHG members and her family, she contested the 2023 three-tier Panchayat elections on behalf of the Trinamool Congress Party.

Her campaign was deliberately simple and personal. Without large rallies or visual publicity, she relied on door-to-door interactions, engaging residents in conversations about clean drinking water, street lighting, girls' education, and sanitation. This grounded approach helped establish trust and laid the foundation for her electoral success.

## **Leadership Style and Achievements: Leading with the People**

After her election, Banani Adak faced the familiar challenge encountered by many women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions—being perceived as a symbolic presence rather than a decision-maker. Instead of responding with rhetoric, she chose to establish her credibility through consistent action and visible engagement with the community. Her leadership style and achievements reflect a people-centered approach rooted in participation, accountability, and empathy.

### **1. Participatory Leadership**

Banani Adak actively promotes participatory governance by organizing regular ward-level meetings where residents are encouraged to voice their concerns directly. These meetings serve as platforms for dialogue, enabling community members—especially women and marginalized groups—to engage with local governance processes. Her emphasis on collective discussion has strengthened trust and improved responsiveness at the ward level.

### **2. Transparency and Accountability**

To address delays and administrative opacity, she introduced a digital complaint register to systematically record grievances. This initiative improved follow-up mechanisms and enhanced transparency in service delivery. By documenting complaints and tracking responses, she contributed to greater accountability within the Panchayat system.

### **3. Empathetic Governance**

Drawing from her own lived experiences, Banani Adak demonstrates a leadership style grounded in empathy. She remains sensitive to everyday issues such as price inflation, ration distribution, sanitation, and access to public services. This ability to relate to constituents' daily struggles has reinforced her legitimacy as a grassroots leader.

### **4. Governance Innovations within a Legal Framework**

Her leadership must also be understood within the broader constitutional context of women's empowerment. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 institutionalized Panchayati Raj Institutions and mandated the reservation of at least 33 percent of seats for women across all three tiers of local governance. This provision marked a significant shift in democratic participation by creating formal spaces for women's leadership.

### **5. Expansion of Women's Representation**

Subsequent state-level initiatives in states such as West Bengal, Bihar, and Rajasthan expanded women's reservation to 50 percent, including leadership positions like Pradhan. These reforms enabled women from marginalized backgrounds to move beyond token representation and actively shape governance outcomes.

Together, Banani Adak's leadership practices and achievements illustrate how constitutional provisions, when combined with committed grassroots leadership, can transform local governance into a more inclusive and responsive system.

## **Key Achievements:**

### **1. Sanitation Revolution**

Before Banani's term, open defecation was a pressing issue. She mobilized resources under the Swachh Bharat Mission and ensured that over 100 households built toilets. She also launched awareness campaigns about hygiene and dignity, especially for women.

### **2. Menstrual Health Awareness**

Banani coordinated with local ASHA workers to hold menstrual hygiene workshops in schools and community halls. Sanitary napkin distribution and discussions on taboo topics became a regular feature in her ward.

### **3. Education and Skill Training**

She played a pivotal role in reopening a non-functioning primary school, ensuring regular teacher attendance. Further, she partnered with NGOs to provide vocational training in tailoring, beauty services, and computer basics for rural youth.

### **4. Pandemic Response**

During COVID-19, even though she was not elected as a Panchayat member in this situation, she has fulfilled his responsibilities as a social person and has shown his identity as a socially responsible citizen towards the society by

providing various other items and daily necessities to the innocent poor common people at all times.

## **5. Women's Economic Empowerment**

She facilitated the formation of six new SHGs and helped them access microcredit from government banks. Some now run small poultry farms, tailoring units, and grocery shops

## **6. Local Governance Innovations**

He takes supportive steps in various welfare schemes of Duare Sarkar Camp is an initiative of the West Bengal Government such as Kanyashree, Old Age Pension, Widow Pension Scheme, Student credit card Scheme and others various schemes that help people achieve self-reliance and overcome dependency.

### **Challenges Faced: Breaking the Chains**

Banani's path was far from easy. Her biggest obstacles didn't come from outside the system — they came from within it.

#### **Gender Bias:**

In her initial months, many male panchayat members would ignore her suggestions, referring to her as “the lady member”. She had to repeatedly assert her authority in meetings.

#### **Proxy Politics:**

Like many women in local governance, Banani was also pressured to let male relatives or party members control her decisions. But she stood her ground. “If I'm the elected one, I'll be the one deciding,” she often says.

#### **Social Discrimination:**

Although she was generally recognized as a women from an upper class community. She did not suffer from social discrimination by society, but she saw in various areas of their ward that she was often subjected to social discrimination against Scheduled Castes, Scheduled tribes or lower class people.

**Lack of Resources:**

She struggled with delayed fund disbursement from block-level administration and often had to manage public expectations while navigating bureaucracy.

**Work-Life Balance:**

As a mother and wife, balancing public duties with domestic responsibilities remains a constant juggling act. Yet she never lets either role suffer.

**Impact: The Silent Revolution**

Banani Adak's leadership has generated both visible and subtle transformations within the community she serves. While improvements in infrastructure are measurable, the deeper impact of her work lies in shifting attitudes, social participation, and collective confidence at the grassroots level.

**1. Social Impact**

One of the most significant outcomes of her leadership has been the increased participation of women in local governance. Attendance at Gram Sabha meetings has reportedly risen by nearly 40 percent, with women actively voicing concerns that were previously confined to private spaces. Sensitive issues such as domestic violence, early marriage, and school dropout rates among girls are now discussed openly. Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as informal support networks, providing both emotional solidarity and collective problem-solving mechanisms.

**2. Economic Impact**

Banani Adak's engagement with SHGs and skill development initiatives has contributed to greater economic independence among rural women. Through training programmes and livelihood opportunities, many women have begun earning independently, reducing household dependency and increasing decision-making power. Improved awareness and facilitation of government welfare schemes have also enhanced access to benefits, ensuring better registration and delivery of entitlements to eligible families.

**3. Cultural Impact**

Beyond social and economic change, her leadership has encouraged cultural inclusion. Inter-caste festivals, joint community celebrations, and inclusive sports activities have helped reduce social distance among different groups. Such initiatives have fostered a sense of shared identity and belonging. Young girls increasingly view Banani Adak as a role model, often expressing aspirations to "work for the people" and participate in public life.

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## **Reflections: Why Banani's Story Matters**

Banani Adak's journey illustrates what can emerge when ordinary women are entrusted with meaningful responsibility. She is not a high-profile political figure, nor does she rely on media visibility. Her influence lies in everyday presence—listening, responding, and standing with the community. She rejected proxy politics and chose to lead with her own voice, transforming frustration into purposeful action. Rather than relying on slogans, she focused on building systems that offer sustainable solutions.

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## **Lessons for Youth and Policymakers**

### **1. Youth Engagement**

Young people, particularly girls, must be encouraged to engage with local governance through volunteering, internships, and participatory platforms such as social audits.

### **2. Policy-Level Support**

There is a need for regular capacity-building programmes for women representatives, dedicated grievance redressal mechanisms to address harassment, and leadership mentoring initiatives. Gender-responsive budgeting can further strengthen women's roles in governance.

Banani Adak's leadership reaffirms that representation alone is not enough; meaningful change occurs when representation is active, informed, and fearless.

## **Conclusion**

In a time when political institutions are often met with public skepticism and declining trust, the leadership journey of Banani Adak offers a meaningful counter-narrative. Her work at the grassroots level demonstrates that governance can be compassionate, inclusive, and responsive when it is rooted in lived experience and community engagement. Rather than viewing leadership as authority, her approach reflects a service-oriented model that prioritises dialogue, accountability, and collective well-being.

Banani Adak's journey signifies more than individual achievement; it reflects the gradual transformation of democratic practice at the village level. Her transition from a homemaker to an elected representative illustrates how ordinary women, when provided with space and

support, can actively shape public decision-making. By challenging patriarchal norms and asserting her presence in a male-dominated political environment, she has contributed to redefining women's roles within Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The case study underscores the broader implications of women's participation in local governance. It highlights how representation can lead to increased attention to social welfare, inclusive development, and community-driven priorities. Banani Adak's experience suggests that democratic deepening is not solely dependent on policy frameworks but also on individuals who embody integrity, resilience, and commitment.

For every woman leader who has emerged, many others remain unheard due to structural barriers and social constraints. This study reinforces the need for sustained institutional support, capacity-building, and social recognition to nurture women's leadership at the grassroots. Banani Adak's story stands as both an inspiration and a reminder that strengthening democracy begins at the local level, with empowered citizens and inclusive leadership.

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