

**Explaining Popular Participation in India's Local Democracy: Some Lessons From  
Panchayats in West Bengal**

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### Abstract

The 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution launched an extensive experiment in local democracy. Based on a study of 2794 gram panchayats and field observations in West Bengal, this article examines when and why popular participation in panchayat elections - the most basic and visible aspect of local democracy – differs across local governments. The study finds that gram panchayats witness high levels of participation when they pursue policies that benefit the villagers, such as greater investment in education, and when they are seemingly less corrupt. Investment in public goods and lower rents are known to promote economic development and general welfare. Besides these familiar implications, this study shows how these policies also have political consequences for democracy in India.

Key words: Democratic deepening; political participation; panchayats; West Bengal.

## **Introduction**

A little over two decades ago, in 1993, the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution came into effect. The amendment aimed to develop democratic governance systematically at the local level in rural India, replacing the hitherto irregular state-level experiments with local democracy. It mandated state governments to set up elected panchayats and directed them to decentralize administrative and financial authority. These elected local councils were to become, as the amendment envisioned, “units of self-government” in India’s numerous villages.<sup>1</sup> Since then, several studies have assessed the progress the states have made on democratic decentralization, its consequences for the quality of governance and corruption, and the involvement of marginal segments of society such as the Scheduled Castes and women.<sup>2</sup> This paper moves in a different direction and seeks to understand when and why Indians participate more in panchayat elections. In particular, the paper seeks to know what kind of panchayat policies increases popular participation in local elections.

In doing so, my goal is to bring under focus an insufficiently understood aspect of local democracy in India: how local government policies inspire and deter popular participation. The empirical focus of this study is on the voter participation in the 2003 gram panchayat elections in West Bengal, a state with a long history of competitive local elections in the country. Though the average voter turnout was 77 percent, there is considerable variation in electoral participation across the 2794 gram panchayats - ranging from zero to 100 percent. I use both qualitative field observations from Maldah and Uttar Dinajpur districts and statistical analyses to examine the reasons for why some panchayats witnessed higher voter participation than others. To summarize my main findings, I find that people are more likely to participate in elections to panchayats that invest more in education and have a lower rate of nontax revenue. Further, panchayats with higher literacy rates and where the then state-governing Left Front’s vote share was lower also witnessed higher voter participation, whereas villages with more Scheduled Caste voters saw lower voter participation. These findings are robust and significant in several statistical specifications. I discuss these findings, their implications for democratic decentralization in West Bengal and India, and my research design in detail in later sections. First, I turn to discuss why we should consider voter turnout seriously.

## **Voter Participation and Democratic Politics**

Popular participation is central to democratic politics. Citizens engage with democratic governments at all levels in diverse ways, including responding positively to government initiatives such as in the polio eradication program in India, protesting against unpopular policies (example: the anti-nuclear protests against the Kudankulam power station in Tamil Nadu) or government inaction (The 2012 protests in Delhi against the state and central governments for failing to provide adequate security for women, for instance), directly deliberating to adopt or reverse government decisions (as in the gram sabhas),<sup>3</sup> and voting in elections.

Among the several ways in which citizens participate in democratic politics, electoral participation is remarkable for at least four distinct theoretical and practical reasons. First, voting in elections is a low-cost action when compared to other forms of citizen participation. Any form of political participation involves citizens spending time and effort; deliberations in gram sabhas or protests expend considerably more of these resources than voting. During my field research in Maldah and Uttar Dinajpur, villagers often complained that they were unable to attend gram sabhas – even when the panchayats publicized the meetings via loudspeakers beforehand – due to their farm work or other daily chores.<sup>4</sup> Most of these villagers I interviewed were engaged in agriculture and allied activities, earning their livelihood cultivating their own small plots of land or as wage-laborers in someone else's farm. These were the very people that the constitutional amendment hoped to better serve with decentralized governance via gram panchayats. Yet, the opportunity costs of participating in the panchayat's gram sabha meetings are often too high for most of these villagers. Attending gram sabhas, for most of my interviewees, meant forgoing farm work, wage labor or daily household duties. In contrast, voting in elections that took at most half an hour every five years offers the villagers a relatively low-cost means to participate in politics.

Second, the secret ballot offers citizens a prudent method to participate in politics and influence outcomes without the fear of inviting prejudice or retribution. This is a particular concern in parts of India, where traditional social hierarchies continue to impose sanctions on women and the dalits from participation in panchayats. Studies amply document how men and caste superiors dominate gram sabhas while women and lower castes participate less in panchayats.<sup>5</sup> Voting provides a fairly anonymous way to participate in politics – and bring about

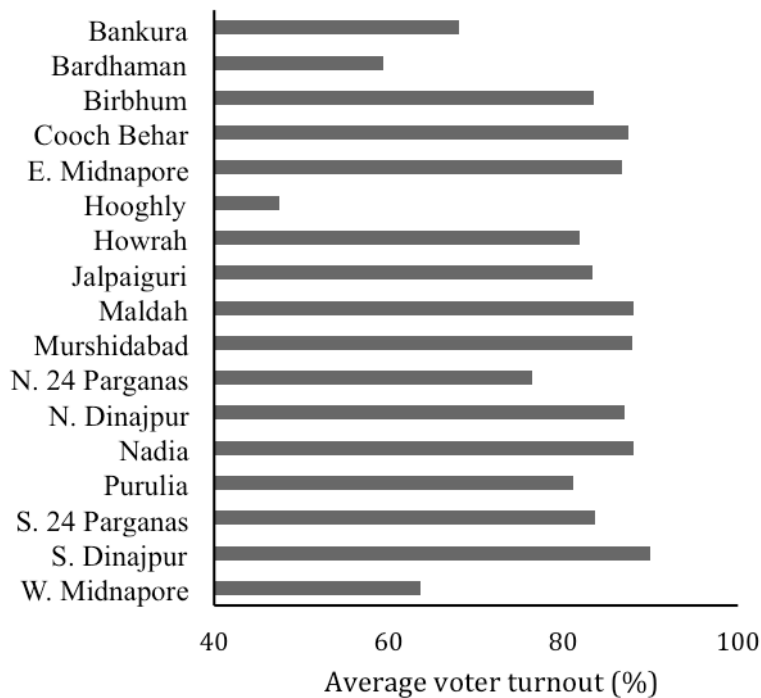
desired changes - without overtly upsetting the social norms prevalent in villages and incurring punishment.

Third, elections are a peaceful mechanism through which accountability of rulers to the ruled is enforced. In theory, protests, riots and revolutions may remove incompetent incumbents from office, but, in reality, they involve considerable effort, coordination, and costs for the participants (including, at times, destruction of lives and livelihood). In comparison, elections are a nonviolent, constitutional means available to the citizens to hold those in power accountable by voting out the incompetent and reelecting those who deliver good governance and better services. Furthermore, since the villagers and the elected panchayat members often live in the same villages, the villagers tend to have more frequent interactions with their panchayat members than with their MLAs and MPs (Members of the Legislative Assembly and Members of Parliament). Proximity between citizens and governments should increase political accountability. There is some evidence to suggest this is indeed the case in India: Stuti Khemani, for instance, finds that voters are more likely to hold their state governments accountable than the distant national government.<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, higher electoral participation bestows popular legitimacy to governments, and voters tend to turnout in greater numbers when governance matter to their lives. On both these points, the case of Jammu and Kashmir is illustrative, where electoral turnout – high or low – is seen as either indicative of the government’s increasing political legitimacy or as symptomatic of political alienation. In fact, studies that examine voter participation in the state conclude that political institutions in low turnout regions such as in the Kashmir valley suffer from a “crisis of legitimacy,”<sup>7</sup> whereas voters participate in greater numbers when electoral outcomes matter for their region’s socio-economic development.<sup>8</sup> In other words, voter participation is greater when voters expect the consequences of voting – that is, which political party forms the government and the policies it pursues - to affect their lives significantly.

Furthermore, electoral participation is the most basic and visible aspect of democracy. Local democracy, in the absence of vibrant voter participation, would be nugatory. Taken together, these reasons suggest how voting could be an efficient means of political participation, a suitable mechanism to ensure political accountability, a pragmatic route to progressive change, and an affirmation of democracy in rural India.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, the data from West Bengal panchayat elections suggest that not all villages take to this form of political participation with equal enthusiasm. The average voter turnout of 77 percent masks systematic differences in voter participation across villages in the state. A high standard deviation of 24 is suggestive of these differences – that is, voter participation rates in several villages are far removed from the overall average voter turnout. In fact, no votes were cast in 165 villages, and about a tenth of the villages witnessed fewer than 25 percent voting, when another fifth of the villages had more than 90 percent electoral participation. A simple aggregation of rural voter participation rates at the district-level gives an idea of the differences in voting across panchayats in the state (Figure 1): the average village in Hooghly witnessed half the voter participation as in an average South Dinajpur village; fewer than half the electorate took part in elections in 75 percent of the villages in Bardhaman.



Data source: West Bengal State Election Commission  
**Figure 1. Differences in Voter Participation in West Bengal**

Wide differences in voter participation have profound implications for politics, government policy, and India’s experiment with local democracy. Very low voter turnout is

some villages, especially in a state with a long history of democratic decentralization, necessarily raises questions about the reach of grassroots democracy in the country. And, as we shall see soon, low voter turnout also has the potential to turn villages into enclaves of corruption, political alienation and unaccountability. Meanwhile, uneven voter participation across the state could translate into asymmetries in political representation and policies. For instance, when literate villages record higher voter participation and dalit villages have poor turnout, the voices and policy preferences of the literates find greater resonance in politics and policies while those of the lower castes fail to get registered.

Given such implications, it is all the more important to understand what accounts for the vast differences in voter participation. Why are some villagers in West Bengal taking part in elections in large numbers while others refrained from voting? Are villagers more likely to vote if they expect the consequences of voting to significantly impact their lives? If so, when do they expect the electoral consequence to be greater? What panchayat policies are likely to increase popular participation in village elections? These are some of the questions the remainder of the paper tries to answer.

## **Data and Methods**

I use both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the reasons for the differential rates of electoral participation in West Bengal panchayats. The quantitative data were collected from three sources: the data on panchayat elections were gathered from the 17 volumes of the West Bengal State Election Commission Panchayat Election Results, 2003. The 17 volumes correspond to the administrative districts in the state; Darjeeling, where local elections were not held simultaneously with the rest of the state, is not part of this study. I also exclude Kolkata since it is an urban district without rural gram panchayats. From these volumes, two pieces of information on 2794 gram panchayats were collected: first, the voter participation rates – the share of eligible voters in villages who voted in the elections; and, second, the vote share of the state-governing Left Front alliance.

Admittedly, these data from the panchayat elections held in May 2003 are dated. Nevertheless, I use these electoral data since they correspond closely to the data on panchayat policies for which we have systematic data.<sup>10</sup> The data on panchayat finances for the fiscal year that ended in March 2003 were collected from the West Bengal Panchayat and Rural

Development Department. Since a prime focus of this research is to examine the kind of panchayat policies that influences voting behavior, I extracted several facets of panchayat expenditure and revenue patterns from these data. The expenditure patterns I consider are the shares of panchayat spending on education, employment generation, infrastructure, salaries, water and sanitation, and current expenditure. On the revenue side, I examine the shares of taxes, nontax income, and state and central transfers in panchayat revenues. Further, I also analyze panchayat's per capita tax collection and expenditure to see if higher tax burden or greater spending influences voting. Even when these data correspond to 2003, as we shall see soon, the insights drawn from these data are timely and consequential for local democracy in the country even now.

The demographic characteristics of panchayats were drawn from the West Bengal Census of 2001. The village characteristics I use in the statistical analyses are: population size, and the population shares of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs), literates, marginal workers and villagers dependent on agriculture.<sup>11</sup> For all these census categories, I follow the definition used by the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India. For example, marginal workers are those who did not work for at least 183 days (or, six months) in the preceding 12 months to the census taking.

The qualitative information comes from 164 open-ended interviews I conducted with villagers (155 interviews), elected panchayat members (six interviews), and officials in the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (three interviews). The interviews with the villagers and panchayat members were held in Maldah and Uttar Dinajpur districts in June and July of 2012; and, the interviews with officials were held in Kolkata in May-June 2007. Given my interest in finding out why people turn out to vote in panchayat elections, the larger number of interviews with villagers is deliberate. The time lag between these interviews and the 2003 panchayat elections should be pointed out. Yet, given that the main objective of the interviews was to ascertain the reasons for why villagers generally vote in local elections, not just why they voted the way they did in the 2003 elections - that is, what aspects of panchayat policies inspire higher turnout in elections, and what attributes dampen voter participation - the time lag is unlikely to skew the inferences we draw from the interviews in Maldah and Uttar Dinajpur districts. The districts were chosen to realize this objective: while panchayats in Maldah consistently witnessed higher voter turnout than the state average, some panchayats in Uttar



Dinajpur had lower than average voter participation. In the overall research design, I use statistical analyses to find out which panchayat policies and village characteristics are systematically correlated with electoral participation, whereas the interviews were undertaken to understand the general reasons behind the correlations.

To find out which panchayat policies and demographic attributes are associated with voting behavior, I use OLS (Ordinary Least Square) regression models. Since gram panchayats within an administrative district tend to share some similarities, I use district fixed effects in the statistical models to account for district-level factors that may influence electoral participation in panchayat elections.

## **Findings**

The regression analyses reveal that two facets of panchayat finances are significantly correlated with voter turnout in panchayat elections (Detailed results presented in Table 1): first, there is a significant positive correlation between the share of panchayat expenditure on education and voter participation in local elections. That is, more people turn out to vote in panchayats that spends more on education. Second, there is a significant negative correlation between the share of nontax revenue in panchayat's total revenue and voter participation. In other words, villagers tend to vote less in panchayats that get a larger share of their revenues from nontax sources, excluding state and central transfers.

	Dependent variable: Voter turnout in panchayat elections			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Panchayat policies:</i>				
Educational spending	<b>1.31</b> (0.39)	<b>0.52</b> (0.25)		<b>0.02</b> (0.006)
Water & sanitation spending	-0.02 (0.02)			-0.03 (0.03)
Infrastructure expenditure	0.11 (0.11)			0.12 (0.14)
Current expenditure	0.02 (0.11)			-0.1 (0.14)
Expenditure on salaries	0.28 (0.44)			-0.02 (0.48)
Job creation expenditure (log)	-0.001 (0.02)			-0.004 (0.05)
Total per capita spending (log)	-0.01 (0.04)			-0.04 (0.05)
Tax revenue	0.47 (0.48)			0.15 (0.55)
Nontax revenue	<b>-0.69</b> (0.17)		<b>-0.5</b> (0.09)	<b>-0.86</b> (0.2)
State & central transfers	0.11 (0.12)			0.02 (0.14)
Total per capita tax revenue (log)	-0.01 (0.01)			-0.01 (0.02)
<i>Demographic attributes</i>				
Population	-0.04 (0.06)			-0.08 (0.08)
Scheduled Castes	<b>-0.15</b> (0.06)			<b>-0.15</b> (0.07)
Scheduled Tribes	0.1 (0.1)			0.16 (0.11)
Literates	<b>0.34</b> (0.12)			<b>0.45</b> (0.15)
Marginal workers	0.13 (0.14)			0.05 (0.18)
Agricultural population	0.07 (0.07)			0.04 (0.08)
Left Front vote share	<b>-0.16</b> (0.04)			<b>-0.24</b> (0.05)
District fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
$R^2$	0.37	0.27	0.28	0.37
$N$	1201	2794	2794	891

Data sources: West Bengal State Election Commission, West Bengal Panchayat and Rural Development Department, and West Bengal Census 2001.

Notes: Coefficients significant at  $p < 0.05$  are in **bold**; standard errors are in parentheses. Column (1) presents the coefficients from the full model; Columns (2) and (3) presents the unconditional effects of educational expenditure and share of nontax revenue on voter turnout. In Column (4), an alternative measure of educational expenditure – the log of the total spending on education – is used instead of the share of spending on education. The expenditure variables in all models, when not log transformed to meet the OLS requirements, are proportions of total spending; similarly, all revenue variables, when not log, are proportions of total revenue. Demographic attributes and Left Front vote share are proportions of total population and total votes respectively.

### Table 1. Regression Results

The regression results also reveal that two demographic attributes – the population share of the Scheduled Castes and literacy rates – and a political factor – then state-ruling Left Front’s vote share – to be significantly related with voter participation in panchayat elections (See

Column 1 and 4 in Table 1). While villages with more dalit voters witness lower electoral participation, more literate villages have higher voter turnout. The vote share of the ruling Left Front is negatively correlated with voter participation – that is, fewer villagers cast their votes in panchayats where the Left Front is electorally stronger.

The relations between panchayat education spending, nontax revenue and voter participation are robust to alternative model specification. In Column (2) and (3) of Table 1, I present the simple correlations between panchayat educational spending, nontax revenue and voter turnout. Furthermore, in Column (4) of Table 1, I use an alternative measure of panchayat spending on education – the log of the total spending on education - instead of the share of total spending on education: the alternative measure is also positively correlated with voter turnout. Alternative model specifications and measurements do not change the results; the relations we observe are robust and significant, therefore.

Besides statistical significance, the strength of the associations between panchayat educational expenditure, nontax revenue and voter participation is also substantial. Panchayats that allocated five percent more of their expenditure on education witnessed about six and a half percent higher voter turnout. Meanwhile, panchayats that had ten percent more of revenues from nontax sources saw seven percent lower electoral participation. At the same time, it is worth noting that several other aspects of panchayat spending and revenue policies are not significantly related with electoral participation. These include aggregate per capita expenditure, spending on salaries and employment generation, shares of tax revenue and financial transfers from higher levels of governments. Total per capita tax burden too is not significantly correlated with voter turnout.

## **Discussion**

What explains the associations among panchayat expenditure on education, nontax revenues and popular participation that we observe in West Bengal? Why does electoral participation decline with increases in the share of nontax revenues? And, why do panchayats in the state that spend more on education witness higher voter turnouts?

It should be noted that it is a tall task to parse the direction of causation from relations among observational data, especially with the cross-section data that we have at hand. For instance, it is difficult to know for certain whether the villagers turn out in greater numbers

because the panchayats have invested more in education or whether the panchayats invest more in education because the villagers are more engaged in electoral politics and demand more educational spending.

The technical way in which I have tried to address this is by using the financial data from the year preceding the election. That is, panchayat finances between April 2002 and March 2003 could not have been influenced by the panchayat's calculations of how many people would turn out to vote in the 2003 May election, even if panchayat finances are subject to typical political business cycles and, therefore, witness higher spending in all villages before elections.

Furthermore, while an awareness of the difficulties in identifying causation is important, it need not inhibit us from trying to understand why voters turnout in greater numbers in panchayats with higher educational spending and stay away from elections in villages with higher nontax revenues. Here, field observations and interviews with villagers in Maldah and Uttar Dinajpur offer some insights. From these interviews, it became clear that villagers use voting as a means to express their approval for the good work their panchayats undertake to improve the quality of education in the villages, and abstain from voting to signal their disapproval when they consider panchayat policies to be ineffectual or corrupt.

For instance, field observations revealed that village schools serve several functions in rural West Bengal. First of all, the villagers consider education the schools impart as a means for social advancement and empowerment. All the villagers that I interacted with either have attended the village school themselves or send at least one of their children to the school; in most cases, more than a person from each family has attended the school. The villagers attribute education with potential leveling effects in society, capable of lifting them – or, at any rate, their children - from privation and improving their chances for success in life. The villagers also think that, with education, they will become less gullible, more empowered and gain greater respect and social standing. This view is succinctly captured in the words of a first generation literate in Bahin village in Uttar Dinajpur, who explained to me the importance of education in rural Bengal: “If you're illiterate, others will be in charge of your life. But, if you're literate, others cannot control you. You've your own knowledge.” (In native Bengali language: “*jatakhon parasona janona, tatakhon tomake jkeu chalate pare, kintu tumi jodi parasona jano tobe tomake keu bhul path e chalate parbena.*”)

In addition to this emancipatory role of education, the villagers regard the midday meals program in schools as promoting childhood health and hygiene (via instilling habits among children to wash hands before and after meals). Villagers also reckon the positive externalities of the midday meals project for the rural economy. The meals project provides employment to village self-help groups that participate in preparing the meals. Some village schools also hire independent cooker-cum-helpers to assist with the administration of the meals project. Hence, any investment in schools and education attracts popular approval and higher voter turnout, according to the villagers.

And, this voter approval of panchayat spending on education is based on a clear understanding of what their panchayats are doing. For instance, when pointed out that most of the spending on village schools and the meals projects is financed not by their panchayats, but instead by state and central funds, the villagers asserted that well-functioning village schools are consequent to well-functioning panchayats. For instance, local governments fund the hiring of cooker-cum-helpers and construct or maintain kitchen-cum-stores as part of the meals program in school. Some panchayat *pradhans* (presidents) and members are also actively engaged in improving the quality and facilities of the village schools - canvassing district and block officials for greater allocation of resources and apportioning more panchayat funds for the upkeep of the schools. The villagers therefore maintain that they notice when elected local officials do such good works and when they are neglectful or corrupt. Given the smaller scale and intimate settings of villages, it is plausible that villagers have a good understanding about their panchayat's performance. Higher electoral participation is then a popular recognition for good panchayat efforts.

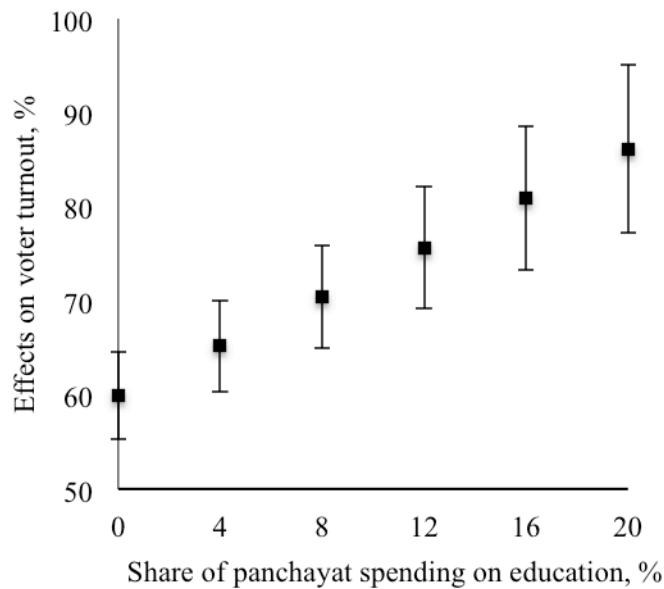
In contrast, villagers disapprove of corruption in panchayats. A form of corruption that the villagers particularly resented is sale of timber, fuel wood and fodder from forestry on village common lands. Panchayat members and officials allegedly collude with builders and contractors to extract side payments when outsiders or villagers use forest produce. According to officials in the West Bengal Panchayat and Rural Development Department, such usufruct fees are the major source of nontax revenue in West Bengal panchayats. If nontax revenue is seen by villagers as a source of corruption, then it is conceivable why voter turnout declines with a higher share of non-tax revenue: corruption deters popular participation in panchayats.

This can over time lead to a negative cycle if panchayats engage in corruption, knowing that they do not depend on taxing the people to generate revenues and that voters do not use elections to punish corruption. When asked why the villagers did not turn out in greater numbers to vote out the panchayat members whom they perceived as corrupt instead of refraining from voting, the refrain I drew was “All of them are corrupt” when referring to panchayat members, and pronouncements on the futility of elections. Such political alienation accounts for why voter participation is low in some panchayats. The impression I gather from my interactions in the villages is that corruption has an alienating rather than a galvanizing effect on villagers. And, this does not bode well for India’s experiment with local democracy, especially if it creates enclaves of corruption, political alienation and unaccountability.

In panchayats where the then state-ruling Left Front was expected to win comfortably too, the voters stayed away from elections. The reason the villagers gave is simple: since the outcome of the election was certain before the voting – that the Left Front would win - they did not see merit in voting; their vote was not going to make a difference. This reasoning turns out to be true only in part. It explains lower turnout in panchayats where the Left Front’s vote share was high. But, the reasoning is inapplicable in panchayats where the Left Front’s vote share was low, which witnessed high voter participation. In fact, the linear negative trend between the Left Front’s vote share and voter turnout suggests that the villagers turned out in greater numbers in such councils even when the electoral outcome was a priori certain – that the Left Front would lose. A more accurate reason for the negative correlation, therefore, is that villagers were voting for change: by 2003, the Left Front had been in power in the state for more than 25 years; and the villagers turned out to vote in greater numbers where the opposition parties stood a chance at winning and stayed away from elections to panchayats where the Left Front was certain to win. In fact, we know from contemporary scholarship on West Bengal state politics that voter alienation with the long-incumbent Left Front had been building up by the turn of the century, and that the Left had squandered its long-held support among rural voters.<sup>12</sup>

While such voter behavior may be seen as consistent with the democratic principle of the alternation of parties in government, a worrying trend in West Bengal local elections is that voter participation is low in villages with a higher share of dalit voters. Progressive legislation and reserved seats seem insufficient at increasing dalit voter participation in panchayat elections. A promising sign, however, is that in panchayats that spend more on education, voter participation

increased with the share of dalit voters.<sup>13</sup> In Figure 2, I present the statistical predicted effects of increased educational spending on voter participation if panchayats were 100 percent dalit: as can be seen, SC voters participate more in elections when panchayats spend more on education. In effect, incentives for dalit participation in local politics arise from panchayat policies themselves. Education, insofar as the villagers perceive it to be a means for economic, political and social emancipation, has a greater appeal among rural voters including dalits to turnout to electorally support panchayats that apportion more resources to it.



**Figure 2. Effects of Education Spending on Dalit Voter Turnout**

Sources: West Bengal State Election Commission, West Bengal Panchayat and Rural Development Department, and West Bengal Census 2001.

Notes: Estimates based on the regression model presented in Column 1 of Table 1.

## Conclusions

Panchayati raj institutions are capable of quiet transformations in rural India. This study examined the gram panchayats in West Bengal - a pioneering state in democratic decentralization in the country - to find out that popular participation in local governments increases when councils spend more on education, and declines with increases in nontax share of

revenues. Interviews with villagers reveal the reasons for these electoral outcomes to be intuitive: voters participate more in panchayat elections when they expect the panchayat policies to qualitatively improve their lives, and they are disillusioned with and withdrawn from elections when they perceive corruption in local councils. What implications do these findings have for local democracy in West Bengal and India?

First, panchayats can play a more significant role in education in India. Panchayats in West Bengal spent on average Rupees 13000 on education in 2003. With an estimated school-going population – those between the ages of five and 14 – of 18.1 million, the local educational expenditure per child amounted to Rupees two.<sup>14</sup> This is insufficient and will prove more so as West Bengal's child population and demand for education increase in the near future (The state's population has grown at 13.8 percent in the previous decade, yet its rural literacy rate - at 72 percent - is only slightly better than that of much poorer states).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, as West Bengal and India implements the Right to Education Act, panchayats can play a more effective role. Both hard data and on-the-ground observations suggest that the villagers – given their recognition that education has become ever more essential for success in today's world - would welcome such an augmented role.

Second, it is reasonable to expect that any enhanced role of panchayats in education will have positive consequences for politics in India. The Seventy-Third Constitutional amendment and the subsequent state-level conformity legislations aimed to broaden political participation via gram sabhas and increase the involvement of women and dalits in rural governance. What this study has shown is that panchayat policies can help promote some of these goals effectively: for instance, increased panchayat spending on education increased voter participation, including among the Scheduled Castes. That spending on schools and midday meals has positive impact on educational achievements, schools attendance, childhood nutrition and hygiene is widely known. This study suggests that such policies also have political advantages that accrue with surging political participation.

Finally, corruption – even perceptions of it – in panchayats can lead to widespread political alienation. Nontax sources are an important means of panchayat revenue and can promote fiscal autonomy of local governments in the country. Yet, when such revenues are seen to offer grounds for financial fraud, they lead to popular disillusionment with local politics. Part of the reason lies in the dense social networks and intimate settings that characterize villages that



make easier both the monitoring of elected local politicians and the spreading of information about corruption. For India's experiments with local democracy, such transparency is good. But, this also means that if panchayats are to be effective means of progressive transformations in rural India, then local politics should tellingly be above corruption. A necessary corrective measure that should inject greater transparency, infuse popular confidence in panchayats and increase voter participation would be to systematically institutionalize social auditing of local accounts. Greater transparency and popular participation in governance can enhance the quality of local democracy in the country.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Quote taken from the Panchayati Raj Amendment Act. Text accessible via [www.indiacode.nic.in](http://www.indiacode.nic.in)

<sup>2</sup> On the progress the states have made in implementing the provisions of the Panchayati Raj amendment, see: George Mathew, *Status of Panchayati Raj in the States and Union Territories of India, 2000* (New Delhi: Institute of Social Sciences, 2000); on how decentralization has affected the quality of governance, see: Patrick Heller, K.N. Harilal and Shubham Chaudhuri, "Building Local Democracy: Evaluating the Impact of Decentralization in Kerala, India," *World Development* Vol. 35, No. 4, 2007, pp. 626–48; on how decentralization contributes to corruption in India, see: Anoop Sadanandan, "Patronage and Decentralization: The Politics of Poverty in India," *Comparative Politics* Vol. 44, No. 2, 2012, pp. 211-28; on the involvement of historically disadvantaged groups in panchayats, see: Niraja Gopal Jayal, "Engendering Local Democracy: The Impact of Quotas for Women in India's Panchayats," *Democratization* Vol. 13, No. 1, 2006, pp. 15-35, and Sudha Pai, "New Social and Political Movements of Dalits: A Study of Meerut District," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* Vol. 34, No. 2, 2000, pp. 189-220.

<sup>3</sup> The 73rd Amendment insisted on popular participation in local governments via the gram sabhas.

<sup>4</sup> Field research involved open-ended interviews and participant observation. The research was conducted in June-July 2012.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance: Malini Nambiar, "Making the Gram Sabha Work," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 36, No. 33, August 18-24, 2001, pp. 3114-7; Sudha Pai, "Social Capital, Panchayats and Grass Roots Democracy: Politics of Dalit Assertion in Uttar Pradesh," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 36, No. 8, February 24-March 2, 2001, pp. 645-54; and Timothy Besley, Rohini Pande and Vijayendra Rao, "Participatory Democracy in Action: Survey Evidence from South India," *Journal of the European Economic Association* Vol. 3, No. 2-3, 2005, pp. 648-57.

<sup>6</sup> See, Stuti Khemani, 2001. "Decentralization and Accountability: Are Voters More Vigilant in Local than in National Elections?," World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 2557. Accessible via [www.elibrary.worldbank.org](http://www.elibrary.worldbank.org). Besides proximity, the distribution of governmental responsibilities may also influence how people assign political accountability.

<sup>7</sup> See, Rekha Chowdhary, "Panchayat Elections in Kashmir: A Paper Exercise," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 36, No. 20, May 19-25, 2001, pp. 1674-7.

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<sup>8</sup> See, Ellora Puri, "Understanding the Paradoxical Outcome in Jammu and Kashmir," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 44, No. 6, February 7-13, 2009, pp. 31-4.

<sup>9</sup> Gram sabhas ought to be an effective avenue for popular participation and political accountability. Studies, however, find that gram sabha meetings are irregularly held and, when held, are manipulated by local party bosses and notables. See, for instance: Amitabh Behar, "Experiment with Direct Democracy: Time for Reappraisal," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 38, No. 20, May 17-23, 2003, pp. 1925-7; Aureliano Fernandes, "Aggrandiser Government and Local Governance," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 38, No. 27, July 5-11, 2003, pp. 2873-9; and, Malini Nambiar, "Making the Gram Sabha Work." Further, comparable data on gram sabha meetings are not available for researchers to examine the extent of popular participation.

<sup>10</sup> Besides the close match with the financial data, the 2003 West Bengal local election results are also suitable since the state politics then was characterized by a relatively stable party system that the Left Front dominated, helping voters hold parties in government accountable. This politics would soon change in the state and resemble much of the rest of India, with fairly fluid party alliances. On the fluidity of party alliances in the country that decade, see: Anoop Sadanandan, "The parliamentary election in India, April–May 2009," *Electoral Studies* Vol. 28, No. 4, December 2009, pp. 658-62.

<sup>11</sup> Villagers dependent on agriculture include both cultivators and workers.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance: Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> An interaction term between the population share of SCs and the share of panchayat spending on education has a significant positive correlation with voter turnout. The coefficient of the interaction term is 0.1, with a  $p$ -value  $<0.01$ .

<sup>14</sup> Population estimates based on 2001 Census. The combined expenditure of all the panchayats on education was about Rupees 36 million in 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Based on provisional figures from the 2011 Census.