

# Bengali women's historic assertion and path to lasting empowerment

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Published on: Jun 20, 2026

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Gender equality (Pixabay)

The history of India's struggle for independence is incomplete without acknowledging the extraordinary agency of Bengali women, who repeatedly defied colonial authority and entrenched gender norms. From the revolutionary underground of the early 20th century to Gandhian mass movements, women from Bengal carved a distinctive space. Pritilata Waddedar led the 1932 assault on the Pahartali European Club in Chittagong and chose death over capture. Bina Das attempted to assassinate the Governor of Bengal in the same year to protest colonial repression. Kalpana Datta played a critical role in the Chittagong Armoury Raid, manufacturing explosives and sustaining the revolutionary network. Matangini Hazra, the 73-year-old Gandhi Buri, was shot dead while leading a procession during the Quit India Movement in Midnapore.

These women were not anomalies; they emerged from a cultural milieu that venerated the feminine divine as Shakti, the primordial, dynamic power that sustains and transforms the cosmos. In Bengal's Shakta tradition, Durga slays the demon Mahishasura, Kali embodies fierce protective energy, and the goddess is not a passive icon but the active force that upends injustice. This theological emphasis on feminine potency coexisted, during the Bengal Renaissance, with concrete social reforms: Raja Rammohan Roy's campaign against sati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's advocacy for widow remarriage and girls' education, and the establishment of institutions that expanded women's intellectual horizons. In

that historical moment, the ideal of woman as Shakti translated, however imperfectly, into expanding public roles and legal protections.

Post-independence, Bengal's women retained symbolic centrality in political rhetoric while their substantive position in society steadily eroded under successive regimes. The Trinamool Congress (TMC) government that held power from 2011 to 2026 perfected a particularly corrosive variant of this contradiction. Publicly, the party invoked "Maa, Mati, Manush" and rolled out cash-transfer schemes such as Lakshmi'r Bhandar. In practice, crimes against women were frequently subordinated to the imperatives of electoral arithmetic. The Sandeshkhali episode of 2024 exposed the pattern with brutal clarity: local TMC strongman Sheikh Shahjahan and associates stood accused of large-scale land grabbing and sexual exploitation of women in the North 24 Parganas delta. When enforcement directorate teams arrived, they were attacked by supporters; the accused remained at large for weeks while victims' testimonies circulated. The August 2024 rape and murder of a postgraduate doctor at RG Kar Medical College in Kolkata ignited months of protests by junior doctors, many of them women, and ordinary citizens demanding institutional accountability. Both episodes revealed a governance culture in which political protection extended to perpetrators when they served vote-bank or syndicate interests. Women's safety became negotiable; fear became normalised. The cultural worship of Durga and Kali continued uninterrupted, Durga Puja remained the state's grandest festival; yet the lived experience of half the population diverged sharply from the theology of empowered femininity.

The accumulated anger of Bengal's women found expression not in sporadic outbursts but in sustained civic assertion. In Sandeshkhali, it was women who first organised marches, braved intimidation, and kept the demand for justice alive when male political actors hesitated. Following the RG Kar crime, women doctors and students sustained the longest medical strike in recent Indian history, insisting that workplaces and public spaces must be rendered safe. These protests were not orchestrated by any single party; they reflected a deeper rupture between the symbolic reverence for Shakti and the daily reality of vulnerability. When the 2026 Assembly elections arrived, women voters turned out in unprecedented numbers. Their ballots helped deliver a decisive verdict: The Bharatiya Janata Party secured a clear majority, ending 15 years of TMC rule and installing the first non-Left, non-TMC government in West Bengal since Independence.

The defeat of a woman-led dispensation was brought about, in significant measure, by women themselves, through protest, through the ballot, and through the emergence of several women candidates who won with substantial margins and now occupy influential positions in the new legislature. The irony is unmistakable: The political force that had long claimed to champion 'mother power' was displaced by an electorate, and a cohort of rising leaders, animated by the very demand for dignity and security that the previous regime had failed to guarantee.

The decisive question now is whether this electoral rupture will translate into durable improvement in women's position or will dissolve into familiar election-season rhetoric. The record of the first six weeks of the BJP-led government under chief minister Suvendu Adhikari provides early but concrete grounds for cautious

optimism. On June 1, 2026 the administration operationalised the Annapurna Bhandar scheme, delivering ₹3,000 monthly direct benefit transfers to eligible women along with completely free travel on state government buses. This is not merely an incremental enhancement of the previous cash-transfer architecture; the addition of zero-cost mobility directly addresses a pervasive safety barrier that limited women's access to education, health care and employment. The scheme operationalises the campaign promise of 'Bhoy Noy, Bhorosa', no fear, only assurance, and does so within weeks rather than after prolonged administrative gestation.

Beyond immediate welfare measures, the new government has signalled structural shifts. Commitments to implement the Uniform Civil Code within the stipulated timeframe aim to replace fragmented personal laws with uniform protections for women in matters of marriage, inheritance and maintenance. Parallel pledges for expanded HPV vaccination and systematic cancer screening programmes treat women's health as a public-health priority rather than a residual concern. Early administrative directives emphasise the expeditious investigation of pending cases involving crimes against women and the creation of dedicated institutional mechanisms for their protection, measures that begin to reverse the perception, widespread under the previous regime, that political considerations could delay or dilute justice. These steps align with a broader women-led development approach that has produced measurable gains in female workforce participation, girls' secondary education retention, and conviction rates in gender-based violence cases in other states governed by the same party.

Cultural symbolism and policy substance are finally being brought into alignment. The same society that invokes Durga as the destroyer of evil and Kali as the fierce guardian is now witnessing governance that treats women's security and economic agency as non-negotiable rather than expendable in the pursuit of electoral coalitions. The anger that unseated the TMC was not ephemeral indignation; it was the political manifestation of a long-suppressed claim to the Shakti that Bengali tradition has always celebrated in theory. The first actions of the new dispensation indicate that this claim is being translated into institutional reality. Whether this trajectory consolidates will depend on sustained implementation, transparent monitoring, and the continued vigilance of the very women whose ballots and protests made the change possible. Six weeks is a short interval, yet the direction is already discernible: Bengal is moving from the ritual worship of goddesses toward the concrete empowerment of women. That shift, if deepened, will mark the most significant reconfiguration of gender relations in the state since the social reform movements of the 19th century.

(The views expressed are personal)

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