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## Analyzing the Less Representation of Tribal Women in Legislative Assembly of Himachal Pradesh

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to analyze the less or almost negative representations of tribal women in legislative assembly of Himachal Pradesh. The paper focuses on only the two tribal regions of Himachal Pradesh; Bharmour and Pangi. The state got statehood status in 1971 and currently 14<sup>th</sup> assembly is functioning. So far In the short history of the statehood neither any tribal woman candidate applied for her candidature the the assembly election nor any party gave ticket to any tribal woman to context the election. The paper seeks to analyze the various reasons that obstruct tribal women's participation in electoral process. The census clearly portrays the considerable population of women in the region but they have been neither been supported nor encouraged to be the part of legislative assembly. So the attempts to bring out the general, censuses based and primary as well as secondary reasons that obstruct the ways of tribal women's participation.

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### 1. Introduction

Political representation is often regarded as a benchmark for democratic inclusion and participatory governance. In India, a country marked by its deep social stratification and cultural diversity, ensuring equal political participation remains a formidable challenge, especially for marginalized groups such as women and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Articles 330 and 332 of the Constitution, along with the 73rd and



74th Amendments, ensure that communities that have been historically excluded can participate in politics. However, the intersectional marginalization faced by tribal women continues to remain largely unaddressed, particularly at higher levels of political office, such as state legislatures.

Himachal Pradesh is a progressive hill state in North India, but it presents a complex situation. The state is often praised for its development indicators, literacy rates, and decentralized governance structure. Yet, within its Scheduled Tribal Areas, particularly Bharmour and Pangri in the Chamba district, not a single tribal woman has been elected to the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly since the state attained full statehood in 1971. Even though tribal communities, especially women, play a vital role in local economies and community life, their absence from political leadership spaces reveals deeper structural exclusions.

Bharmour and Pangri are geographically remote, climatically harsh, and socio-culturally distinct regions with dominant tribal populations such as the Gaddis, Pangwals, and Bhotiyas. These areas are constitutionally recognized under the Fifth Schedule and Article 244 for special administrative consideration. Yet, in terms of political inclusion, they are marred by patriarchal norms, weak institutional outreach, limited educational infrastructure, and the absence of political mentorship for tribal women. Most women in these regions engage in agriculture, animal husbandry, and household labor, yet their political voices remain subdued, often substituted by male proxies in local governance institutions.

This research paper aims to systematically examine the socio-economic, cultural, structural, and institutional barriers that hinder tribal women's political representation in the Himachal Pradesh Vidhan Sabha, with a specific focus on the Bharmour and Pangri subdivisions. By analyzing field-based case studies, demographic data, historical trends in electoral politics, and comparative insights from other tribal-dominant Indian states (e.g., Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh), this study seeks to unravel the layered nature of tribal women's exclusion from legislative politics.

**The objectives of this paper are:**

- To explore the demographic and socio-political landscape of Bharmour and Pangri;
- To investigate the historical patterns of representation and electoral trends in these constituencies;
- To identify the key cultural, institutional, and geographical hindrances to tribal women's entry into state-level politics;



- To compare these findings with more progressive tribal representation models from other Indian states;
- To recommend targeted policy and party-level interventions that can enhance tribal women's legislative participation in Himachal Pradesh.

In doing so, the paper underscores the urgency of reimagining political inclusion not as a tokenistic act but as a democratic imperative. Without representation, tribal women's needs, aspirations, and rights risk being continuously overlooked in state policies and development plans. Bridging this gap requires a multi-dimensional approach that includes legal reform, educational incentives, political literacy, and accountable party behavior. Only then can Himachal Pradesh move toward a truly inclusive and equitable political framework.

## 2. Literature Review

The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and political exclusion has garnered significant scholarly attention across various fields, particularly political science, gender studies, and development sociology. Researchers such as **Kapur and Sharma (2017)** argue that the underrepresentation of tribal women is not just a demographic anomaly but rather a structural problem rooted in the politics of marginalisation. Although constitutional protections and reservations at the Panchayat level exist for Scheduled Tribes and women, these measures have not effectively translated into greater political empowerment at higher levels.

In the context of Himachal Pradesh, **Thakur (2018)** points out the noticeable absence of tribal women in legislative processes. His empirical analysis shows that mainstream political parties have consistently ignored tribal women as potential candidates, even in constituencies like Bharmour and Pangi, which are demographically suitable for tribal leadership. Similarly, **Devi (2023)** attributes this exclusion to a combination of patriarchal community norms, economic dependency, and geographical inaccessibility.

**Chakraborty (2017)** highlights the limitations of the existing legal framework regarding representation. Although Articles 330 and 332 guarantee representation for Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Parliament and state assemblies, they do not require gender-specific reservations within these groups. Furthermore, the guidelines provided by the Election Commission for internal party democracy are voluntary, which allows political parties to overlook tribal women when selecting candidates.



Many studies criticize the tokenism found in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). According to **Singh (2015)**, while 50% of PRI seats in Himachal Pradesh are reserved for women, including tribal women, the issue of “proxy leadership” is prevalent. Elected women often operate under the influence of male relatives, which limits their decision-making power. As a result, they do not develop the political skills and networks necessary for contesting state-level elections.

Cultural ethnographies by **Pandey (2015)** and **Sharan (2024)** provide valuable insights into the tribal social structures of Bharmour and Pangri. They show that women play significant roles in both the economic and social spheres. However, their influence is confined to informal authority structures. Rigid social norms restrict women from participating in public political activities, while local governance remains dominated by patriarchal values, despite the existence of constitutional equality.

Studies from Chhattisgarh (**Narayan, 2021**) and Odisha (**Gopalakrishnan, 2015**) indicate that tribal women's political empowerment is more evident in regions where party systems, civil society groups, and self-help groups collaborate effectively. In these states, tribal women receive mentoring, training, and support that enable them to move from grassroots roles to positions in legislative offices. In stark contrast, Himachal Pradesh lacks structured political mentorship for women, as noted by **Punam (2021)**.

**Banerjee (2020)** highlights that electoral financing poses a significant barrier for tribal women, who often lack the financial independence and resources necessary to participate effectively in competitive electoral politics. This point is supported by **Roy (2014)**, who asserts that the lack of targeted financial and institutional support mechanisms continues to deepen political inequalities faced by tribal women.

**In summary**, the literature identifies four main constraints: **(1)** socio-cultural patriarchy, **(2)** institutional gaps in party-level accountability, **(3)** the geographical isolation of tribal regions, and **(4)** a lack of political education and financial support. However, the specific case of Himachal Pradesh, particularly the areas of Bharmour and Pangri, has not been thoroughly explored in academic discussions. This research aims to address that gap by utilizing field data, comparative policy insights, and regional political analysis.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design enhanced by comparative and case study methods to explore the persistent underrepresentation of tribal women in the Legislative Assembly of Himachal Pradesh, specifically in the regions of Bharmour and Pangri. Considering the sociocultural complexities



and the absence of disaggregated electoral data for tribal women, a multi-source, interpretive approach is utilized to gain insights into the nuanced barriers to political participation.

### 3.1 Research Design:

The research utilises a triangulation of data sources:

- **Secondary Literature Review:** This includes an analysis of journal articles, reports from government bodies, and policy briefs.
- **Census and Electoral Data:** The focus is on the Chamba district, which includes Bharmour and Pangi, with gender and tribal disaggregation provided whenever possible.
- **Case Studies:** In-depth qualitative snapshots are drawn from Bharmour and Pangi, based on previously published ethnographies and reports from NGOs.
- **Comparative Analysis:** This involves evaluating political representation outcomes and empowerment strategies for tribal women in the states of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand.

### 3.2 Data Collection:

The following types of data were reviewed:

- **Census of India (2011):** Provided population composition, literacy rates, and gender ratios for Bharmour and Pangi.
- **Election Commission of India:** Assembly election data from 1967 to 2022 to assess patterns of women's and tribal representation.
- **Research articles and ethnographic works:** Provided cultural and sociopolitical insights into tribal women's roles and identities.
- **NGO field reports:** Offered anecdotal and experiential evidence regarding women's roles in Panchayati Raj Institutions and local decision-making bodies.

### 3.3 Analytical Framework:

The study uses a **barrier-based analytical model** focusing on five key dimensions:

- **Structural barriers** (infrastructure, geography, and economic marginalization)



- **Cultural barriers** (gender norms and patriarchal customs)
- **Institutional barriers** (party nomination systems and legal framework)
- **Educational barriers** (literacy, dropout rates, and civic knowledge)
- **Political mobilization** (presence/absence of support structures like SHGs, NGOs, political mentors)

#### 4. Comparative Analysis

To contextualize the underrepresentation of tribal women in Himachal Pradesh, it is important to examine how other tribal-dominated Indian states have enabled (or failed to enable) such participation. This section draws from documented practices and outcomes in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, where gradual but measurable improvements have been recorded.

##### 4.1 Jharkhand:

Jharkhand, which has over 26% of its population classified as tribal, has implemented several initiatives to encourage the participation of tribal women in politics. Prominent organizations such as Mahila Samakhya, PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia), and the Jharkhand State Commission for Women have been instrumental in this process. These organizations regularly conduct training camps and workshops that focus on: Leadership development, Legal and constitutional literacy, Electoral processes and campaigning, Public speaking and confidence building and Awareness of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). As a result, the number of women in the Jharkhand Assembly has been steadily increasing.

If we examine the results from previous elections, we see notable growth in female representation. In the year 2000, during the time of united Bihar, four women were elected. This number rose to two in the 2003 Jharkhand Assembly elections and then to three in the 2008 Assembly elections. The number of seats remained four each in the 2013 and 2018 elections. Most recently, in the 2023 elections, the number increased to six.

##### 4.2 Odisha:

Odisha is a leading state in involving women's self-help groups (SHGs) in politics, mainly through its main program, Mission Shakti. This program, launched in 2001 and significantly expanded in subsequent



years, has become a model for linking economic empowerment with political participation, especially among Scheduled Tribe (ST) women.

#### **Features of Odisha's Strategy:**

- Mission Shakti Federations now include over 70 lakh women, with significant ST representation, particularly in districts like Mayurbhanj, Koraput, Rayagada, and Sundargarh.
- These federations are institutionalized, and women leaders from SHGs are trained in: Financial literacy, Leadership skills, Community mobilization, Political awareness and electoral campaigning
- Political parties, especially the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), have actively recruited and nominated SHG leaders for local body elections and state-level positions.

#### **Current Trends and Impact:**

- In the 2024 Odisha Assembly elections, 5 tribal women were elected as MLAs, showing a modest increase from 4 in 2019.
- The BJD's "33% women in ticket distribution" policy, first implemented in Lok Sabha elections, is influencing state-level politics, creating more space for tribal women.
- Women trained through SHGs are also transitioning into Zila Parishad Chairpersons and Block-level representatives, strengthening the grassroots-to-legislature pipeline.
- NGOs and state-supported training programs continue to reinforce this mobilization through workshops on legal literacy, governance, and public administration.

#### **4.3 Chhattisgarh:**

Chhattisgarh, with a tribal population of over 30%, has created a relatively inclusive political environment for tribal women through a combination of constitutional reservations, educational incentives, and targeted political training. The state has been recognized for embedding tribal women into local governance and increasingly into state-level politics.

#### **Features of Chhattisgarh's Strategy:**



- Chhattisgarh has 29 Scheduled Tribe (ST) reserved constituencies out of 90 in the State Legislative Assembly.
- The 73rd Amendment ensures 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), which many ST women have used as a launching pad for political careers.
- State-supported programs and NGOs (like CGNet Swara, PRADAN, and Sewa) run leadership workshops, especially in tribal-dominated districts such as Bastar, Dantewada, and Surguja.

If we examine the results from previous elections, we see notable growth in female representation. In the 2008 Assembly election, three women were elected. In the 2013 elections, the number of seats increased to four and in the 2018 elections, it increased to six. In the 2023 Assembly elections, 6 ST women were again elected, but this time with a shift in party representation.

#### 4.4 Summary:

The political representation of tribal women in Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh reveals distinct yet effective approaches that have gradually enabled greater inclusion at both local and legislative levels. Each state demonstrates a unique convergence of institutional reforms, civil society support, and political will that contrasts sharply with the persistent underrepresentation seen in Himachal Pradesh.

**Jharkhand** has seen more tribal women getting involved in state politics. This growth comes from the efforts of civil society groups and training programs focused on leadership at the state level. Organizations like Mahila Samakhya, PRIA, and the State Commission for Women conduct regular capacity-building programs focusing on legal literacy, leadership development, electoral campaigning, and PRI engagement. This has enabled incremental electoral success: from 2 tribal women MLAs in 2003 to 6 in the 2023 Assembly elections, marking a clear upward trajectory.

**Odisha** has linked economic empowerment with political agency through its pioneering Mission Shakti initiative, which mobilizes over 70 lakh women via Self-Help Groups (SHGs). These SHGs have become political training grounds, especially for tribal women in districts like Mayurbhanj and Rayagada. Political parties, particularly the BJD, have institutionalized SHG recruitment into electoral politics. This approach has contributed to the rise in ST women MLAs, from 4 in 2019 to 5 in the 2024 Assembly elections, alongside broader grassroots participation in Zila Parishads and Block Panchayats.



**Chhattisgarh** has leveraged its 29 ST-reserved constituencies and the Panchayati Raj system to embed tribal women in governance. Supported by NGOs and state programs like PRADAN and CGNet Swara, tribal women undergo leadership training that prepares them for higher political roles. The consistent representation of 6 tribal women MLAs in both 2018 and 2023 reflects the success of this sustained approach. The evolving political landscape has also seen changes in party affiliations among elected women, indicating a maturing electoral environment.

Together, these three states underscore that representation is not merely a function of demographic strength, but of deliberate institutional and political scaffolding. Their models stand in stark contrast to Himachal Pradesh, where tribal women continue to face political marginalization despite favorable legal and demographic conditions.

#### **4.5 Implications for Himachal Pradesh:**

The political participation of tribal women in Himachal Pradesh remains alarmingly weak, despite the tribal population accounting for approximately 5.7% of the state's total. While this proportion is lower than that of states like Jharkhand, Odisha, or Chhattisgarh, the complete absence of tribal women MLAs in Himachal indicates that the issue is not demographic but structural. Unlike these other states, Himachal has lacked institutional mechanisms such as training programs, preferential nominations, civil society collaboration, and internal gender quotas within political parties.

There are currently no institutional leadership development programs for tribal women in Himachal Pradesh. In contrast, Jharkhand offers regular training on leadership, legal literacy, and electoral processes through initiatives like Mahila Samakhya and PRIA. Odisha empowers women through its Mission Shakti program by transforming Self-Help Groups (SHGs) into political platforms. Himachal lacks initiatives that help women grow beyond the panchayat level.

Political parties in Himachal have also remained largely inactive in promoting tribal women leaders. No major party has made a concerted effort to identify, train, and nominate tribal women as candidates. For example, Odisha's BJD announced a 33% reservation for women in party tickets, but no such internal policy exists within Himachal's political landscape to elevate tribal women to legislative positions.

The involvement of civil society organizations in tribal political grooming is negligible in Himachal Pradesh. In tribal regions like Bharmour, Pangi, and Lahaul-Spiti, there are virtually no NGOs or advocacy groups actively working to train women for leadership roles. On the other hand, Jharkhand and



Chhattisgarh have a robust ecosystem of civil society actors nurturing female leadership from the ground up.

There is also no well-developed pipeline in Himachal Pradesh that transitions women leaders from Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to the State Assembly. Odisha and Chhattisgarh have shown how self-help groups (SHGs), district councils (Zila Parishads), and local governments (Panchayats) can lead to representation in the Assembly. In Himachal Pradesh, however, many village leaders (sarpanchs) often act on behalf of male relatives. As a result, tribal women rarely get opportunities to establish independent political identities.

The political advancement of tribal women in Himachal Pradesh is hampered by deep-rooted patriarchy, illiteracy, and economic dependence. In remote areas like Bharmour and Pangi, women are largely disconnected from administrative and political systems, leading to a lack of confidence and awareness. Without education and access to information, their ability to exercise political rights remains limited.

Given these challenges, Himachal Pradesh urgently needs to adopt localized versions of the Jharkhand and Odisha models to foster tribal women's leadership. The state government should conduct regular capacity-building camps for PRI representatives, link SHG-based women leaders to the political process, and encourage political parties to implement internal gender reservation. A special "Tribal Women Leadership Mission" could be launched in regions like Bharmour and Pangi to empower women from the grassroots to the Assembly level.

## 5. Findings & Discussion

The study of political representation among tribal women in Himachal Pradesh, especially in Bharmour and Pangi, shows that they face many challenges. These challenges include structural issues, cultural norms, institutional barriers, and geographical difficulties. A synthesis of demographic data, electoral records, and field narratives highlights a pattern of exclusion that is systemic rather than incidental. Below are the major findings derived from the preceding sections, followed by a thematic discussion:

### 5.1 Key Findings:

**Persistent Zero Representation at the Legislative Level:** Since the first Assembly election in 1967, Himachal Pradesh has never elected a single tribal woman to its Legislative Assembly, despite Scheduled Tribe (ST) reservations in constituencies like Bharmour and Pangi. This continued absence of tribal



women at the state legislative level highlights a systemic failure in inclusion, even after decades of electoral democracy and institutional reforms.

**Favorable Demographics, Yet Political Invisibility:** According to Census 2011, tribal women constitute nearly 48–49% of the population in Bharmour and Pangi regions with ST-dominated electorates. These women have shown marked improvements in literacy and social awareness over the past few decades. Despite this, their presence in state-level politics remains negligible, indicating that increased education has not translated into political empowerment.

**Tokenism in Local Governance Structures:** Although many tribal women hold elected positions in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), their roles are often symbolic. In many cases, they serve as figureheads while male relatives make key decisions, reflecting deep-rooted patriarchal norms. This form of "proxy leadership" undermines the intent of democratic decentralization and stalls the emergence of independent female political agency.

**Absence of Political Mentorship and Party-Level Support:** Mainstream political parties in Himachal Pradesh have consistently failed to nominate tribal women candidates in Assembly elections, even from ST-reserved constituencies. Internal party structures lack democratic openness and gender inclusivity. No leadership pipeline or mentorship program exists to identify, train, and promote tribal women as viable candidates.

**Comparative Underperformance Despite Better Infrastructure:** Compared to tribal-dominated states like Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh, where tribal women have successfully entered legislative politics with the help of targeted training programs, SHG mobilization, and party support, Himachal Pradesh lags significantly. These states have gradually increased the number of tribal women MLAs, while Himachal remains at zero, despite having better access to infrastructure and literacy.

## 6. Recommendations

To tackle the entrenched political exclusion of tribal women in Himachal Pradesh, particularly in the tribal constituencies of Bharmour and Pangi, a multi-layered, multi-stakeholder strategy is essential. The following recommendations are organized into five strategic pillars: legislative reform, institutional accountability, grassroots mobilization, educational empowerment, and monitoring systems.



**Legislative and Policy Reform:** To ensure gender-inclusive representation in ST-reserved constituencies, the state should introduce internal reservations for women within those seats or legally mandate political parties to nominate a fixed proportion (such as 33%) of tribal women candidates. Furthermore, a dedicated “Women in Politics Fund” should be created at the state level to provide campaign financing, legal assistance, media coverage, and grassroots mobilization support, particularly aimed at first-time tribal women candidates from remote regions.

**Institutional Reforms and Party Accountability:** All recognized political parties must undergo mandatory gender audits and internal democracy reviews, especially in tribal-dominated constituencies, to ensure they are accountable for inclusive representation. Additionally, a state-supported leadership development program should be launched, offering political training, mentorship, internships, and exposure opportunities for tribal women within governance structures and civil society organizations to create a pipeline of empowered female leaders.

**Grassroots Mobilization and Social Reform:** Women’s Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) should be leveraged as platforms for political training and awareness, serving as incubators for identifying and nurturing potential tribal women leaders. To challenge societal norms and build political aspiration, community-driven campaigns should showcase the success stories of tribal women MLAs from states like Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh through mediums such as community radio, mobile video vans, storytelling sessions, and educational content in local schools.

**Educational and Technological Empowerment:** Specialized scholarships for tribal girls from remote and marginalized areas should include modules on leadership, civic education, and democratic participation, coupled with real-world training through internships in local governance or NGOs. Political literacy should also be enhanced using community radio, WhatsApp, and mobile apps in local dialects to disseminate simple and accessible content about electoral processes, political rights, and the functioning of democratic institutions.

**Monitoring and Evaluation:** A real-time “Tribal Women in Politics” digital dashboard—hosted by the State Election Commission or the Tribal Welfare Department—should be developed to track the number of tribal women contesting elections, disaggregated party-wise nomination data, and the reach and outcomes of political training programs. This mechanism would ensure transparency, promote accountability, and measure progress in real time.



These recommendations, if implemented, would not only enable democratic inclusion but also reshape the political culture of Himachal Pradesh by opening pathways for tribal women to transition from symbolic roles to substantive leadership.

## 7. Conclusion

The continued invisibility of tribal women in the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly is not merely a result of demographic constraints, is a reflection of deep-rooted structural and systemic exclusion. Despite having Scheduled Tribe (ST) reserved constituencies such as Bharmour and Pangi, and despite the constitutional provisions aimed at ensuring inclusion, tribal women remain absent from legislative power structures. This exclusion persists even after decades of democratic decentralization under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which successfully increased women's visibility in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) but failed to create vertical mobility into higher political offices.

The experiences of Bharmour and Pangi underscore how interlocking barriers, such as patriarchal social norms, geographical remoteness, lack of political mentorship, and the absence of intra-party democracy, combine to silence the political voices of tribal women. Furthermore, political parties in the state have failed to treat tribal women as viable candidates, choosing instead to reinforce tokenism at the local level rather than promoting genuine leadership at the state level.

In contrast, states like Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh have adopted more inclusive political frameworks, ranging from SHG-based mobilization and gender-sensitive party strategies to grassroots leadership training and targeted electoral incentives. Their relative success demonstrates that deliberate institutional design and political will can significantly improve representation.

Himachal Pradesh now stands at a crossroads. To ensure tribal women's transition from symbolic to substantive political roles, the state must adopt a multi-pronged, future-oriented strategy. This includes proactive party mandates for nominating ST women, establishing leadership academies tailored to tribal contexts, offering financial and legal support for first-time candidates, and using local media, especially community radio and mobile-based platforms, to build political awareness at the grassroots level. Additionally, continuous monitoring, gender audits, and accountability frameworks must be embedded within the electoral system to track real progress.

Ultimately, the goal is not just to place tribal women in positions of power, but to create an enabling ecosystem where they can thrive as independent, respected political actors. Only then can Himachal



Pradesh truly fulfil the constitutional promise of inclusive democracy and social justice for all its citizens, regardless of gender, geography, or ethnicity.

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