



Symbolic Representation vs. Substantive Participation: Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions

Prof. (Dr.) V. K. Rai

University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India

Deepika Singh

Research Schlor, Department of Political Science, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India, Email: deepikasingh.au@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, represents one of the most ambitious experiments in gender-inclusive governance worldwide. By mandating women's participation at the grassroots level, the Indian state sought to transform historically exclusionary power structures and promote democratic deepening. However, three decades after the enactment of constitutional reservations, a persistent debate continues regarding the nature of women's participation in PRIs—whether it constitutes merely symbolic representation or has translated into substantive political participation. This paper critically examines the distinction between symbolic representation and substantive participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions using secondary data from government reports, national surveys, and scholarly studies. It analyzes patterns of women's entry into PRIs, the prevalence of proxy leadership, decision-making autonomy, and the extent of women's influence over governance outcomes. The study argues that while reservation has successfully ensured descriptive representation, substantive participation remains uneven and deeply mediated by socio-cultural norms, caste hierarchies, institutional



constraints, and administrative practices. By synthesizing empirical evidence from across Indian states, the paper highlights the conditions under which women's political presence moves beyond symbolism toward genuine participation and democratic empowerment.

1. Introduction

Democratic representation is not merely a question of numerical inclusion but also of meaningful participation in decision-making processes. In the context of gender and governance, this distinction has been widely articulated through the concepts of symbolic, descriptive, and substantive representation. While symbolic representation refers to the presence of women as markers of inclusion, substantive participation implies the actual exercise of political authority and influence over policy outcomes. India's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), constitutionally recognized through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, provide a critical arena for examining this distinction, particularly in relation to women's political participation.

The reservation of not less than one-third of seats for women in PRIs—later expanded to 50 percent in several states—was envisioned as a transformative intervention aimed at correcting historical gender exclusion from political institutions [1]. By facilitating the large-scale entry of women into rural governance, the amendment positioned Panchayati Raj as a vehicle for grassroots democratization and social justice. Today, India has more than one million elected women representatives in PRIs, making it a global leader in women's political representation at the local level [2]. This numerical achievement, however, has not automatically translated into uniform empowerment or leadership.

A growing body of research points to the persistence of symbolic participation, wherein women occupy elected positions but remain excluded from substantive decision-making. Practices such as proxy leadership, bureaucratic sidelining, and informal male dominance continue to undermine the authority of elected women representatives in many regions [3]. In such contexts, women's presence fulfills constitutional and electoral requirements without significantly altering power relations or governance priorities. This raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of reservation as an instrument of empowerment and the conditions necessary for transforming symbolic representation into substantive participation.

At the same time, empirical studies also document cases where women leaders have exercised genuine authority, reshaped governance priorities, and improved development outcomes, particularly in areas



related to health, sanitation, and social welfare [4]. These contrasting experiences suggest that women's participation in PRIs is neither uniformly symbolic nor uniformly substantive, but rather contingent upon a range of social, institutional, and contextual factors. Understanding these variations is essential for evaluating the democratic potential of gender quotas in local governance.

This paper seeks to critically examine women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions through the analytical lens of symbolic versus substantive representation. Using secondary data from government reports, national surveys, and peer-reviewed studies, it explores the structural and socio-cultural determinants that shape women's political agency in PRIs. The analysis situates women's participation within broader debates on decentralization, gender justice, and democratic deepening, highlighting both the achievements and limitations of India's reservation policy.

By focusing on the quality of participation rather than merely its quantity, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of women's political empowerment at the grassroots level. It argues that while symbolic representation is an important first step toward inclusion, substantive participation requires sustained institutional reforms, capacity-building, and socio-cultural transformation. The paper ultimately emphasizes that the democratic promise of Panchayati Raj can be fully realized only when women's presence in local governance translates into genuine political voice and authority.

2. Review of Literature

The debate on women's political participation has evolved significantly from concerns of numerical inclusion to questions of power, agency, and influence. In political theory, this shift is often articulated through the distinction between **descriptive (symbolic) representation** and **substantive participation**. While descriptive representation emphasizes the presence of women in political institutions, substantive participation focuses on their capacity to influence decisions, shape policies, and exercise authority. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India provide a rich empirical context to examine this distinction due to the scale and longevity of women's reservation in local governance.

Early studies on Panchayati Raj primarily focused on institutional design and democratic decentralization. Scholars such as Mathew [5] and Manor [6] viewed PRIs as instruments for participatory democracy, capable of empowering marginalized groups through proximity to governance. However, women's participation remained peripheral in these analyses until the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act introduced mandatory reservation. This constitutional intervention marked a turning



point in the literature, prompting scholars to assess whether institutional inclusion could transform entrenched gender hierarchies.

Feminist political theorists have long cautioned against equating presence with power. Pitkin's seminal work on representation [7] distinguishes between descriptive representation and substantive representation, arguing that numerical presence alone does not guarantee advocacy or influence. This theoretical framework has been widely applied in studies of women in PRIs. Rai [8] and Jayal [9] argue that quotas can create entry points for women but do not automatically dismantle patriarchal norms embedded in political institutions. These insights laid the groundwork for analyzing women's participation in PRIs as potentially symbolic rather than transformative.

Empirical research following the implementation of reservation policies reveals mixed outcomes. Several large-scale studies document the dramatic increase in women's numerical representation in PRIs. According to Ministry of Panchayati Raj data, women constitute nearly half of all elected representatives in rural local governments in states that have adopted 50 percent reservation [2]. This achievement is often celebrated as a global milestone in gender-inclusive governance. However, scholars caution that numerical dominance does not necessarily translate into substantive participation.

The phenomenon of **proxy leadership** has received extensive scholarly attention. Baviskar [10] and Panda [3] highlight how women elected to Panchayats are often represented by male relatives—husbands, fathers, or sons—who exercise de facto power. This practice, commonly referred to as the “Sarpanch Pati” phenomenon, is cited as a primary indicator of symbolic representation. Studies suggest that proxy leadership is particularly prevalent in regions characterized by low female literacy, rigid patriarchal norms, and strong caste hierarchies. These findings raise concerns about the democratic legitimacy of women's participation when formal authority is divorced from actual decision-making.

At the same time, quantitative studies offer evidence that women's leadership can lead to substantive outcomes under certain conditions. Chattopadhyay and Duflo's influential study [4] demonstrates that women leaders allocate resources differently than men, prioritizing public goods related to women's needs such as water and sanitation. Subsequent studies by Beaman et al. [11] suggest that exposure to women leaders can reduce gender bias among voters and increase aspirations among young girls. These findings challenge the notion that women's participation in PRIs is merely symbolic and underscore the importance of contextual factors in shaping leadership outcomes.



Caste and class emerge as critical mediating variables in the literature. Guru [12] and Jodhka [13] argue that women from marginalized castes face layered exclusions that limit their ability to exercise authority even when elected. Studies from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan document instances where Dalit women leaders encounter social boycott, administrative non-cooperation, and intimidation when asserting their roles [14]. These experiences complicate the symbolic–substantive dichotomy by revealing how representation can be simultaneously formal and constrained by social power relations.

Education and capacity-building are consistently identified as enabling factors for substantive participation. Kaushik [15] and Vidya [16] argue that literacy, political awareness, and administrative training enhance women’s confidence and reduce dependence on male intermediaries. Government and NGO evaluations indicate that trained women representatives are more likely to attend meetings, question officials, and initiate development projects [17]. However, the literature also notes that training programs are uneven in quality and reach, limiting their transformative potential.

Institutional constraints within the Panchayati Raj system further shape women’s participation. Scholars such as Sudarshan [18] and Rao and Hazarika [19] argue that limited financial devolution and bureaucratic dominance restrict the autonomy of PRIs as a whole, disproportionately affecting women leaders who lack informal networks. In such contexts, women’s participation may appear symbolic not due to lack of capacity but due to structural limitations that curtail meaningful decision-making.

Comparative regional studies highlight significant variation in outcomes. States with strong decentralization traditions and social reform movements, such as Kerala and Karnataka, exhibit higher levels of women’s substantive participation compared to northern states [20]. These differences underscore the importance of political culture, civil society engagement, and administrative practices in shaping the quality of participation. The literature thus moves beyond a binary classification of symbolic versus substantive participation to emphasize a continuum influenced by regional and institutional contexts.

3. Research Methodology and Data Sources

The present study adopts a descriptive–analytical research design to examine the nature of women’s participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India, with particular emphasis on the distinction between symbolic representation and substantive participation. Given the nationwide scale of women’s reservation in PRIs and the availability of extensive institutional datasets, the research is based exclusively on secondary sources. This approach enables a comprehensive and comparative assessment



of women's political participation across regions, social groups, and institutional contexts without the methodological constraints of large-scale primary fieldwork.

The study is anchored in feminist political theory and decentralization studies, drawing upon conceptual frameworks that differentiate between descriptive representation and substantive political agency. By synthesizing empirical evidence from official statistics, policy documents, and peer-reviewed scholarship, the methodology facilitates a critical evaluation of whether women's numerical presence in PRIs has translated into meaningful decision-making power and leadership influence.

3.1 Nature and Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is national, encompassing Panchayati Raj Institutions across Indian states and Union Territories that have implemented the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. While the analysis considers national-level trends, it also draws on state-level and regional evidence to highlight variations in outcomes. The temporal scope extends from the implementation of constitutional reservations in 1993 to the most recent period for which verified secondary data is available.

The focus is primarily on the Gram Panchayat level, where women's representation is most extensive and where the symbolic–substantive distinction is most visible. However, evidence from higher tiers—Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads—is also considered to examine whether women's participation diminishes as institutional power increases.

3.2 Sources of Data

The study relies on the following categories of secondary data sources:

1. **Government of India Publications:** Reports of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj provide comprehensive data on the composition, functioning, and performance of PRIs, including statistics on elected women representatives and leadership positions [2], [14].
2. **State Election Commission Data:** Panchayat election statistics from multiple states are used to analyze patterns of women's candidature, electoral success, and leadership distribution across tiers of PRIs [21].



3. **Census of India (2001 and 2011):** Census data is used to contextualize women's participation within broader socio-demographic indicators such as literacy, workforce participation, caste composition, and rural population structure [22].
4. **National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4 and NFHS-5):** These datasets are employed to examine correlations between women's leadership and social development indicators, including sanitation coverage, maternal health, and access to public services [23].
5. **Policy Reports and Evaluations:** Documents from NITI Aayog, Planning Commission, UN Women, and the World Bank provide analytical insights into decentralization, gender governance, and institutional capacity [17], [24].
6. **Peer-Reviewed Academic Literature:** Scholarly articles and books published in reputed journals and academic presses form the theoretical and empirical foundation of the study [7], [11], [18].

All data sources used are publicly accessible, institutionally authenticated, and methodologically transparent, ensuring reliability and academic credibility.

3.3 Analytical Framework and Methods

The analytical framework of the study is structured around the symbolic–substantive participation continuum. Symbolic representation is operationalized through indicators such as numerical presence, reservation compliance, and formal occupancy of leadership positions. Substantive participation is assessed through indicators related to decision-making autonomy, leadership roles in Panchayat proceedings, influence over budgeting and planning, and governance outcomes associated with women's leadership.

Quantitative analysis involves descriptive statistics, percentage analysis, and comparative trend analysis to assess patterns of women's representation and leadership across regions and over time. Qualitative thematic analysis is applied to interpret findings from policy documents, government evaluations, and scholarly studies, focusing on themes such as proxy leadership, caste and gender intersectionality, institutional constraints, and capacity-building.



4. Analysis and Discussion: Symbolic Representation vs. Substantive Participation

Women’s participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India presents a paradoxical reality. On the one hand, constitutional reservation has ensured unprecedented numerical inclusion of women in local governance; on the other, the translation of this inclusion into substantive political participation remains uneven. This section analyzes the nature of women’s participation through empirical patterns, institutional practices, and governance outcomes, distinguishing between symbolic representation and substantive participation. To enhance analytical clarity, selected tables based on secondary data are incorporated.

4.1 Expansion of Women’s Descriptive Representation in PRIs

The most visible outcome of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is the dramatic rise in women’s numerical presence in PRIs. Government data indicates that women now constitute nearly half of all elected representatives in Panchayats across states that have adopted 50 percent reservation [1], [2]. This transformation marks a radical departure from the pre-1993 scenario, where women’s presence in rural local bodies was marginal.

Table 4.1: Women’s Representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (India)

Level of PRI	% Women Representatives (Approx.)
Gram Panchayat	46–50%
Panchayat Samiti	38–42%
Zila Parishad	32–35%

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2020–21 [2]

The table demonstrates that while women’s representation is highest at the Gram Panchayat level, it declines at higher tiers. This vertical disparity suggests that women’s participation is more readily accepted at the village level, whereas higher decision-making arenas remain more resistant to gender inclusion. Such patterns reflect the persistence of patriarchal norms and political gatekeeping, reinforcing the argument that descriptive representation alone does not ensure substantive participation.

4.2 Symbolic Representation and the Persistence of Proxy Leadership



Symbolic representation becomes most evident in the phenomenon of proxy leadership. Numerous studies document cases where elected women representatives function as nominal heads, while male relatives exercise actual authority [3], [4]. This practice, popularly referred to as the “Sarpanch Pati” phenomenon, undermines the democratic intent of women’s reservation.

Proxy leadership is not uniformly distributed; it is shaped by education, caste, and socio-economic dependency. Women with limited literacy or economic autonomy are more vulnerable to proxy control, as are first-time elected representatives. Administrative practices further reinforce this pattern, as officials often engage informally with male relatives rather than elected women leaders.

Table 4.2: Indicators of Symbolic Representation in PRIs

Indicator	High Presence	Implication
Proxy decision-making by male relatives	Yes	Symbolic authority
Women’s limited role in financial decisions	Yes	Restricted participation
Dependence on male intermediaries	Yes	Weak autonomy
Formal attendance without deliberative role	Yes	Token participation

Compiled from MoPR reports and EPW studies [3], [5]

The prevalence of these indicators suggests that in many Panchayats, women’s presence fulfills constitutional requirements without altering underlying power relations. Symbolic representation, in this sense, masks the continuity of patriarchal governance under the veneer of gender inclusion.

4.3 Determinants of Substantive Participation

Despite these challenges, evidence also points to conditions under which women’s participation becomes substantive. Substantive participation is characterized by decision-making autonomy, leadership in planning and budgeting, and influence over policy priorities. Education, political experience, and institutional support emerge as critical determinants.

Women leaders with basic education and exposure to capacity-building programs are more likely to assert authority, engage with officials, and resist proxy control [6]. Re-election also plays a significant role; women serving multiple terms demonstrate increased confidence and administrative competence.

Table 4.3: Factors Influencing Substantive Participation

Factor	Influence on Participation
Education and literacy	Strong positive
Re-election / political experience	Strong positive
Training and capacity-building	Moderate to strong
Supportive administrative environment	Moderate
Caste and social status	Differential

Based on secondary synthesis of UN Women and MoPR evaluations [7], [8]

These findings highlight that substantive participation is contingent rather than automatic. Reservation creates opportunity structures, but realization depends on enabling social and institutional conditions.

4.4 Governance Outcomes: Do Women Leaders Make a Difference?

One of the strongest arguments for substantive participation lies in governance outcomes. Empirical studies suggest that women leaders prioritize welfare-oriented policies, particularly in areas related to water supply, sanitation, nutrition, and health [9]. These priorities align closely with women's everyday experiences and community needs.

Table 4.4: Governance Priorities in Women-Led Panchayats

Sector	Observed Focus
Drinking water	High
Sanitation	High
Health and nutrition	High
Education	Moderate
Infrastructure contracts	Low to moderate

Derived from NFHS-linked studies and policy evaluations [9], [10]



While such outcomes suggest substantive engagement, it is important to note that women’s influence is often confined to welfare sectors, whereas control over financial and infrastructural decisions remains male-dominated. This selective participation underscores the partial nature of substantive empowerment.

4.5 Caste, Class, and Gender: Intersectional Constraints

The symbolic–substantive divide is further complicated by caste and class dynamics. Women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically weaker sections face compounded barriers that limit their leadership effectiveness [11]. Studies document instances of social boycott, intimidation, and administrative non-cooperation faced by Dalit women leaders who attempt to assert authority.

Table 4.5: Intersectional Barriers to Substantive Participation

Social Category	Nature of Constraint
Upper-caste women	Gender norms
OBC women	Gender + class
Dalit women	Gender + caste + social exclusion
Poor women	Economic dependency

Synthesized from EPW and Human Rights Watch reports [11], [12]

These patterns indicate that women’s participation cannot be analyzed solely through a gender lens; intersectionality is central to understanding why symbolic representation persists for certain groups more than others.

4.6 Institutional Constraints and Administrative Mediation

Institutional design and administrative practices significantly influence women’s participation. Despite constitutional provisions for devolution, PRIs often lack financial autonomy, functioning primarily as implementing agencies for higher-level schemes [13]. Bureaucratic dominance limits the scope for local decision-making, disproportionately affecting women leaders who lack informal political networks. Administrative attitudes toward women leaders range from paternalistic support to overt disregard. Such practices reinforce symbolic participation by restricting women’s engagement to procedural compliance rather than substantive governance.



4.7 Discussion: From Symbolism to Substance

The analysis reveals that women's participation in PRIs exists along a continuum rather than a binary divide. Symbolic representation dominates in contexts characterized by low education, strong patriarchy, and weak institutional support. Substantive participation emerges where women possess education, experience, and institutional backing.

Importantly, symbolic representation is not entirely without value. Scholars argue that even nominal presence can have long-term transformative effects by normalizing women's visibility in public life and altering social attitudes over time [14]. However, without deliberate interventions, symbolic representation risks becoming an endpoint rather than a transitional stage.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The constitutional reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represents a landmark intervention in India's democratic experiment, aimed at correcting historical gender exclusion from political power. Over three decades since the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, women's numerical presence in rural local governance has increased dramatically, positioning India as a global exemplar of gender-inclusive decentralization. However, this study demonstrates that numerical inclusion alone does not guarantee meaningful political empowerment. The distinction between symbolic representation and substantive participation remains central to understanding women's experiences in PRIs.

At the same time, the study highlights evidence of substantive participation under certain conditions. Women leaders who possess education, political experience, and institutional support demonstrate greater autonomy and influence over governance processes. Empirical findings indicate that women-led Panchayats tend to prioritize welfare-oriented policies, particularly in sectors such as sanitation, drinking water, health, and social security. These outcomes suggest that women's leadership can contribute to more responsive and inclusive governance when structural and socio-cultural barriers are mitigated.

Importantly, the symbolic–substantive divide should not be understood as a rigid binary. Women's participation in PRIs exists along a continuum shaped by intersecting factors of gender, caste, class, education, and regional political culture. Symbolic representation may serve as an initial stage in a longer



process of empowerment, gradually normalizing women's presence in public life and creating pathways for future leadership. However, without deliberate policy interventions, symbolic inclusion risks becoming an endpoint rather than a transitional phase toward substantive participation.

The findings of this paper underscore that women's political empowerment through Panchayati Raj is an ongoing and uneven process. Reservation has successfully opened institutional doors, but the realization of its democratic promise depends on sustained efforts to transform social attitudes, strengthen institutional capacity, and enhance women's agency. Evaluating women's participation through the lens of symbolic versus substantive representation thus provides critical insights into both the achievements and limitations of gender-inclusive decentralization in India.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

To bridge the gap between symbolic representation and substantive participation, the study proposes the following policy recommendations:

1. **Strengthening Capacity-Building and Political Education:** Training programs for elected women representatives should be continuous, practical, and context-sensitive. Beyond procedural knowledge, these programs must focus on leadership skills, financial management, and legal literacy, enabling women to engage confidently with administrative systems.
2. **Institutional Measures to Curb Proxy Leadership:** Clear administrative guidelines should mandate direct interaction between officials and elected women representatives. Mechanisms for monitoring and penalizing proxy governance must be institutionalized to protect women's autonomy in decision-making.
3. **Educational and Economic Support:** Adult education initiatives and livelihood support programs can enhance women's independence and bargaining power, reducing reliance on male intermediaries. Economic autonomy is a critical foundation for substantive political participation.
4. **Intersectional Support for Marginalized Women:** Dalit, Adivasi, and economically vulnerable women leaders require targeted interventions, including legal safeguards, grievance redressal mechanisms, and specialized leadership training, to address compounded forms of exclusion.
5. **Deepening Devolution and Institutional Autonomy:** Substantive participation is contingent upon the empowerment of PRIs themselves. Greater financial devolution, timely fund transfers, and reduced bureaucratic interference are essential to enable women leaders to exercise real authority.



6. **Gender Sensitization of Administrative Personnel:** Officials working with PRIs should undergo gender-sensitization training to challenge biases and foster an institutional culture that respects women's leadership.

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