



Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in India: Representation, Roles, and Contemporary Challenges

Malay Sen

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Arts, Faculty of Humanities, Mangalayatan University, Beswan,
Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

The institutionalization of women's political participation in rural local governance through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act marked a transformative moment in India's democratic trajectory. By mandating a minimum of one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the reform sought to deepen decentralization while advancing gender justice. Over three decades later, women's numerical representation in PRIs exceeds 33% nationally, with several states providing 50% reservation. However, the relationship between descriptive representation and substantive empowerment remains complex. This article critically examines the constitutional and institutional framework governing women's participation, trends and patterns of representation, functional roles and governance outcomes, and persistent structural and socio-cultural challenges. The paper argues that while PRIs have expanded political opportunities for women, meaningful empowerment requires strengthening institutional autonomy, capacity-building mechanisms, and gender-sensitive governance reforms.

Introduction:

The idea of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India is deeply rooted in the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. Although the constitutional framework of Panchayati Raj was established decades after



independence, its normative foundation lies in Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj (village self-rule). The empowerment of women in grassroots governance through their participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions is central to democratic deepening and social justice. In India, decentralization reforms in the early 1990s restructured rural governance by constitutionally recognizing Panchayati Raj Institutions as units of local self-government. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) institutionalized a three-tier PRI system, Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zila Parishad at the district level and mandated reservations for women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The amendment sought not merely administrative decentralization but participatory democracy. Women's inclusion was framed as both a corrective to historical exclusion and a strategy for enhancing governance outcomes.

History of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs):

The concept of local self-governance in India dates back to ancient times. Village assemblies such as the Sabha and Samiti during the Vedic period functioned as grassroots democratic institutions. During the medieval period, village panchayats continued to regulate social and economic life. Under British rule, local governance received formal recognition through measures like: Government of India Act (1919), Government of India Act (1935).

Mahatma Gandhi strongly advocated Gram Swaraj (village self-rule). He believed that India's democracy should be built from the bottom up, with self-sufficient and autonomous villages forming the foundation of governance. For Gandhi, village was the basic unit of democracy, power should be decentralized, women should play an equal role in nation-building. Although his vision was not fully implemented immediately after independence, it deeply influenced later decentralization reforms.

After 1947, India attempted to institutionalize rural local governance.

- i) Community Development Programme (1952). Launched to promote rural development, but it lacked people's participation.
- ii) Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957), recommended, Three-tier Panchayati Raj system (Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, Zilla Parishad), and democratic decentralization. Based on these recommendations, the Panchayati Raj system was formally inaugurated in 1959 in Rajasthan.

The most significant milestone in PRI history was the enactment of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. This amendment gave constitutional status to PRIs, made regular elections mandatory, established a three-tier structure, introduced reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women,



mandated at least 33% reservation for women (many states later increased it to 50%). This marked a transformative shift in grassroots democracy and gender inclusion.

Status of Women in Panchayati Raj institutions in India:

Before the 73rd Amendment women's participation in local governance was negligible. Patriarchal norms restricted women's public roles. At that time political participation was largely male-dominated. Very few women who entered politics often belonged to elite or politically influential families. The status of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has undergone a significant transformation since the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. Over 1.4 million women serve in PRIs across India. Constitutionally mandated reservation of at least one-third of seats for women raised to 50% in several states has resulted in women forming nearly half of the elected representatives in many rural local bodies across India. This has positioned India as one of the largest examples of grassroots gender-inclusive governance in the world. Women today serve not only as ward or booth members but also as Sarpanches, Pradhans, and Chairpersons of Panchayats and municipalities, actively participating in decision-making processes. Although their status reflects a complex mix of empowerment and constraints. While many women representatives have demonstrated leadership by prioritizing issues such as health, sanitation, education, drinking water, and social welfare, challenges such as limited literacy, lack of administrative training, patriarchal interference, and instances of proxy representation continue to restrict their autonomy. Financial dependency and inadequate devolution of powers to PRIs further limit their effectiveness. Despite these obstacles, participation in PRIs has enhanced women's political awareness, confidence, and public visibility, gradually reshaping gender relations in rural India and strengthening democratic decentralization.

Representation of Women in Panchayati Raj institutions in India:

The representation of women in PRIs in India constitutes one of the most extensive experiments in gender-based political reservation globally. The constitutional mandate introduced through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act institutionalized women's political participation by reserving not less than one-third of seats and chairperson positions at all three tiers of rural local governance Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad. This reform fundamentally altered the gender composition of rural political institutions and expanded access to formal decision-making spaces for women.



Article 243D of the Constitution mandates the reservation of seats for women in PRIs, including rotational reservation of chairperson posts. The policy also intersects with reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, thereby ensuring representation for women belonging to historically marginalized communities. Over time, several states such as Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal have increased women's reservation from 33% to 50%, further consolidating their numerical presence.

Since the mid-1990s, women's representation in PRIs has grown substantially. Women now constitute more than one-third of all elected representatives in rural local bodies nationwide, with some states reporting near parity due to enhanced quotas. India thus accounts for millions of elected women representatives at the grassroots level, making it one of the largest platforms for women's political participation in the world. This quantitative expansion reflects a significant shift from the pre-reform period, when women's participation in local governance was minimal and largely symbolic. The institutionalization of reservation has normalized women's presence in electoral politics at the village level and created opportunities for first-generation political actors.

An Important dimension of representation is its intersectional character. Because reservations for women operate within broader caste-based quotas, women from SC and ST communities have gained access to elected office. This has diversified the sociological profile of rural leadership and challenged traditional power hierarchies. However, representation remains mediated by local socio-economic structures, and women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face greater constraints in exercising authority.

Despite uniform constitutional provisions, the effectiveness of women's representation varies across states. Differences in political commitment, administrative support, fiscal devolution, and training mechanisms influence the quality of participation. States with stronger decentralization frameworks and sustained capacity-building initiatives tend to demonstrate more substantive engagement by women representatives.

While numerical inclusion has been largely successful, the critical issue concerns the translation of descriptive representation into substantive representation. In many regions, women have demonstrated leadership in prioritizing social welfare issues such as health, sanitation, and education. However, instances of proxy representation, where male relatives exercise informal authority, continue to undermine independent agency in certain contexts.



Thus, the representation of women in PRIs reflects a complex interplay between constitutional design and socio-cultural realities. Although reservations have significantly democratized access to political office, the consolidation of women's substantive political power requires deeper institutional reforms and transformation of entrenched gender norms.

The Role of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions:

The role of women in 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has significantly transformed the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India by expanding women's participation in grassroots governance and strengthening democratic decentralization. Since the implementation of this constitutional reform, women have increasingly assumed important positions as members, Sarpanch, Pradhan, and chairpersons in village-level institutions, ensuring broader and more inclusive political representation in rural governance. Their participation has enhanced decision-making processes within Panchayats, where they actively deliberate on village development plans, budget allocations, and the implementation of welfare programmes. Women representatives also play a crucial role in supervising and monitoring the execution of major government schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), and various sanitation, health, and nutrition initiatives aimed at improving rural living standards. Women Panchayat leaders frequently prioritize issues related to women and child welfare, including maternal health, child nutrition, girls' education, and the prevention of domestic violence, often working in coordination with programmes like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Their involvement also contributes to strengthening educational initiatives by encouraging the enrollment of girls in schools and monitoring the functioning of primary educational institutions in rural areas. Furthermore, women representatives play an important role in promoting public health and sanitation by organizing awareness campaigns on hygiene, safe drinking water, and rural health services. Many women leaders also advocate for social justice by addressing issues such as caste discrimination, gender-based violence, child marriage, and other forms of social exclusion. Alongside these efforts, they contribute to local economic development by encouraging the formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), supporting skill-development initiatives, promoting micro-credit activities, and facilitating livelihood programmes that enhance the economic independence of rural women. Women in PRIs are also actively involved in environmental conservation initiatives, including watershed management, afforestation, and water conservation, which are essential for sustainable rural development. In many communities, they act as mediators in family and village disputes, helping to resolve conflicts through dialogue and community-based solutions. Moreover, several studies suggest that women leaders tend to emphasize transparency and accountability in local governance, particularly



in financial management and the monitoring of public resources. Their presence in Panchayati Raj Institutions has also contributed to the development of leadership skills among rural women and has served as an inspiration for other women to participate in public life and local politics. Thus, women's participation in PRIs has gradually moved beyond symbolic representation toward substantive engagement, making a significant contribution to rural development, gender empowerment, and the deepening of democratic governance in India.

Major Challenges to Women's Representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions:

Women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has increased significantly after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. Despite constitutional reservation and increased numerical participation, their representation is accompanied by several structural, socio-cultural, and institutional challenges. A deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset and traditional gender norms often limit women's autonomy and discourage their active engagement in political decision-making. In many cases, the phenomenon of proxy leadership emerges, where elected women representatives are overshadowed by male family members, particularly husbands or relatives, who exercise actual authority. Moreover, many women enter local governance without prior political exposure, which affects their confidence, leadership capacity, and decision-making abilities. Educational constraints, including illiteracy or limited formal education, further hinder their ability to understand administrative procedures, financial records, and legal provisions. Economic dependence on family members also restricts their independent functioning in political roles. Women representatives frequently struggle to balance dual responsibilities, as they must manage household duties alongside their public office, leading to time constraints and increased stress. Gender-based violence, intimidation, and harassment ranging from verbal abuse to physical threats, also act as deterrents to effective participation. Limited access to resources, inadequate control over financial allocations, and insufficient administrative support further constrain their ability to implement development initiatives. Political marginalization within party structures often denies women adequate backing and leadership opportunities. Furthermore, women from marginalized caste and class backgrounds face multiple layers of discrimination. Institutional weaknesses, such as the absence of adequate mentoring, training programmes, and grievance redressal mechanisms, also affect their effectiveness in governance. Resistance from male colleagues sometimes creates additional obstacles in implementing local development policies. Additionally, limited leadership skills, lack of political training, and communication barriers, especially when official documents and correspondence are prepared in English, reduce women's ability to participate confidently in deliberations. Therefore, although reservation has significantly increased women's representation in local governance, these



persistent socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers continue to limit their full empowerment and effective participation in rural political institutions.

Policy Suggestions for Strengthening Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions:

The following suggestions aim to address structural inequalities, enhance leadership competencies, improve administrative efficiency, and create an enabling environment for women representatives to exercise their authority meaningfully. These recommendations focus not only on policy reforms but also on transforming societal attitudes and governance practices to ensure inclusive and gender-sensitive rural development.

Strengthening the effective participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions requires a comprehensive set of institutional, social, and policy interventions. First, regular capacity-building programmes should be institutionalized to train elected women representatives in governance procedures, budgeting, digital literacy, and their legal powers. Leadership development workshops are also essential to enhance confidence, public speaking abilities, negotiation skills, and decision-making capacity. Addressing the issue of proxy representation is equally important; strict enforcement of existing regulations is necessary to prevent interference by male relatives in the functioning of elected women leaders. To overcome communication barriers, official documents, guidelines, and correspondence should be made accessible in regional languages. Ensuring financial autonomy and transparency is another critical step, allowing women representatives direct access to funds, bank accounts, and financial decision-making processes. The formation of support networks or federations of elected women representatives can further promote peer learning, collective advocacy, and knowledge sharing.

In addition, gender-sensitization programmes should be conducted for male members and local communities to challenge patriarchal attitudes and encourage supportive environments for women leaders. Establishing effective legal protection and grievance redressal mechanisms is necessary to address harassment, intimidation, and discrimination faced by women representatives. Political parties also have an important role in promoting women's leadership beyond reserved seats by providing mentorship and organizational support. Promoting education and digital literacy through targeted initiatives can help women representatives participate more effectively in e-governance systems. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be introduced to periodically assess the quality of women's participation, focusing on substantive empowerment rather than mere numerical representation. Furthermore, the uniform implementation of 50% reservation across all states can strengthen women's collective influence in local governance.



The establishment of dedicated resource centres or help desks at the block level can provide legal guidance, technical assistance, and administrative clarification to women representatives. Special training in digital governance, including e-Panchayat systems, online reporting, and digital documentation, would further improve administrative efficiency. Community awareness campaigns should also be undertaken to inform rural citizens about the constitutional authority and decision-making role of women representatives. Encouraging greater participation of women voters in Gram Sabha meetings can build stronger grassroots support for women leaders. Collaboration between women representatives and Self-Help Groups can also promote livelihood generation and social mobilization within rural communities. Finally, integrating legal literacy programmes will help women representatives better understand constitutional provisions, rights, and responsibilities associated with local governance, thereby strengthening their capacity to function as effective leaders at the grassroots level.

Conclusion:

The inclusion of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions constitutes one of the most significant institutional innovations in India's democratic decentralization process. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has substantially enhanced women's descriptive representation, thereby expanding opportunities for political participation and leadership at the grassroots level. However, the transition from numerical inclusion to substantive empowerment remains uneven and contingent upon multiple structural and socio-cultural factors. Effective empowerment depends not only on constitutional provisions but also on the depth of institutional decentralization, the dismantling of entrenched patriarchal norms, and the provision of genuine fiscal and administrative autonomy to local bodies. Persistent challenges such as proxy representation, capacity limitations, and unequal power relations continue to constrain women's independent political agency. Consequently, bridging the gap between representation and real influence necessitates sustained policy interventions, institutional strengthening, and broader social transformation. In this context, Panchayati Raj Institutions hold considerable potential to function as arenas of gender-equitable governance. Realizing this potential requires a comprehensive approach that integrates legal reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and normative change within rural society. Only through such multidimensional efforts can decentralized governance evolve into a meaningful instrument for advancing gender justice and inclusive democratic development in rural India.

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