



# A Critical Study Of Political Participation Of Women In Panchayati Raj

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## Abstract

The Panchayat Raj system, a cornerstone of decentralized governance in India, has significantly opened avenues for women's political participation. Mandated by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, which reserves one-third of the seats for women in all Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at the village, intermediate, and district levels, this system has been a transformative force, challenging traditional patriarchal norms and bringing women into the mainstream of local decision-making. Before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, women's involvement in formal political structures at the grassroots level was negligible. Their roles were largely confined to the domestic sphere, and societal attitudes often discouraged their public engagement. The reservation policy, therefore, was not merely a symbolic gesture but a deliberate constitutional intervention aimed at rectifying historical imbalances and empowering women to take charge of their own development and that of their communities. The impact of this Increased participation has been multifaceted. It has led to a visible increase in the number of women representatives, often referred to as "*Sarpanch Didis*" or "*Panch Gramin*," who are now actively involved in local governance. This numerical presence, while not uniformly translating into substantive power in all cases, has undeniably raised the visibility of women in public life and normalized their presence in leadership roles. Many women representatives, initially hesitant or proxy figures for male relatives, have gradually



gained confidence, acquired knowledge of administrative procedures, and effectively articulated the needs of their constituencies.

### **Keywords:**

Women, Panchayati, Political, Participation

### **Introduction**

Women's participation in Panchayats has brought a distinct gender perspective to local planning and development. Issues that were previously overlooked or given less priority, such as access to clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, healthcare for women and children, education for girls, and addressing gender-based violence, are now more likely to be championed by women representatives. Their lived experiences enable them to identify and address the specific challenges faced by women and marginalized groups within their communities, leading to more inclusive and equitable development outcomes. (E.A.Narayana, 2023)

The experience of being elected and actively participating in Panchayat meetings has empowered women individually. It has enhanced their self-esteem, improved their mobility, and broadened their social networks. Many women who were once confined to their homes are now traveling, attending training programs, interacting with government officials, and engaging with their constituents. This newfound agency extends beyond their political roles, often leading to greater say in household decisions and increased respect within their families and communities.

The journey of women's political participation in Panchayat Raj is not without its challenges. The phenomenon of "proxy" or "Sarpanch Pati" (husband of the Sarpanch) where male relatives effectively run the show while the elected woman remains a rubber stamp, is a significant hurdle. Illiteracy, lack of awareness about their rights and responsibilities, limited access to information, and continued societal resistance from



patriarchal structures often hinder women from exercising their full authority. Additionally, financial constraints, lack of proper training, and the burden of domestic responsibilities further impede their effective functioning.

The Panchayat Raj system has undeniably laid a strong foundation for women's political empowerment at the grassroots. To further strengthen their participation, continuous efforts are needed to address the existing gaps. This includes robust capacity building and training programs to enhance their leadership skills, knowledge of governance, and financial management. Campaigns to raise awareness about women's political rights and responsibilities, both among women themselves and within the wider community, are crucial to combat proxyism and societal resistance. Moreover, fostering a supportive environment through women's self-help groups and federations can provide a platform for sharing experiences, building solidarity, and collectively addressing challenges. (Singh, 2022)

The concept of local self-governance in India, embodied by the Panchayat Raj system, is not a modern invention but a deeply rooted tradition that stretches back millennia. From the ancient "sabhas" of the Vedic period to the constitutionally mandated institutions of today, the history of Panchayat Raj is a testament to India's enduring commitment to decentralized administration and community participation. This journey, marked by periods of flourishing and decline, ultimately culminated in a renewed push for grassroots democracy, fundamentally reshaping the political landscape of the nation.

In ancient India, self-governing village bodies, often referred to as "sabhas" or "panchayats" (councils of five persons), played a crucial role in administering local affairs, settling disputes, and managing resources. These institutions fostered a sense of community ownership and direct participation in governance. However, with the advent of various empires and the establishment of centralized rule, the autonomy of these local bodies gradually diminished. The Mughal period, for instance, saw the rise



of the Zamindari system, which focused more on revenue collection than local administration, further eroding the traditional panchayat structure.

The British colonial era brought about significant changes. Initially, the British largely disregarded indigenous local governance structures. However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, due to administrative expediency and growing nationalist sentiments, some reforms were introduced. Lord Mayo's Resolution of 1870 and Lord Ripon's Resolution of 1882 are considered crucial steps, as they aimed at promoting local self-government, albeit with limited powers and often with a focus on British administrative interests. The Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935 also made provisions for provincial autonomy, leading to some efforts by elected provincial governments to democratize local self-governance institutions. Yet, true responsible government at the grassroots level remained largely elusive. (M.Sarumathy, 2022)

## Literature Review

Singh et al. (2022) : The dream of "Gram Swaraj" (village self-governance), passionately advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, became a cornerstone of the independence movement. Gandhi envisioned a decentralized political system where every village would be empowered to manage its own affairs.

Dhawan et al. (2021) : Post-independence, the framers of the Indian Constitution, while not immediately granting constitutional status to Panchayats due to the prevailing political instability and other priorities, included Article 40 under the Directive Principles of State Policy, urging the state to organize village panchayats and endow them with powers and authority as units of self-government.

Jene et al. (2021) : The real impetus for the modern Panchayat Raj system came in the late 1950s. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), appointed to examine the Community Development Programme and National Extension Service, strongly recommended the establishment of a three-tier Panchayati Raj system: Gram



Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zila Parishad at the district level. This committee's report led to the inauguration of the Panchayati Raj system by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in Nagaur, Rajasthan, on October 2, 1959, with Andhra Pradesh following suit shortly after.

Rao et al. (2020) : The initial enthusiasm waned over the subsequent decades. The system suffered from a lack of adequate powers, financial resources, irregular elections, and dominance by state governments. Various committees, such as the Ashok Mehta Committee (1977) and the G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985), were formed to recommend reforms, consistently highlighting the need for constitutional recognition and greater autonomy.

### **Political Participation Of Women In Panchayat Raj**

The most transformative period in the history of Panchayat Raj arrived with the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992. This landmark amendment granted constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), making it mandatory for states to establish a three-tier system of local self-governance in rural areas.

Parallel to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 provided for the constitutional recognition of urban local bodies (Municipalities). Together, these amendments marked a paradigm shift, recognizing local self-governments as the third tier of governance in India.

The impact of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments has been profound. They have democratized governance at the grassroots, empowered marginalized sections, especially women, and created a large number of elected representatives. Panchayats are now expected to play a crucial role in planning and implementing development schemes, enhancing local accountability, and fostering participatory decision-making.



Many Panchayats still face issues of inadequate financial resources, limited devolution of powers by state governments, capacity building gaps, and political interference. Despite these hurdles, the journey of Panchayat Raj from ancient village assemblies to constitutionally mandated institutions is a testament to India's evolving democratic ethos. It is a continuous endeavor to realize the vision of true grassroots democracy, where local communities are empowered to shape their own destinies and contribute to the inclusive development of the nation.

One of the most significant hurdles is the deeply entrenched patriarchal societal structure prevalent across much of India. Traditional gender roles often confine women to domestic spheres, limiting their mobility and access to public spaces. This societal mindset often translates into a lack of acceptance for women in leadership roles, both from within their families and the community. Male family members, particularly husbands, often act as "proxy" representatives, effectively controlling the decisions of elected women, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as "Sarpanch-Pati" (husband of the Sarpanch). This undermines the very spirit of women's reservation and prevents genuine empowerment.

Lack of political literacy and awareness further exacerbates the problem. Many women, especially from rural and marginalized communities, lack adequate knowledge about their rights, the functioning of the Panchayat system, and the policy-making process. This can make them vulnerable to manipulation by male counterparts and limit their ability to articulate their needs and advocate for their constituents effectively. Educational disparities, with lower literacy rates among women, particularly in rural areas, contribute significantly to this challenge.

Limited access to resources and financial independence also poses a considerable barrier. Women often lack control over financial resources, which are crucial for campaigning, attending meetings, and fulfilling their duties as elected representatives. This financial dependence often makes them reliant on male family members or political



parties, further curtailing their autonomy and decision-making power. Moreover, poverty disproportionately affects women, making it difficult for them to invest time and energy in political activities when basic survival is a primary concern.

The prevalence of violence and intimidation, both overt and subtle, is another distressing reality. Women in politics, especially at the local level, are often subjected to harassment, threats, and even physical violence from political rivals or those who resent their participation. This can create a hostile environment that discourages women from contesting elections or actively participating in Panchayat proceedings, fearing for their safety and that of their families.

Furthermore, inadequate training and capacity building mechanisms often leave elected women unprepared for the responsibilities of their office. While some training programs exist, they are often insufficient in quantity and quality, failing to equip women with the necessary administrative, financial management, and leadership skills. This lack of capacity can lead to a perception of incompetence, further reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes and limiting their influence.

Finally, the intersectionality of caste, class, and religion adds another layer of complexity. Women from marginalized communities, such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and religious minorities, face compounded discrimination and challenges. They not only grapple with gender-based discrimination but also systemic oppression based on their social identity, making their journey in Panchayat Raj even more arduous.

While the Panchayat Raj system has undeniably paved the way for women's political entry, the road to genuine and effective participation is still fraught with challenges. Addressing these issues requires a multi-pronged approach encompassing societal transformation to dismantle patriarchal norms, enhanced political education and awareness programs, economic empowerment initiatives, robust legal frameworks to

combat violence, and comprehensive capacity-building efforts. Only then can the vision of truly representative and equitable grassroots governance, where women are not just present but actively shape the development agenda, be fully realized.

## Conclusion

The political participation of women in Panchayat Raj marks a significant stride towards gender equality and inclusive governance in India. While challenges persist, the system has successfully brought millions of women into the political arena, enabling them to voice their concerns, shape local development, and redefine traditional gender roles. As India continues its journey towards a more equitable society, strengthening women's agency and ensuring their substantive participation in local governance remains paramount for achieving truly democratic and representative institutions.

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