

# A Catalyst for Change: Impact of Panchayati Raj on Women's Empowerment in India

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## ABSTRACT

In the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi's profound declaration, "The day a woman can walk freely on the roads at night, that day we can say that India has achieved independence," the study emphasizes the vital role of gender equality and freedom to accomplish meaningful societal freedom. It promotes an all-encompassing strategy for rural government that acknowledges and emphasizes the vital role that women play in promoting social change. The study investigates the crucial role that women play in Panchayati Raj organizations and how this empowers rural communities. It discusses the significance of female participation in local governance, throwing light on how Panchayati Raj institutional structure and its influence on their empowerment. The analysis stresses the need for constitutional revisions, legal frameworks, and policy interventions to reinforce women's agency like decision-making, leadership and collective action particularly in rural settings.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, Panchayati Raj, rural governance, policy implications

## INTRODUCTION

*"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."* — Frederick Douglass.

The fundamental principle behind empowerment is to transfer authority and power from a select few to a large number of people. By amplifying the voices of underprivileged communities, this method guarantees that individuals who were previously silenced have a voice in society structures and governance. Empowerment promotes inclusivity, equity, and agency by decentralizing control, enabling people and groups to actively choose their own destinies rather than being passive objects of decisions made on their behalf. It involves the ways in which power over others is constructed, reproduced and legitimized (Buch, 2010). The purpose of empowerment focuses on three criteria: changing the feelings of people, improving their existence as well as converting the social frameworks. It is not just in performing acts of kindness but about creating a society built on empathy, compassion, and equality.

Empowerment should be linked to regular, ordinary people, instead of those who are culturally and socially advantaged such as politicians, experts, and others. In this context, women's empowerment becomes a particularly important as well as consequential issue. Notwithstanding such progress, women still face many challenges and problems, including particular social norms as well as gender-based discrimination. Empowering women turns necessary for breaking free of those socio-psychological traps and achieving equality.

Being a representative of the people at the local and national levels and taking part in elections are two methods to break free from the bonds of stereotypes. At the national level the representation of women in the Lok Sabha had not crossed eight percent till 2000 (Ambedkar & Nagendra, 2005), now it is approximately fourteen percent.

So, Panchayati Raj, or democratic decentralization, has a pivotal role to play in the women's empowerment in India. A thread that runs through the history of Indian governance is Panchayati Raj, which tells a tale of tenacity, change, and grassroots empowerment. The journey, which began with ancient roots and culminated with constitutional recognition, is a collective effort for local decentralized governance, where transparency serves as a unifying principle for local communities and policymakers in their pursuit of impartial and egalitarian development.

Reservation regulations are used to guarantee participation for women in Panchayat councils, with a one-third quota. Women now have more opportunities to actively engage in local governance thanks to the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution. The descriptive representation theory (Pitkin, 1972), mentions that having more women in positions of power and authority will encourage them to speak for their own interests. As women would be able to understand the plight to other women we can have a substantive representation, when the opinions and action of the representatives reflect in the needs, interests and hopes of the people who elect them (Pitkin, 1972).

In her study on women in Scandinavian politics Drude Dahlerup (1988), says that there may be a tipping point in changing women's status in society. Women's thoughts and viewpoints will have more sway if there is a "critical mass" of them in public office, which is roughly 30%. They will be able to challenge social norms and push for legislation and regulations that benefit all women.

50% of the seats and positions in the PRIs are reserved for women, according to stipulations in the PR Acts of the majority of Indian states and union territories as of 08.09.2021 (Ministry of Panchayati Raj).

Many women have been allowed to enter politics thanks to the 73rd Amendment, and some have even started their own political organizations to express their demands, concerns, and goals. However, while the reservation policy and other measures to include them in the decision-making roles, has increased female representation in Panchayats, significant challenges remain. Many women elected to these positions struggle to assert their authority and influence due to entrenched patriarchal structures and societal expectations. Despite this, Panchayati Raj stands as a beacon of grassroots empowerment, offering women a space to advocate for their needs and priorities at the local level.

According to S. P. Jain, women have become more powerful as a result of opposing men and claiming authority over officials and resources (Jain, 1996). After years of being marginalized in public and political life, the women are now powerful and full of confidence, and they are working to make both their own and the community's lives better. According to Jain (Jain, 1996), they are integrating "their experience in governance of civic society into governance of the state." The impact of Panchayati Raj on women's empowerment in India is the main topic of this paper.

### **An outline of India's Panchayati Raj system**

One of the main pillars of Indian governance is the Panchayati Raj system, which marks the start of local self-government in rural regions. Under the inspiring direction of the Indian Prime Minister of the time, this system was put into place in 1959 (Jha, 1972).

It precisely conveys Mahatma Gandhi's favourite vision of Gram Swaraj, in which independent, self-governing village units with the ability to make decisions for themselves. (Palanithurai, 2004).

It focuses on the village self-rule and community development. The three-tiered structure, consists of District Councils, Gram Panchayats, and Panchayat Samitis (PriyaLakshmi, 2016), aims to stimulate economic development, make implementation of government projects easier and promote social fairness and equality. The fundamental component of the Panchayati Raj system is the local communities' capacity to govern and oversee their own affairs. Decentralization of power and the implementation of decision-making processes encourage grassroots democracy and foster a sense of responsibility and collective ownership. Both the Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) and the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) recommended strengthening the Panchayats (Mishra, 1997) All-women panchayats were suggested by the Committee on the Status of Women in India in 1976, and they briefly appeared in some areas (Dutta, 1998)

Empowerment is emphasized by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), which includes regular election organization, seat reservations for marginalized and excluded groups, and the establishment of State Finance Commissions to ensure financial autonomy. Moreover, Panchayati Raj is significant because going beyond simple governance framework it is a fundamental change introducing social fairness and inclusive development. It aims to remedy the historical injustices and minimize the gap between the privileged groups and the downtrodden by giving these voiceless people especially women, the Scheduled Tribes and Castes a platform to change their lives. The emphasis on local involvement and accountability, it strengthens the social fabric of the society, promotes a transparent and accountable culture and increases the trust in government institutions.

For millions of rural Indians, the Panchayati Raj system is, more than just a bureaucratic apparatus; it is a force for change and advancement and a source of opportunity and hope. It is a foundation for a more resilient India, where every citizen in the village community has a voice and the ability to determine their own future by fostering democracy and equity at the grassroots level. Recognizing and utilizing the revolutionary potential of Panchayati Raj is essential when we try to negotiate the complexity of the modern society and work to transform the country into a more equitable and inclusive nation.

The Vedic Era, when the village community served as the fundamental unit for regional self-administration, is one of the stages in the development of the Panchayati Raj system of governance in India. The Rigveda mentions the Sabha and Samiti as local governmental bodies throughout the Epic Era, which delineates the two major epic eras in India. (Smith, 1904) (Talageri, 2000). The British government attempted to establish local self-governance, but these efforts did not lead to much progress or change until the post-independence period (Mitra & Singh, 1999).

Decentralized local, village, community level governance was sparked by Gandhi's support of Gram Swaraj during the independence movement. This resulted in the acknowledgment of Gram Panchayats in the Constitution of India (Mitra & Singh, 1999). The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 constituted a three-tier Panchayati Raj system, recognizing the essential function of Panchayati Raj Institutions in village community development. PRIs act as intermediaries between the state government and rural communities, facilitating local engagement, effective policy execution, and the introduction of sustainable development programs and initiatives at the grassroots level (Mitra & Singh, 1999).

### **An historical analysis of women's participation in politics**

The history of women's participation in local self-governance in India is a gradual progress against a background of deep-rooted patriarchal norms. This course of women's involvement in decision-making can be broadly divided into four phases.

During the Vedic period the position of women was high, they enjoyed many privileges in the family, religious life and the public sphere (Altekar, 1999). The girls and boys both underwent the *brahmacharya* period. Many of them became renowned poetesses, their poems are included in canonical literature. The wife was a joint owner of the family but did not possess any property, demonstrating that women were viewed as equals in religious circles (Altekar, 1999). The condition of women progressively declined during the period of the Samhitas, Brahmanas, and Upanishads from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. (Altekar, 1999)

Women have played vital roles in the public life as depicted in the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. Where Queen Kaikeyi had helped her husband King Dushrath in the war, and Subhadhara had driven Arjuna's Chariot in the Mahabharata. It was in the colonial period that the British particularly Ripon in 1882 who introduced local government structures like formal village councils to involve men to manage the rural areas for the British, later local self-governance was revived by the Montague Chelmsford Reforms in 1919 (Teltumbde, 2011). These structures, which were reflecting the contemporary patriarchal society, prioritized male involvement and participation while excluding women from formal engagement. (Forbes, 1999) Traditionally, most villages had panchayats which were made up of five elder males, women were not allowed to participate (Vyasulu & Vyasulu, 2012).

In 1937 elections fifty-six women had been elected as legislators out of these forty-one were elected on reserved seats, five were selected in nominated seats and the rest on unreserved seats (Hasan, 2002). Many women also actively participated during the freedom struggle.

After Independence, a number of women were part of the Constitution committee. The Indian Constitution enshrines the ideal of equality for all citizens. However, the actualization of this idea for women in local government entities has progressed slowly. The initial endeavours of women's involvement in Panchayat bodies were constrained. They frequently relied on co- option rather than outright election.

With its lingering difficulties, the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts' enactment in 1992 marked a significant turning point. These changes mandated a 33 percent reservation for women in elected offices at both the Panchayat and Municipal levels. This legal provision has markedly augmented the representation of women in local governing bodies. The increasing representation of women in politics globally signifies progress towards a more fair society. Consequently, any society that excludes half of its constituents from the governance process will have numerous challenges. Women around are combating the inequitable allocation of power in society and striving to liberate themselves from their constraints. Transforming contemporary gender relationship patterns necessitates leadership in the political, economic, and civil sectors. They represent the three principal centres of power in the modern global economy. Consequently, if women seek policies that enhance their decision-making capacity, they must engage actively in these spheres of influence and advocate for improved conditions by supporting people in positions of power. To create a gender-equal society that fosters growth opportunities for women, it is essential to empower women across all sectors, particularly in politics. This is essential for achieving the objectives of progress and fairness (Connell, 1987) Underscores the significance of comprehending the interconnection among three fundamental social processes: the sexual division of labor, the power structure, and cathexis, which denotes the socially mandated roles, norms, and emotional affiliations that influence behavior. These processes collectively shape and maintain gender relations, and addressing them is crucial for promoting authentic equality and societal change.

The rationale for women's empowerment in politics is based on three essential, critical, and non-negotiable principles: the right of women to self-determination and self-representation; the equality of women with men; and the right of women to fully realize their potential. The essence of empowerment is in power—the capacity to access possibilities, exert influence over one's life, and make educated decisions. In the dialect of the Indian people, it is called 'Shakti'. It is the capacity to interrogate and transform the institutions and frameworks of patriarchal ideology, along with the prevailing power dynamics, through the application of power, efficacy, capacities, force, and influence. The Jakarta Declaration 1997, asserts that the empowerment of women is not merely an issue of equity, but also an essential prerequisite for sustained economic and social progress. Consequently, the participation of women in politics and decision-making roles is essential for their empowerment and for monitoring the expectations regarding their political conduct.

The active participation of women in local rural governance can result in significant positive transformations within society. Research indicates that women prioritize issues that immediately impact their everyday lives, including access to water, sanitation, and education (Buch, 2010). This aligns with their traditional roles and understanding of community needs. For effective participation some initiatives need to be introduced to empower them as leaders in the PRI's. Training programs have to be launched for capacity building specifically designed for women to equip themselves with the knowledge and skill needed to function in the bureaucratic structure of the Panchayati Raj systems, manage finances, and represent the members of their constituency. Organization of leadership development programmes, public speaking workshops, and effective communication classes will help enhance their public image and boost their confidence. Mentorship programmes need to be established to connect the experienced women leaders with the newly elected ones, fostering sharing of knowledge and guidance (Sinha, 2018). Another initiative is, online and offline meeting platforms for women leaders to build networks, share experiences, develop solidarity, foster a sense of community and organise collective action.

Launching of the social and self-awareness programmes and campaigns will also help challenge the traditional gender roles and encourage women take up leadership roles in the society (Moser, 1993). Mehta Committee Report suggested increasing the resources allocated to Panchayats, to permit them to undertake various

initiatives that will address the specific needs of women (Mehta, 1978). For this, financial literacy training programmes need to be started to add to their understanding of money management, budgeting, resource management and allocation, and project administration and supervision within Panchayats.

Apart from this today, utilization of technology and organizing computer training programs allowing them to access information, communicate effectively is indispensable. Encouraging e-governance initiatives within the Panchayats for efficient working of the government body and reduce corruption will help create a more conducive environment for women leaders to work in. This will empower women leaders and foster a more inclusive and effective decision-making in PRI's.

### **Women empowerment in PRIs: An Examination of Recent Policy Changes**

Although India's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have not recently seen any major statutory changes, it is noteworthy that they have placed a strong emphasis on strengthening their capacities and empowering its female members. Women constitute 48.5% of the population (Census of India, 2011), rendering their voices and participation vital for local governance, hence underscoring the necessity of women's empowerment.

The centralized programmes such as the Rajiv Gandhi Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan (RGPSA) (launched in 2011) marks the inadequacies in infrastructure and provided essential training programmes for Panchayat staff to develop abilities for effective participation (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2016). Keeping in mind the women representatives, these programmes were designed with a goal to provide them with information, technology and abilities required to successfully participate in the Panchayati Raj system and voice the interests of their communities.

The recommendations of the 14th Finance Commission, implemented in 2015, built upon the perspectives of the Ashok Mehta Committee Report (Mehta, 1978), which advocated for financial devolution to Panchayats (Sinha, 2018). It is an encouraging initiative to increase fund availability for empowering women in leadership positions. Enabling Panchayats to launch programmes for women's healthcare and education (Mehta, 1978). A World Bank report (2018) emphasized how such initiatives in investing in girls' education and healthcare offers economic and social rewards.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) remains the principal statute regulating women's participation in municipal governance. It mandates the allocation of one-third of elected positions for women (Sinha, 2018). Still, there are issues with actually effective engagement. Obstacles persist in the form of social norms that restrict women's leadership responsibilities and a dearth of continuous capacity building initiatives. The Panchayati Raj system does not directly address the recent reforms, but it has given the emphasis to financial power and authority, providing an indirect route towards women empowerment. Ongoing work is required to change societal norms to help women occupy elected office and participate actively in Panchayati Raj's decision-making processes.

Different women have different experiences in politics. Intersectionality theory advocates that, intersecting social identities influence systems of oppression, dominance and discrimination. Gender is influenced by other identities, like race and class (Collins, 2000). The diversity of women's views should be taken into consideration by the leaders and solve problems that women confront.

Policies and women's empowerment is a double-edged sword it has both positive and negative aspects which can significantly impact women's participation. Policies such as quotas, reservations, and enhanced representation can directly augment the participation of women in decision-making bodies, thereby amplifying their voice. Training programs equip them with the knowledge and expertise making them empowered leaders who can advocate for their communities. Increased resources availability for local bodies, creates a ripple effect of empowerment, allowing them to address needs of women in healthcare, education, economy etc. leading to a progressive community.

However, there are some aspects that can negatively affect women empowerment. Quotas can lead to "token"

participation, where women hold power positions as symbolic roles lacking real power or resources. Cultural norms and stereotypes become social barriers hindering women's participation, even with quotas in place.

A multifaceted strategy is necessary for initiatives to have a lasting impact. Government policies must confront socio-cultural norms and conventions that impede and limit women's engagement in the public sphere. Investing in capacity building, training, and support programs can bolster women's self-confidence. Enhanced financial sustainability and effective resource allocation for local entities enable them to tackle unique challenges and secure the enduring success of women's programs. Consequently, policies can serve as potent instruments for the oppressed, facilitating their engagement and empowerment.

### **Voices from the Margins: Gendered Challenges to Rural Leadership**

Women in rural societies encounter a distinct array of hurdles while assuming leadership positions. These issues stem from a complicated interaction of various causes.

Entrenched patriarchal societal norms and attitudes impede and constrain the mobility and decision-making authority of women within households and society. The feudal patriarchal tendencies that want to convert the women into slaves are being resisted by the women in silence. (Kaushik, 1993). This manifests into resistance from male members of the community, limited network access and mentorship, and an underestimation of her capabilities. It adversely affect their ability to participate actively in the public domain and generating community support for leadership positions and roles.

The traditional gender roles confine women to domestic spheres. The cultural beliefs and practices related to their reproductive health, pregnancy and child-birth taboo are some of the socio-cultural barriers that restrict their participation. Apart from that, the patriarchal form of society leads to a lack of societal acceptance for women leaders (Moser, 1993). The vital question that comes to mind is whether women's empowerment must begin at home before they venture out into the public domain (Calman, 1992). Women have to balance household responsibilities alongside their leadership roles in PRI's. It is a challenge which tests their time management skills and it hinders their ability carry out their responsibilities as leaders. Low self-esteem at household level and official responsibilities at the Panchayats creates a contradiction which they have to address (Buch, 2010). Many chosen women representatives when they enter PRI's they have limited experience or skill in public administration.

Rural areas in India have limited access to the resources available compared to urban settings. Women leaders face difficulties in accessing available funds, have few opportunities to education and training, no access to technical knowledge and tools necessary to carry out their duties effectively. The convoluted language of bureaucratic system, pose another hurdle making them feel unequipped in handling these complex administrative and bureaucratic procedures. Many cannot articulate properly or remained silent or did as was directed by others (Sangita, 2007). The less educated panchayat members face non-co-operation and indifference which hinder their participation (Buch, 2010). Thus, literacy emerges as a crucial factor. Illiterate women often express regret, highlighting the importance of education for effective participation. Lack of education potentially hinders their autonomy as they have to seek assistance from male members. However, this has a positive side effect it fuels a desire to overcome these challenges; it raises women's literacy rates.

Rural women leaders are vulnerable to threats, harassment and even physical violence, especially when they are challenging or going against the traditional patriarchal power structures (Sangita, 2007) (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Some women due to the history of exclusion, may lack the confidence to take up leadership roles or positions due to limited exposure to women leadership role models. The caste system in India can further marginalize women from disadvantaged communities, limiting their access to leadership positions within Panchayats. Lack of access to established social and political networks and mentorship opportunities that can provide crucial support and guidance, hinders their ability to voice their concerns or work in the bureaucratic structure. Enforcing the existing laws effectively to protect women from violence and harassment can create a safer environment for them to participate in public life. There is a need for development of support mechanisms for the women leaders who face intimidation and/or harassment, giving them access to resources and legal assistance when needed.

In many cases, men (father, brother or husband...) act as proxies for elected female officials, undermining their decision-making power and authority (Sinha, 2018). This practice, where the husband of the elected official runs the office instead is known as 'sarpanch-pati', 'pradhan- pati' preventing these women from acquiring genuine leadership experience. Mary John (2007) points out the complexity of the issue. In some cases, women who were proxies start gaining confidence in operating the local bodies. In the world of politics having 'right connections' whether these connections are familial, neighbourhood, community or caste, influences who will be selected as representatives (John, 2007) (Buch, 2010).

PRIs have two sides when it comes to empowerment. It permits individuals to make positive changes in their lives; nevertheless, they encounter social, economic, and political difficulties in accessing that power. The impact of women's participation in Indian Panchayats on decision-making has been a topic of discussion. Participation of women in governance can be affected by power structures, state, legislative behaviour, representation and electoral systems. According to this view, institutional changes will provide female candidates an equal chance at participation and winning elections (Krook & Childs, 2010).

The complex landscape is created by cultural hurdles, a lack of support systems, and invisible variables, even though reservations guarantee women's participation in local governance. The efficacy of reservation of women, in fostering a conducive environment for their political participation is still under debate.

The PRIs also face many challenges including unavailability of resources, skilled labour, and lack finance and financial accountability (Mitra & Singh, 1999) and they are not fully autonomous financially (Sangita, 2007). As India faces many challenges in revenue generation at the state level there is heavy dependency on central assistance and fund transfers for PRIs (Mitra & Singh, 1999). To ensure the efficient functioning of local governing bodies, village panchayats depend on various initiatives, including the public accessibility of audited accounts and budgets, the implementation of e-governance platforms such as e-Gram Swaraj, enhanced transparency in Gram Panchayat Development Plans, and the promotion of participation and accountability in local governance (Mitra & Singh, 1999) (Mitra, 2001). Panchayats are essential to the execution of development strategies because over 830 million people in India live in rural regions. Facilitating the connection between villagers and governmental bodies, as well as Panchayati Raj Institutions, is essential for attaining Sustainable Development Goals at the village level (Mitra & Singh, 1999) (Mitra, 2003). According to the website of Ministry of Panchayati Raj women representatives hold 45.6 percent (1454488 seats out of a total of 3188981) seats and offices in the PRIs in the country (panchayat.gov.in).

## CONCLUSION

Nelson Mandela reiterated in his inaugural address to Parliament in 1994 that true autonomy cannot be attained without the liberation of women from all forms of oppression.

Panchayati Raj being a vital forum helps women assume leadership positions and participate in reforming the society. Reservation have guaranteed the participation of women but empowerment depends on their capacity to exercise authority and overcome obstacles. Obstacles may arise due to socio-cultural barriers, prejudice and bureaucratic apathy. A positive overcome of overcoming these obstacles is the increase of literacy rate among women. multifaceted strategy is necessary for women to truly be empowered, wherein their welfare, awareness, access to resources, involvement in decision-making, and autonomy over their own lives are all non-negotiable. Policymakers have to foster a conducive environment by changing social norms and generating support networks. Financing and organizing initiatives and programmes that increase women's capacity and knowledge can help women leaders handle challenges and speak up for themselves and their communities. To guarantee that women can handle the issues that are important to them, such as access to healthcare facilities and access to higher education, social and economic independence, the panchayats must be financially sustainable and have autonomous powers. In the end, what is required is a group effort for Panchayati Raj to be successful in empowering women. Panchayati Raj has the potential to become an effective instrument for social change in rural India by including women in decision-making processes and advancing a better future for the Indian society with the support from policymakers, local communities, and women themselves.

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