

# Role of Women in Participatory Democracy with Special Reference to Panchayaths in India

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**Abstract:** *In colonial India, voting and electoral participation were limited to a select group of men, with women completely barred from political involvement. Post-independence, whilst the Indian constitution did not explicitly address women's representation in legislative bodies, it established gender equality and was bolstered by various legal measures. This evolution has enabled women, previously restricted to domestic roles, to engage in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), thereby effecting change and addressing longstanding issues within women's communities.*

**Keywords:** Panchayath Raj, Women Representation, 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, Rural Development, Women Reservation, Gender Equality

## 1. Introduction

The concept of women's political empowerment encompasses a political framework that facilitates and promotes the involvement and impact of females in political governance and decision-making procedures. As India's most esteemed figure, Swami Vivekananda, asserted, "The world's prosperity is unattainable unless the status of women improves. A bird cannot soar with just one wing." (Prabhakaran, 2019). The term 'panchayat' derives from 'Pancha Panchasvanusthitah', with evidence indicating the existence of 'Grama Sanghas' or rural communities. Panchayati Raj, an institution as ancient as Indian civilisation, has influenced village-level civil and judicial matters since antiquity. Ancient texts like the Rigveda, Manusamhita, Dharmashastras, Upanishads, and Jatakas discuss local governance, specifically the panchayat system. The Manusmriti and the Mahabharata's 'Shantiparva' also contain references to village councils or Grama Sanghas (Phukon, 2022).

## 2. Legislative Frame work

During the initial implementation of Panchayat Acts in the 1920s across various provinces and princely states, women were neither included as representatives nor as voters. The prevailing ideology did not consider them worthy of consideration. Some provincial panchayat legislation explicitly excluded women and the establishment of panchayats was optional. For instance, the Central Provinces (CP) Village Panchayat Act of 1920 stipulated that the Deputy Commissioner could investigate the feasibility of forming a panchayat and establish one "upon receiving an application from a District Council or no fewer than twenty adult male inhabitants of a village or cluster of adjacent villages". The elected 'Panchas' were to be chosen from amongst male homeowners and landowners or tenants who were permanent residents within the designated area (Buch, 2009b).

In April 1993, the 73<sup>rd</sup> (Constitution Amendment) Act was implemented, prompting all states to modify their local self-government legislation accordingly. This represented a crucial turning point in India's political landscape, as it required that women occupy one-third of the positions in local self-governing bodies. This legislative change has had profound implications for women's empowerment, initiating

a substantial transformation across the nation (Mohanty, 1995). The National Perspective Plan for Women 1988-2000 proposed a 30% quota for women in decision-making entities, including panchayats at all levels. This initiative represented a departure from the previous approach of symbolic representation, which involved nominating or co-opting one or two women into panchayats, as recommended by the B.R. Mehta Committee (1957) and Ashok Mehta Committee (1978). Instead, the plan sought to establish a "critical mass" of women, which was determined to be 30% at the time (Buch, 2009a).

In 1993, the state of West Bengal amended its Panchayat Constitution Rule, mandating that one-third of the councillor seats in each Gram Panchayat be allocated to women, as well as a proportion equal to their population for SCs and STs. In one-third of the villages within each GP, councillor positions were restricted to female candidates. This resulted in women occupying 36 per cent of elected panchayat council seats in West Bengal following the 1993 election. However, this outcome was deemed insufficient, as few women (only 196 out of 3,324 GPs) progressed to the role of 'Pradhan', the sole position with substantial authority. In April 1998, West Bengal made further amendments to its Panchayat Constitution Rule to ensure alignment with the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment [Government of West Bengal 1998], introducing reservations for women in 'Pradhan' positions. Rajasthan implemented a random rotation policy for both councillor and Pradhan seats in 1995 and 2000 (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Subsequent to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, approximately one million women participated in the inaugural panchayat elections. Notably, approximately 40 per cent of the successful female candidates were from disadvantaged groups (Tiwari, 2008).

### Role Played by Women Representatives

Women in collective groups actively participate in various activities, including Gram Sabha meetings. They engage in rural development programmes at different levels, from manual labour to policy-making, commensurate with their capabilities. As members of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), rural women work to enhance the well-being and status of women in their communities. Through PRIs, their core initiatives encompass the eradication of dowry customs and female illiteracy, mitigation of violence against women

and Dalits in domestic settings, prevention of female foeticide, addressing discrimination towards girl children, and promoting female enrolment in educational institutions. Furthermore, they facilitate women's participation in governmental programmes, provide assistance to women in securing financial aid for small enterprises, strengthen self-help groups and cooperatives, enhance awareness of electoral and political rights, and advocate for improved maternal and child healthcare services and family planning initiatives (Kumar, 2023).

Certain positive references are noted by a researcher on female representatives in Panchayats of Himachal Pradesh: Compared to males, women in representative positions allocate more resources to female-specific issues and are more effective in implementing women-related legislation. For many women, participation in the PRIs has been transformative. They have achieved empowerment by controlling resources, challenging male authority, and influencing officials. These women have become more articulate and aware of their impact. Despite limited literacy, they have navigated political and bureaucratic systems successfully. They consistently report attending Panchayat meetings. Using their elected authority, they have addressed crucial issues like education, potable water, family planning, hygiene, health, healthcare quality, and village development. They have also introduced alcohol abuse and domestic violence as political campaign topics. Women's priorities in these roles differ from traditional political platforms focused on caste and religion (Devi, 2017).

### 3. Analysis of Representative Nature

Numerous studies have examined women's leadership at the panchayat level across various Indian states. The representation of women has shown promising results in states such as West Bengal, Haryana, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Notably, in Kerala and Karnataka, women have secured over 43 per cent of seats in Gram Panchayat elections, surpassing the 33 per cent quota. Orissa has also witnessed a significant number of women ascending to power at the panchayat level. This achievement is particularly remarkable considering the state's low female literacy rate of only 29.1 per cent, highlighting the progress in women's political empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions in India (Hoque, 2020).

A study of 85 female elected representatives in Assam, India's Cachar district revealed diverse motivations for local governance involvement. Most participants expressed a desire to contribute to community welfare and rural development. Familial influence, particularly from husbands and fathers-in-law, was cited by ten respondents as their primary motivation. Five individuals sought personal empowerment, while another five were prompted by political party encouragement. The absence of female candidates from their parties motivated five more participants to contest elections. The research highlighted that women's participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions was shaped by familial persuasion, community expectations, political party influence, and individual aspirations (Singha, 2016).

Another study investigating female representation in the Jharmunda and Tangarpali Panchayat of Odisha's Bargarh district yielded noteworthy results. The qualitative field data suggested that women were not elected to any unreserved positions, indicating that caste-based reservation in the Panchayati Raj institution is the main factor driving women's involvement. Occupation, much like caste, plays a significant role in determining socio-economic standing. Of the 30 women representatives in the sample, 17 (56.66%) were unable to read or write, whilst 13 (43.33%) had only completed primary education. This highlights a markedly low level of education among the participants. Nevertheless, these women chose to stand for election of their own accord. Their decision to take part in the Panchayati Raj election was often influenced by encouragement from relatives or community leaders (Bag & Jagadala, 2016).

### 4. Conclusion

The concept of women's empowerment has been predominantly reduced to a focus on political engagement. This, in turn, has been narrowed to a discourse on women's roles in formal representative decision-making bodies, such as Panchayati Raj Institutions or Parliament, particularly in the context of the debate surrounding the Indian Constitutional Amendment Bill on women's reservation in Parliament. Women's capabilities are often unrecognised, and their contributions are commonly overlooked.

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