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Panchayati Raj and Women's Empowerment in India: A Transformative Journey

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The strengthening of democracy in India is intrinsically linked to the inclusion and empowerment of women. The introduction of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 marked a transformative shift towards decentralised governance and participatory democracy. This paper critically examines how PRIs have redefined the role of women in Indian democracy, particularly in rural governance. It evaluates the extent to which political reservation has translated into substantive empowerment, highlighting both achievements and structural limitations. The study argues that while PRIs have enabled descriptive representation of women, substantive empowerment remains uneven due to socio-cultural, economic, and institutional constraints. The paper calls for a reconceptualisation of women's role beyond mere participation toward transformative leadership.

Keywords: *democracy, panchayati raj, women empowerment.*

INTRODUCTION

The Panchayati Raj system represents a significant step toward grassroots democracy and decentralised governance in India. Institutionalised through the 73rd Constitutional

Amendment Act 1992, it aimed to strengthen local self-governments and ensure participatory development.¹

India, despite being the world's largest democracy, has historically faced gender disparities in political representation. While constitutional provisions guaranteed equality, women's participation in governance remained limited before structural reforms. The introduction of reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, mandating not less than 33%, and later increased to 50% under Article 243D,² in several states, was a landmark intervention designed to address this imbalance. This paper explores whether such structural inclusion has resulted in genuine empowerment or remains largely symbolic. It examines the extent to which women's participation in PRIs has transformed their role in governance and society.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The Constitution of India provides a strong foundation for gender equality:

- Article 14 ensures equality before the law and equal protection of laws.³
- Article 16(2) prohibits discrimination in public employment on grounds of sex, religion, caste, etc.⁴

Directive Principles of State Policy further strengthen gender justice:

- Article 39(a): Equal right to livelihood for men and women.⁵
- Article 39(d): Equal pay for equal work.⁶
- Article 39(e): Protection of workers' health and strength.⁷
- Article 42: Just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.⁸

These provisions collectively envision a socio-political order based on equality and dignity. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) operationalised these principles at the grassroots level by institutionalising PRIs and mandating the reservation of seats for women.

¹ The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act 1992

² The Constitution of India 1950, art 243D

³ The Constitution of India 1950, art 14

⁴ The Constitution of India 1950, art 16(2)

⁵ The Constitution of India 1950, art 39(a)

⁶ The Constitution of India 1950, art 39(d)

⁷ The Constitution of India 1950, art 39(e)

⁸ The Constitution of India 1950, art 42

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ

The concept of local self-governance in India dates back to ancient village councils or 'panchayats.' However, the modern Panchayati Raj system emerged following the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) and was formally introduced in Rajasthan in 1959.⁹ The 73rd Amendment in 1994 strengthened the panchayati raj system by addressing its weaknesses and constitutionalising PRIs, mandating regular elections, providing for the representation of marginalised groups including women, and creating the framework for the devolution of powers, funds and responsibilities to local bodies.¹⁰

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature on women's political participation in India confirms that a favourable legal framework is a necessary but insufficient condition for substantive empowerment. The existing studies can be organised around four interrelated strands.

The first concerns the gap between legal opportunity and political outcome. Scholars such as Gabriele Dietrich have observed that the political legal framework in India is much more favourable as far as women's opportunities are concerned. However, their participation in the parliamentary process has not contributed to any significant extent to the improvement of the position of women in society.

According to Jahan, women generally participate in voting in large numbers. However, in other political activities such as attendance at public rallies and membership of social and political organisations, their participation is very low. Women's representation in national and state legislative bodies and their presence at the decision-making level is marginal.¹¹

The second strand locates this gap in social structure. Henry Chafe argues that discrimination against women is deeply rooted in the structure of society, in the roles women play and in a sexual division of labour which restricted females primarily to the domestic spheres of life.¹² Imtiaz Ahmed agrees with him and argues that the position of Indian women in the field of

⁹ The Rajasthan Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads Act 1959

¹⁰ The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act 1992

¹¹ Barbara D. Miller, 'Women and Development: Perspectives from South and South-East Asia' (1983) 43(1) *The Journal of Asian Studies* <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2054656>> accessed 08 June 2026

¹² William Henry Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Roles, 1920–1970* (Oxford University Press 1972)

politics is characterised by a passive political orientation rooted within the social structure itself. Hence, only a substantial upheaval that undermines the structural basis for traditional views of male and female roles could modify the existing asymmetry in the political status of men and women.

The third strand emphasises institutional design. Donley Studlar and Susan Welch laid down the view that countries with a multi-member proportional representation system do consistently have more women in their central legislatures. They observe that political participation of women in a country necessarily depends on the overall political representation, which in turn is dependent upon the type of electoral system. The plurality system is bound to create a barrier against the spillover, whereas the proportional representation system is more responsive in this matter.¹³

The fourth strand theorises empowerment itself. Political empowerment of women has been aptly explained by B.S. Bhargava, where he observed, 'empowerment gives women the capacity to influence the decision-making process, planning, implementation and evolution by integrating them into the political system.' This implies political participation, which includes the right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership, and effectively influence the decision-making process thereof, leading to political empowerment.

The Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act provided avenues for all sections of society to participate actively in grassroots-level democracy and thus led us to a more harmonious society with social equity. Reservations ensure entry of all sections of rural society into these local bodies and thus create equal opportunities for all in the political arena. In local bodies, regular elections have been made mandatory for the first time. However, mere reservation does not assure a strong Panchayati Raj System in the given social fabric.

¹³ Donley T Studlar and Susan Welch, 'DOES DISTRICT MAGNITUDE MATTER? WOMEN CANDIDATES IN LONDON LOCAL ELECTIONS' (1991) 44(2) *The Western Political Quarterly* <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/448789>> accessed 08 June 2026; Susan Welch and Donley T Studlar, 'Multi-Member Districts and the Representation of Women: Evidence from Britain and the United States' (1990) 52(2) *The Journal of Politics* <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2131899>> accessed 08 June 2026

WOMEN'S RESERVATION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The reservation of seats for women in PRIs has significantly increased their political participation. Women now constitute nearly 46% of elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions.¹⁴ This has led to greater inclusion in decision-making processes, increased visibility of women in public leadership roles and enhanced confidence and political awareness among women. However, representation alone does not automatically translate into empowerment.

IMPACT OF PANCHAYATI RAJ ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The impact of reservation on women's empowerment may be assessed along four dimensions, i.e. increased representation, leadership and capability, access to economic resources and governance priorities. The reservation policy has ensured large-scale entry of women into governance, breaking traditional barriers to political participation. Participation in PRIs has enabled women to develop leadership, negotiation, and decision-making skills. Engagement in governance has improved women's access to economic resources, government schemes, and livelihood opportunities. Women leaders have played a crucial role in addressing issues such as education and school enrolment, health and sanitation, gender-based violence and social welfare.¹⁵

CASE ILLUSTRATIONS

The case illustrations demonstrate that PRIs function as a critical institutional mechanism for advancing women's empowerment in India. While reservation policies have ensured women's entry into governance, the transition from descriptive to substantive representation remains uneven.

In Haryana, particularly in districts such as Jind, Rewari, and Mewat, empowerment is an incremental process shaped by socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors. The evidence suggests that sustained capacity building, administrative support, and convergence

¹⁴ Aastha Choudhary et al., 'GENDER AND REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS' (2025) 23(10) Lex Localis-Journal of Local Self-Government <<https://lex-localis.org/index.php/LexLocalis/article/view/801053/1694>> accessed 08 June 2026

¹⁵ S N Ambedkar and Shilaja Nagendra, *Women Empowerment and Panchayati Raj* (ABD Publisher 2011)

with socio-economic programs are essential for translating political participation into meaningful empowerment outcomes.

The institutionalisation of democratic decentralisation through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act marked a critical turning point in advancing women's political participation in India. By mandating reservations for women in local governance, the reform sought to address historical gender exclusion and promote inclusive decision-making at the grassroots level. Over the past three decades, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have functioned as both political and social platforms for women's empowerment, albeit with varying degrees of effectiveness across regions. This section presents selected case illustrations from India, with a particular focus on Haryana, to examine how institutional provisions translate into substantive empowerment outcomes.

National-level Illustrations: Empirical studies provide the strongest evidence on the effects of reservation. Using the random reservation of village-council head positions, Chattopadhyay and Duflo demonstrate that the gender of the leader systematically affects the type of public goods provided, with women leaders prioritising welfare-oriented public goods such as drinking water, sanitation, and primary education.¹⁶ However, the persistence of 'proxy representation,' wherein male family members informally exercise authority, highlights the gap between formal inclusion and actual empowerment.¹⁷

The Kudumbashree initiative in Kerala demonstrates the synergistic potential of linking women's collectives with PRIs. By integrating Self-Help Groups (SHGs) into local planning and budgeting processes, the model facilitates both political and economic empowerment. Studies suggest that such convergence enhances women's agency, financial independence, and participation in development planning. This case underscores the importance of institutional convergence in deepening empowerment outcomes.¹⁸

¹⁶ Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo, 'WOMEN AS POLICY MAKERS: EVIDENCE FROM A RANDOMIZED POLICY EXPERIMENT IN INDIA' (2004) 72(5) *Econometrica* <[https://economics.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2022-08/Women as Policy Makers Evidence from a Randomized.pdf](https://economics.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2022-08/Women%20as%20Policy%20Makers%20Evidence%20from%20a%20Randomized.pdf)> accessed 08 June 2026

¹⁷ Vidhatri Rao, 'Sarpanch Pati': The small steps, and giant leaps of women's reservation' *The Indian Express* (11 August 2022) <<https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/sarpanch-pati-madhya-pradesh-women-representatives-oath-reservation-8084346/>> accessed 08 June 2026

¹⁸ J Devika and Binitha V Thampi, 'Between 'Empowerment' and 'Liberation': The Kudumbashree initiative in Kerala' (2007) 14(1) *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* <<https://doi.org/10.1177/097152150601400103>> accessed 08 June 2026

States like Bihar, which implemented 50% reservation for women in PRIs, have witnessed a substantial increase in female participation, particularly among marginalised communities. While this has improved quantitative representation, qualitative empowerment remains contingent on factors such as education, awareness, and institutional support.¹⁹

Field-based studies from Rajasthan reveal that women Sarpanchs often emphasise basic service delivery, particularly in water management and sanitation. These findings reinforce the argument that women's leadership contributes to more inclusive and need-based governance. It also reveals that prior exposure to a woman leader is associated with electoral gains for women and with a measurable weakening of bias against female leadership.²⁰

Haryana: Illustrative Observations: Haryana's decision to implement 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has significantly expanded women's political participation. This policy has normalised women's presence in leadership roles across rural governance structures.²¹

The district-level material set out below is drawn from localised and, in places, anecdotal accounts; it is presented to illustrate patterns rather than to establish them, and each empirical claim is flagged for the supporting authority that a final manuscript should supply.

Micro-level studies in Jind district indicate that women representatives initially exhibit limited participation due to socio-cultural constraints but gradually gain confidence and decision-making capacity over time. Exposure to governance processes emerges as a key driver of empowerment.²²

Evidence from Rewari suggests that political participation has contributed to enhanced social recognition and intra-household bargaining power among women representatives. Women leaders have increasingly engaged in issues such as sanitation, education, and welfare

¹⁹ Dr Ravi Kant Pandey, 'Women's political participation in rural Bihar: The impact of Panchayati raj reservations on women's empowerment' (2025) 7(11) IJPSG

<<https://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com/uploads/archives/7-11-20-234.pdf>> accessed 08 June 2026

²⁰ Lori Beaman et al., 'Powerful Women: Does Exposure Reduce Bias?' (2009) 124(4) The Quarterly Journal of Economics <<https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2009.124.4.1497>> accessed 08 June 2026

²¹ Haryana Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Act 2020

²² Sandeep Kumar et al., 'PANCHAYATI RAJ AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF JIND DISTRICT, HARYANA' (2024) 5(1) ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts

delivery.²³ The phenomenon of proxy leadership has been a significant challenge in Haryana. However, targeted administrative interventions such as direct training, monitoring, and capacity-building initiatives have enabled women Sarpanchs in districts like Kaithal to assert independent authority (Sharma, 2022).²⁴

The Mewat (Nuh) region represents a socio-economically disadvantaged region characterised by low literacy and entrenched patriarchal norms. In this context, the Panchayati Raj system has facilitated women's entry into governance, albeit with limited immediate impact. Studies highlight that while women's participation has increased awareness of rights and entitlements, structural barriers such as economic dependence and social restrictions continue to impede substantive empowerment. Nonetheless, gradual shifts in gender roles indicate the transformative potential of PRIs in such contexts.²⁵

Scholarly discourse highlights that legal frameworks alone are insufficient for empowerment:

- Studies indicate that women's participation in formal political institutions has not always translated into improved social status.
- Structural inequalities and gendered division of labour continue to limit women's agency.
- Political empowerment requires not just participation but meaningful influence over decision-making processes.
- As B.S. Bhargava notes, empowerment involves the capacity to influence planning, implementation, and evaluation within political systems.

²³ Sarita, 'Empowerment of Women through Participation in Haryana Panchayati Raj Institutions: Case Study of Rewari District' (2019) 4(5) Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary <https://old.rjournals.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/1131-1135_RRIJM190405245.pdf> accessed 08 June 2026

²⁴ Dr Jeet Ram Sharma, 'A Comprehensive Study on Capacity Building of Elected Members of Panchayati Raj Institutions' (2022) 4(2) International Journal of Multidisciplinary Trends <<https://www.multisubjectjournal.com/article/315/5-7-15-899.pdf>> accessed 08 June 2026; Parveen Arora, 'Ensure no male proxy for women panches, staff told' *The Tribune* (06 December 2022) <<https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/haryana/ensure-no-male-proxy-for-women-panches-staff-told-458161/>> accessed 08 June 2026

²⁵ Perways Alam and Mohammed Nizamuddin, 'Role of Micro Finance & Self Help Groups in Women Empowerment: A Case Study of District Mewat' (2012) 1(2) International Journal of Entrepreneurship & Business Environment Perspectives <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2217304> accessed 08 June 2026; Neelam and Suneet Awasthi, 'WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUPS (SHGS) IN MEWAT DISTRICT OF HARYANA STATE' (2024) 5(6) ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts

FROM PARTICIPATION TO TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

Moving beyond symbolic representation requires intervention along several fronts. The same may be achieved by moving towards the following goals:

- Strengthening capacity-building frameworks for women representatives
- Ensuring financial and administrative autonomy of PRIs
- Addressing socio-cultural barriers through community engagement
- Promoting digital and governance literacy among women
- Encouraging networks and peer-learning platforms for women leaders

CONCLUSION

The Panchayati Raj system has undeniably expanded the political space for women in India, marking a significant step toward inclusive democracy. However, the transition from descriptive representation to substantive empowerment remains incomplete.

Constitutional safeguards like reservation have proven to be highly effective at securing representation for women. The primary hurdle to women's empowerment is not legal, but a structural issue arising out of socio-economic dependence and inherited gender norms. Reservation alone is insufficient to address these issues. Hence, it should also be strengthened by real administrative devolution to allow actual decision-making to ensure that those who are elected are also the people who govern.

True empowerment requires not only participation but also the ability to influence decisions and shape development outcomes. Strengthening institutional mechanisms, addressing structural barriers, and fostering transformative leadership are essential for realising the full potential of women in grassroots governance.