



# From Margins to Mainstream: Examining Women's Socio-Political Development in Panchayats

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**Abstract:** This research paper examines the journey of women from the margins to the mainstream in the context of socio-political development within Panchayats in India. Panchayats, as local self-governing bodies, play a crucial role in grassroots governance and development. Despite constitutional provisions, the journey of women in Panchayats remains complex, marked by challenges and opportunities. This study synthesizes existing literature and secondary data to analyze the socio-political impact of women's participation, highlighting achievements, barriers, and implications for gender equality and inclusive development. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at further enhancing women's empowerment and equitable participation in Panchayats.

**Key Words:** Women empowerment, Panchayats, socio-economic development, political participation, gender equality, sustainable development.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Gender equality and empowerment of women have been recognized globally as a key element for achieving progress in all spheres. To promote the development of women, the United Nations adopted the 3rd Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women on 18 December 1979, which entered into force on 3 September 1981. Despite many traditions and time-bound measurable goals, world statistics speak of the miserable condition of women and that they are marginalized from enjoying the fruits and benefits of a state of equality and freedom. In the context of Indian society, women have been inferior to men at both socio-economic and political levels. The Constitution of India guarantees equality between men and women. But in the Indian context, family status is judged on the basis of male seniority and not female. Women have not yet been given equal status by the society through Panchayati Raj. Panchayati Raj is not a new phenomenon in the country. Its history is more than 1000 years old. It has its roots in ancient Indian institutions when villages were small republics governed by their panchayats. During this period, it was not that women could not join politics, but the fact was that they did not take interest in it due to the patriarchal system. The British virtually destroyed these ancient republics as well as women's participation in politics through their brutal methods of revenue collection and the introduction of the zamindari land tenure system. The British were of the view that the "women's vote" in Indian society would be premature and they continued to enforce purdah and prohibition against women's education.

After independence, despite having a constitution which embodies ideals like equality and equity, social justice is yet to be achieved. Even when India had a woman Prime Minister for many years, the situation of women at large did not change for the better. Even after 59 years of self-rule, the participation of women in politics in India remained very low. From 2nd October 1959 when the first Panchayati Raj was inaugurated, it has been an uncertain and bumpy journey for the Panchayats after the enactment of the 73rd Amendment Act on 24th April 1993. The structure and procedure of Panchayats are equally important as they bring the members who play a role in it to function and give them powers. If the overall scenario of the panchayats was largely dismal, another disturbing aspect is that nearly half of the rural population was virtually excluded from the panchayat area. Women were completely left out in the British scheme of traditional caste panchayats, gram panchayats and local governments. From the outset, women's participation in the PRI was dominated by two inter-related themes: The representation and effectiveness of women in these bodies and the



outcome of their participation. The co-option of some women was the only available option for women to participate and this was a travesty as it did not produce the desired output and could not verify any results. the co-option method, of course, provides a convenient scope for the dominant caste / class leaders to install their family women such as wife; Mother as their yoke and the very purpose of the policy fell. It took 43 years to realize and recognize that women are another disadvantaged group and also need a solution to their discrimination.

Women have been given priority and that too only in the field of political representation and then in local governments. Women are changing governance in India. As a result of the amendment to the Constitution mandating reservation of seats for women in local governments, they are being elected to an unprecedented number of local councils. In India, we call this new system the Panchayati Raj Institution System. The Panchayati Raj institutions that have brought women into politics are now ruling, be it in a village, or a large area like 100 villages or a district. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system began as recently as January 1994, and it is thus too early to assess the impact of women's entry into the formal structure of government. The sheer number of women that the Panchayati Raj institutions have brought into the political system has brought about a change. The percentage of women at different levels of political activity has changed dramatically as a result of the constitutional change, from the first 4-5% to 25-40%. But the difference is also qualitative, because these women are bringing their experience to the governance of civil society. This is how they are sensitizing the state to issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

### **1.1 Analysis of active political participation of women in Uttar Pradesh**

Panchayats Based on secondary data obtained from official documents of the State Government, the proportion of women elected as representatives of various Panchayats is indicated to be almost the same (i.e. 33.33 per cent) as the proportion prescribed under the provision of the Panchayati Raj Act. But, the proportion of women elected as heads of pramukhs / block panchayats has been found to be as high as 35.62 per cent, while the proportion of women as heads of district panchayats and gram panchayats is estimated to be 27.71 per cent and 33.30 per cent respectively. Further, the percentage of women elected as members of Gram Panchayats (25.55 per cent) Block Panchayats (24.07 per cent) and District Panchayats (25.40 per cent) was much lower than what is recommended under the Panchayati Raj Act. Overall, there seems to be greater emphasis by the State Government on securing the maximum level of representation of women belonging to lower castes in various tiers of Panchayats. As the percentage of lower caste women among the total elected women as heads of block panchayats is 59.32 per cent, followed by gram panchayats (48.33 per cent) and district panchayats (47.83 per cent). Even among elected members, the percentage share of these groups of women is estimated to be 55.09 per cent in Gram Panchayats, 57.76 per cent in Block Panchayats and 53.70 per cent at the level of District Panchayats.

### **1.2 Impact of Women's Reservation Policy on Political Participation**

The reservation policy ensures that a minimum percentage of seats (usually one-third) are reserved for women in panchayats. This has led to a significant increase in the number of women holding elected positions at the local level. The constitutional amendments that provided for reservation of women in local bodies had a transformative impact at the grassroots level, resulting in the elevation of more than 1.4 million women to leadership positions. The latest data shows that around 44 per cent of seats in local bodies in India are held by women, a significant record that makes India one of the world's top performers in women's political empowerment at the local level, surpassing other major countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Japan. Encouraged by women's political participation, many states have increased quotas for women representatives. Currently, 20 states have increased the reservation for women in their Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to 50 per cent. In some states like Karnataka, women have even crossed this threshold with over 50 per cent representation in PRIs, indicating that women are now succeeding in electoral wards that were not specifically reserved for them.

Panchayat level politics has proved to be an indispensable platform for women to participate in public life and decision-making structures, significantly enhancing their agency and confidence. In the area of governance, studies have shown that elected women representatives (EWRs) at the panchayat level are less likely to be associated with corruption, and are more likely to demonstrate efficient leadership in development work such as investment in health, education and improving drinking water facilities in rural areas. Quotas have also influenced gender issues and helped shape policy choices in line with women's needs and concerns. EWRs play an important role in providing redressal support on issues of domestic violence and child marriage. The entry of women into non-traditional spaces has challenged existing rigid gender norms in rural India. EWRs serve as role models for other women in their communities and inspire more women



to participate in politics. Women who were previously marginalized from political participation now have a platform to raise their concerns, advocate for their communities, and influence decision-making processes. The presence of women in panchayats has changed traditional power structures, challenging the dominance of men in local governance and decision-making. Political parties are forced to field women candidates in elections to comply with reservation quotas, prompting internal party reforms and strategies to groom women leaders. Women's participation in panchayats has also influenced the party's agenda and policies, especially on gender-related issues and grassroots development. Reservation policies have facilitated the emergence of a new generation of women leaders at the grassroots level, many of whom have risen to high positions in state and national politics. Women in panchayats gain experience in governance, leadership skills and political networking, enhancing their ability to navigate the higher echelons of political leadership. The presence of women in elected positions can increase voters' confidence in the political process, especially among women voters who see themselves represented. Women's reservation policies have also encouraged greater participation of women voters in elections and citizen participation, creating a more inclusive political environment. Women representatives often advocate policies that address gender inequalities, social welfare and community development, leading to more inclusive and responsive governance. Their presence can improve transparency and accountability in local governance, as women often prioritize efficient service delivery and equitable resource allocation.

## **2. IMPACT OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATS ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT:**

Women who become panchayat representatives gain political experience, leadership skills and confidence, which can empower them in other aspects of life. By participating in decision-making processes, women gain a voice in matters that directly affect their communities, challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The increasing visibility of women in leadership positions challenges the social norms that have traditionally kept women out of the public and political spheres. Women leaders serve as role models for the younger generation, inspiring girls into leadership roles and higher education. Women representatives often prioritize issues such as health care, education, sanitation and infrastructure that directly affect the well-being of women and children. Their presence ensures that the needs and perspectives of women and marginalized groups are considered in local development initiatives. Women's participation in decision-making can lead to policies and initiatives that address gender-based violence, ensuring safe environments for women and girls. Women leaders often bring transparency and accountability to governance processes, making local governance more inclusive and accountable. Their participation can improve the delivery of public services by addressing deficiencies and ensuring equitable allocation of resources. Women's participation promotes greater community cohesion as they connect diverse stakeholders and foster collaborative approaches to problem-solving. Reservation policies encourage wider participation of women in civic and political activities beyond panchayats, thereby strengthening democratic processes.

## **3. IMPACT OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATS ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:**

Women panchayat leaders often advocate and facilitate access to resources such as credit, agricultural inputs and infrastructure development that are essential for economic activities in rural areas. Women's participation in decision-making can lead to policies and initiatives that support small-scale enterprises and entrepreneurship among women, thereby promoting local economic development. Women representatives prioritize investment in health facilities and educational institutions, thereby improving human capital development and overall community well-being. They advocate infrastructure projects such as roads, water supply systems and sanitation facilities, which are vital for economic activities and quality of life in rural areas. Women in panchayats initiate and support livelihood programs that economically empower women, such as skill development training, self-help groups, and cooperatives. They promote sustainable agricultural practices, provide market linkages for agricultural produce and ensure fair prices for farmers, thereby contributing to rural income generation. The women leaders advocate for increasing access to banking and financial services in rural areas, promoting savings, investment and financial inclusion among women. They support microfinance initiatives that enable women to start or expand small businesses, thereby increasing household income and economic resilience. Women's participation in panchayats helps address gender inequalities in access to economic opportunities, resources and decision-making roles. By promoting women's economic empowerment, women leaders contribute to reducing poverty, improving living standards, and promoting inclusive growth within their communities. Women representatives undertake vocational training and skill development programs that enhance the employability and income-earning potential of women. They support initiatives that create employment opportunities for women in sectors such as handicrafts, cottage industries and services, thereby diversifying the local economy.



#### **4. SOME EXAMPLES OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SUCCESS:**

Some of the examples of Panchayats where remarkable social and economic development has taken place under the leadership of women are as follows:

##### **4.1. Mamta Devi**

At the government level, Mamta Devi's growing dynamism and interaction has enabled her to earn and use her good rapport with various legislators, ministers and government officials. He successfully negotiated to open a law college in his panchayat, which resulted in student access to law education locally. Mamata's positive approach and relationship with various political leaders and representatives enabled her to get funds for various infrastructure projects in the panchayat. These include construction of proper footpaths, new pucca roads, rain shelters at bus stops, installation of solar lamps for safe and easy night-time mobility for commuters, especially women and elderly people, and reducing the risk of falls / injuries.

Under his leadership, funds were received and utilized from the government for inaccessible areas in his panchayat. The work includes construction of roads, repair of irrigation water canals, water storage tanks and pipelines for access to clean water. Besides, a proper pucca structure has been built for the health and veterinary department in the panchayat. A large community center has been built to accommodate 300-500 people for hosting events like marriages and other social events, besides being a source of revenue through rent for the panchayat. One of the biggest changes under Mamata's leadership has been the construction and use of household toilets and community toilets under the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), resulting in improved sanitation, health and hygiene in the panchayat. As a result of her outstanding performance as Pradhan in her first term from 2011 to 2016, Mamata was re-elected as Pradhan in 2016 despite facing stiff competition from all other women contesting from this open (caste) seat. In her second term, Mamata has been continuing her work to develop her panchayat through initiatives including cleanliness and new works since the first term such as developing an underground garbage disposal system like Smart City, addressing the issue of eviction notices from the government to residents with houses in Dharamshala forest land, government officials visiting Mamata's panchayat to monitor development works. Construction of ropeways to promote eco-tourism - high schools and a primary health care center (PHC) - infrastructure development i.e. shops and guest houses to generate revenue and employment.

##### **4.2. Aarti Devi**

She is a panch in Ganjam district of Orissa, which is also her hometown. He was also nominated for the Rajiv Gandhi Leadership Award for 2014. He has introduced the benefits of the public distribution system in his village, which most people did not know about. Now they take advantage of wheat, kerosene and other commodities at subsidized prices. He also launched a major literacy campaign for women in the panchayat, where signatures will be recorded only for official applications instead of thumb impressions. She is known for reviving traditional folk art in Ganjam. She said that she wants to spend the rest of her life in the service of rural people.

##### **4.3. Meena Behen**

In a small village in the Vyara district of Gujarat, the Meena sisters are the first women panchs that their village has seen. After 65 years, her village has its own panchayat board, and that too a women's panchayat board. In a patriarchal society, it has not been easy to reach here. Women were never allowed to leave their homes. They were also not allowed to talk in front of men or in their presence. Recently they built a road because access to the village was very poor. Pregnant women found it really difficult to go to the hospital and even the ambulance vehicle could not come to the village because of this. Now the accessibility is much better. Many people were unaware of important government schemes. The Mahila Panchayat took cognizance of this and ensured that the government schemes were utilized by the people of the village. This year alone, under a government scheme providing housing to the poor, he has built more than 30 houses in his village. Next on his agenda is the construction of a government hospital in his village.

##### **4.4. Chavi Rajawat**

Times of India describes her as the woman who changed the face of rural Rajasthan. With innovative projects, he has brought better water, solar energy, pucca roads, toilets and a bank to his native village called Soda. Not letting bureaucracy come in his way, he has single-handedly enabled many projects in his village. He has also addressed a



poverty conference at the United Nations in New York, USA. The MBA's glamorous punch in jeans is an inspiration to many and the face of young and modern India yearning for change.

## 5. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN PANCHAYATS:

Despite progress, persistent challenges hinder women's full participation and effectiveness in Panchayats. These challenges include socio-cultural norms, lack of support structures, insufficient training, and institutional barriers. Women leaders in Gram Panchayats face various challenges, including:

- **Limited Education and Literacy:** Many women elected to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) face challenges related to illiteracy and low education levels, affecting their effective participation.
- **The Family Responsibilities:** Women often find themselves burdened with family responsibilities, limiting their time and resources for active participation in PRIs.
- **The barriers to communication:** Limited communication skills contribute to introversion among female representatives, which hinders their ability to express themselves effectively.
- **Socio-economic barriers:** Women entering the PRI system often come from poor socio-economic backgrounds that lack adequate capacity building to overcome the complexities of governance.
- **Interference of male members of the family:** Male family members and leaders of caste groups or communities can obstruct the functioning of panchayats, hampering women's decision-making.
- **Unhelpful attitude of officials:** Officers working within the system may display an indifferent attitude, which may affect the confidence and performance of women in PRIs.
- **Misleading by local bureaucracy:** Women representatives may face being misled by the local bureaucracy, which may affect their decision-making ability and understanding of governance processes.
- **The political pressures:** Political parties with vested interests in gender reservation can exert undue pressure on women representatives, affecting their autonomy and decision-making.
- **Corrupt practices:** The widespread use of corrupt practices among male members and local bureaucrats is a challenge to the ethical functioning of PRIs, which affects the representation of women.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the findings, this paper proposes several recommendations for policymakers, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders:

- Enhancing access to resources, training, and capacity-building programs for women elected representatives.
- Promoting gender-sensitive policies and initiatives to address socio-economic disparities and empower marginalized communities.
- Advocating for legislative reforms to ensure gender parity and inclusivity in local governance structures.
- Fostering partnerships and collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and community-based organizations to advance gender equality and sustainable development goals.
- Conducting extensive awareness campaigns to educate women about their rights, the importance of participation in local governance and the benefits of being part of decision-making processes.
- Ensure adequate financial resources and budgetary allocations earmarked specifically for women-led initiatives and projects within Panchayats. To develop necessary infrastructure such as women friendly meeting places and facilities catering to the needs of women delegates.
- Challenging and changing traditional patriarchal mindsets and social norms that hinder women's participation in public life.
- Facilitate networking opportunities for women representatives to share experiences, best practices and strategies for effective governance.
- Provide access to support services such as child care facilities, transportation, and flexible meeting schedules to accommodate women's responsibilities.
- Regularly collecting gender-disaggregated data on panchayat functioning, including participation rate, challenges faced by women representatives and their contribution.
- Conduct periodic evaluations to assess the impact of interventions aimed at increasing women's participation and identify areas that need further improvement.



- Encouraging political parties to promote and support women candidates in panchayat elections, ensuring their inclusion in party decision-making processes. Advocating at all levels of government for policies and programs that promote gender equality and women's empowerment in local governance.

## **7. FUTURE PROSPECTS OF WOMEN'S PANCHAYATS AND POTENTIAL AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT:**

The future of women's panchayats is crucial for the social and moral upliftment of Indian society. It has often been observed that the participation of women in panchayats is low. For improvement, women can be motivated to participate more and be fully included. Women Panchayat members can be given complete information and training about legal procedures and Panchayati Raj system, besides moral and social subjects. More and more investment can be made in development works in panchayats for women, so that they can get suitable resources to solve their problems. Various schemes and programs can be launched for empowerment of women members in Panchayats to help them make their voice heard. Facilities can be made available to provide technical support and in-depth information to women panchayat members so that they can work effectively. Through these reform areas, steps can be taken towards wider upliftment of the society by increasing the participation of women in panchayats. It can play an important role in improving the social structure, thereby ensuring the general development of the society.

## **8. CONCLUSION:**

In conclusion, this research paper underscores the importance of women's participation in Panchayats as a catalyst for socio-political development and gender equality. Despite facing numerous challenges, women in Panchayats have demonstrated resilience, leadership, and commitment to promoting inclusive and equitable governance. The findings emphasize the imperative of continued efforts to enhance women's representation, agency, and empowerment within Panchayats through targeted policies, capacity-building programs, and community engagement initiatives. By mainstreaming women's voices and experiences in local governance, India can achieve more inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

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