

Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in Empowering Rural Women

ABSTRACT

This article follows the evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) from the Independence provisions in the 73rd constitutional amendment concerning reservations for women and other vulnerable sections. The goal of the 73rd constitutional amendment of 1993 is to examine and comprehend how the amendment affects women's empowerment. Indeed, women's reservations in PRIs have created enormous opportunities for their empowerment, especially for those who belong to the weakest segments of society. Despite significant progress, women's subordination to men is still a widespread occurrence. India is seeing a sharp increase in violence against women at a period of unparalleled economic prosperity, and the majority of girls are still not afforded equal opportunities in school. The Indian government designated 33% of the seats in Panchayats for women and granted constitutional status to village-level councils, or Panchayati Raj institutions, in one of the most significant moves towards the empowerment of women.

Key words: PRI, empowerment, women, reservation

INTRODUCTION

In rural India, the village is the fundamental social unit. In India, the villages still house more than three-quarters of the population. Soon after independence, the government took a number of actions to improve the lives and prosperity of the rural populace, which was a reflection of its care for their welfare. Several notable figures, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Jai Prakash Narain, stated that bringing democracy to the rural masses and including them in the process of rebuilding the country would be the main goals of an independent India. Mahatma Gandhi believed that twenty men seated in the center could not operate a true democracy. It must be resolved by the villagers themselves, starting from the bottom. He envisioned independent, self-sufficient village republics that could run their own affairs. The Constituent Assembly started discussion on the Draft Constitution for new India and the Drafting Committee set up by the Constituent Assembly released its report in February, 1948, but it gave no reference to the village panchayats. With the efforts of a number of leaders, particularly K. Santhanam and Shriman Narayan, panchayats did get a place in the Indian Constitution. The Article 40 of the Indian

Constitution under the heading of “Directive Principles of State Policy” runs as follows: “The state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government”

By implementing Uttar Pradesh Kshetra Samiti and Zila Parishad Adhiniyam 1961, a three-tier Panchayati Raj structure was established in accordance with the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957). It covered the last two layers, known as Kshetra Samiti at the block level and Zila Parishad at the district level. Since then, the state's experience with Panchayati Raj has been uneventful. As noted by Ravi Kumar Pandey and Arun Kumar Singh (1998). “It is true that from 1956 onwards the cause and evolution of Panchayati Raj suffered a setback, mainly due to setback suffered by community development itself. Certain calling off of enthusiasm on the part of political leaders and civil servants at higher levels was actuated by perceived threats to the respective power configuration from the merging Panchayati Raj leadership. Other reasons for its decline, therefore, were irregularities in the elections and suspension of upper tier. The elections to Panchayats were held in 1949, 1955, 1972, 1978, 1982 and 1988 respectively.” As a result, on April 24, 1993, the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 became effective. It establishes the framework for the nation's strong, dynamic Panchayati Raj Institutions. From the perspective of social justice and political mobilization, this amendment aims to maintain the three-tier Panchayati Raj system while also empowering women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, and other marginalized groups in local self-government through elective office reservations; (ii) bolstering the Gramme Sabha to enable direct public participation in identifying needs and meeting them through Panchayati Raj institutions; In order for rural local bodies to carry out their duties and obligations, (iii) a mechanism (the State Finance Commission) must be established; (iv) the 11th Schedule of the Constitution's functions must be ensured to be devolved; and (v) the State Election Commission must be established to conduct timely and regular elections for multi-level panchayat raj institutions. As a result, the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution has gained historical significance.

In India, panchayat raj is not a recent development. Its historical manifestation dates back over a millennium. The origins of Panchayat Raj can be traced back to early Indian institutions, a time when rural areas were ruled by Panchayats, a form of small-scale democracy. Women may enter

politics during this time, but because of a male-dominated system, it was not a priority for them to do so. These ancient republics were almost completely destroyed by British administration, which also severely restricted women's participation in politics and imposed the Zamindari land tenure system. The British persisted in enforcing purdah and prohibiting women from attending school because they believed that a "Vote of Women" would occur quickly in Indian society (Bhagat, 2004). India is the world's largest democratic nation, with women making up about half of the population, following its independence. The techniques of improving women's social, economic, and political standing in society—as historically marginalized groups—are crucial to the empowerment of women. It entails creating a culture in which women can operate without fear of discrimination, repression, abuse, anxiety, or the general sense of mistreatment that comes with being a woman in a historically male-dominated field. One of the tried-and-true methods for empowering women is the political participation of women. Since panchayats are the closest type of government to the people, they can protect their actual participation, which can be vital to their empowerment (Sudipta Biswas, 2015). The majority of disabled women have been neglected. They have never participated in household or community decision-making, partly because of many laws and regulations. Aside from that, women still have a long way to go before they are treated equally to men under our constitution and other legal requirements. That "a country succeeds if its women succeed" is true and has been demonstrated. Therefore, the advancement of women's empowerment is essential to the development of society as a whole. To be empowered is to be authorized. From the people's point of view, they need permission to be in charge of their own life. The only real solution to injustice, cruelty, oppression, and other social ills is empowerment. Women's empowerment, to put it briefly, is granting women the chance to satisfy their demands, requirements for innovation, and decision-making process on their own.

Women's Engagement in PRIs: A Historical backdrop

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee's 1957 report focused on the active involvement of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions and suggested that Panchayats utilize the two female members' desire to implement programming specifically designed for women and children. The Committee on Status of Women in India was established in 1971 with the goal of examining all aspects of women's status in India, particularly their involvement in politics. In its 1974 report, the committee suggested creating legally binding women's Panchayats at the village level, endowing

them with autonomy and resources to oversee and manage projects for women's and children's welfare and development. Women in the villages were granted the ability to directly elect their own representatives and to send delegates to the Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad (Sabanna Rao, 2011, p. 38). In 1977, a committee led by Ashok Mehta once more emphasized the importance of recognizing and bolstering women's participation in Panchayat decision-making. According to Ahmed, Nilofer & Parveen (2008), the National Perspective Plan (NPP) for women 1988–2000 A.D. explicitly suggested reserving 30% of seats for women at the village Panchayat level up to the Zila Panchayat level and in municipal organizations. On April 24, 1993, a historic campaign for women in India began when the 73rd Amendment Act, which dealt with Panchayat Raj Institutions, went into effect. By granting them 33% representation in Panchayati Raj institutions and reserving one-third of the chairperson's office in the three-tier system, this Act gave women unprecedented constitutional power. In addition, on March 20, 2001, the government approved the National Policy for Women's Empowerment. This policy's primary goals are to protect women's effective participation in all areas of public life and activities and to bring about the incursion, expansion, and empowerment of women (Raju in Rao, 2011, p. 143).

Although they make up half of the population, women have access to political, social, economic, and health opportunities. The majority of women with impairments have been overlooked. They are never involved in the decision-making process, owing in large part to numerous societal rules and restrictions. Even while the constitution and legislative laws currently grant women the same standing as males, they still have a long way to go. "A country prospers if its women prosper" is a fact that has been demonstrated. Therefore, empowering women is essential to the advancement of society. Empowerment translates as "to grant." Therefore, empowering women is essential to the advancement of society. To be empowered is to be authorized. Within the framework of the people, they must be granted permission to be in charge of their own life. The only real solution to injustice, exploitation, oppression, and other societal ills is empowerment. Giving women the chance to express their creativity, achieve their desires, and make decisions on their own is, in essence, what is meant by women's empowerment. Its dimensions are social, political, economic, and cultural. The 1960s American civil rights movement gave rise to the idea of empowerment. In 1994, Cairo hosted the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), and in 1995, Beijing hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW). The importance of women's empowerment was acknowledged at both conferences,

and it was reiterated that reproductive health is a crucial component of that empowerment. This agenda was also implemented by the Indian government. In order to empower women and raise their level of awareness about their rights, health, and social development, the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCW) worked to do so. Women's empowerment projects were implemented in India during the sixth five-year plan (1980–1985), with a focus on "awareness raising" and "mobilization." The notion of "welfare of women" in the 1970s gave way to "development of women" in the 1980s, and "empowerment of women" in the 1990s, marking a significant change in policy. The Indian government has proclaimed 2001 to be the Year of Women's Empowerment; yet, the road to this milestone has not been easy. India has 68 years of democratic history. The participation of all citizens, men and women alike, is essential to the success of democracy. In India, women played an active role in the national movement that gave rise to the first political debate about women's political equality. Indian women have actively engaged in politics since 1932. In India, women have served as chief ministers of several states and as president and prime minister. The Government of India made a historic move in 1993 when it included Panchayati Raj Institutions in the Constitution. Panchayat raj institutions, which provide women with a 33% reservation and decentralized decision-making, have resulted in a variety of effects in this regard.

Women in Panchayat

By designating one-third of the seats nationwide for women, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has made room for them in local political involvement and decision-making. In PRIs, it offers reservations for women in two capacities: for member offices and chairperson offices. At least one-third of the seats intended for direct election of members at each tier of the Panchayats are to be reserved for women, in accordance with clauses (2) and (3) of Article 243 (d). Even while the proportion of women participating in politics has increased significantly, they are still underrepresented in governance and decision-making. According to the findings, women's representation in Gram Panchayats was highest in Bihar (54.6%), then in Manipur (43.5%), Karnataka (43.1%), Sikkim (39.9%), Arunachal Pradesh (39.4%), Dadara & Nagar Haveli (39.4%), Assam (39.2%), Himachal Pradesh (39.1%), and Kerala (30.3%). The largest percentages of women in Panchayat Samities were found in Bihar (49.1%), Uttar Pradesh (37.5%), Andaman and Nicobar Islands (37.3%), and Pondicherry (37.0%). Bihar (49.8%) had the

greatest percentage of women at District Panchayats, followed by Manipur (45.9%), Uttar Pradesh (41.5%), Goa (40.0%), Sikkim (40.0%), Rajasthan (37.4%), and Karnataka (37.1%). Women were represented in Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samities, and District Panchayats in Uttar Pradesh in the following proportions: 38.8%, 37.5%, and 41.5%, respectively. Additionally, it was discovered that a growing tendency has been observed in many states in the representation of women at the Panchayati Raj level. This demonstrates the increase in the number of women working in politics. Prior to 1985, there were just two women involved in panchayats in each of the following states: Gujarat, Punjab, West Bengal, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. However, by 2013, that number had risen to 33.0%, 34.9%, 38.4%, 50.0%, and 50.5%, respectively.

The female members of the collective actively participate in a variety of activities, including attending Gram Sabha meetings. Women, ranging in status from labourers to policymakers, actively participate in rural development projects. The adoption of the reservation for women at all levels has resulted in an increase in the participation of women as elected and non-elected members. It serves as a draw for female attendees during the meeting. They offer their recommendations for a range of projects and issues that they have encountered (Gadadhar Behera, 2017, pp. 1–5). The rural women who actively participate in PRI-related activities pertaining to the welfare and advancement of women in their community. The primary tasks carried out by women through PRIs include the elimination of dowries and female illiteracy, the reduction of domestic violence and violence against women and Dalits to end female foeticide, the eradication of discrimination against female children, the enrollment of girls in schools and other educational institutions, the encouragement of women to seek employment in government development schemes, the support of women in obtaining financial resources for operating small businesses, the consolidation of women's self-help groups and cooperatives, the education of women about voting and other political rights, and the improvement of mother and child health facilities and family planning initiatives, among other things. (Page 364 of Srivastava, A.K., 2009).

PRI and Women Empowerment

The Indian Constitution's Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties, and Directive Principles of State Policy all safeguard the idea of gender equality. In addition to guaranteeing women's equality, the Indian Constitution gives the State the authority to take corrective action to

improve public perception of women. After that, India implemented the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974–1978) has been significantly changing how it approaches women's issues, moving from welfare to development while maintaining the idea that women's empowerment is the primary factor determining their place in society (Sunita Singh, 2013, p. 3).

The World Bank (2005) has identified gender inequality as the classic "inequality trap" that perpetuates social inequality and has detrimental effects on women, their families, and communities, as well as on nation states, their economies, and ultimately the well-being of their citizens. A global collaboration to address the primary development concerns is embodied in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MDG 3: "Promoting gender equality and empowering women" is a representation of the firm conviction that, from an economic and social justice perspective, this is a crucial development goal. "Empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes," according to the World Bank (2005). People who are empowered are capable of taking action and enjoy freedom of choice. They are then more equipped to shape their life and the decisions that have an impact on them as a result. According to Linda Mayoux (2006), empowerment is a process that involves internal transformation, or power within, capacity enhancement, or power to act, and group mobilization of women (and men), or power with others, with the aim of challenging and altering the gender-related subordination that implies power over (emphasis ours). People who feel empowered participate more in decision-making processes and believe they have the right and ability to make decisions for themselves (Kabeer, 2001). Furthermore, empowerment is a politically charged and controversial idea. The fundamental meaning of "power" in the context of empowerment is agency and competence. Being capable goes beyond simply knowing something. Human agency, as highlighted by Amartya Sen (1999), is the capacity and will to act. Individual and collective human agency is essential to engaging in social, political, cultural, economic, and personal life. Authority is also implied by empowerment. The ability of women to make decisions and take action is essential to society's overall progress.

Empowerment through education: India's case

As was already established, empowerment is the ability to make decisions and turn those decisions into the desired actions. It is necessary to give women access to tools for

empowerment. Education is one of the main methods in which this access can be ensured. Here, education encompasses not only reading but also critical understanding of the connections between women's lives and the larger socio-political institutions of which they are a part, as well as awareness of the societal injustices and discrimination that women experience. Being educated gives one the ability to analyse patriarchal systems and actively work to undermine its standards. Education, particularly critical education, enables women to create collectives, navigate current power structures, and effect change. Women's empowerment may ultimately result from this kind of education.

It was accepted, within a broadly liberal framework, that education would result in many forms of empowerment, including those that take place inside the family, in the workplace, in securing rights, and in raising the representation of women and giving them a voice in politics. But in India, the legacy of colonization and strongly ingrained caste, gender, and class barriers barred women from pursuing higher education, impeding this process from taking place. Therefore, alternative strategies for guaranteeing women's representation in a developing democracy have to be looked for. Giving constitutional legitimacy to PRIs and reserving 33% of Panchayat seats for women, the Indian Constitution Act (73rd Amendment, 1992) is a significant step towards women's empowerment and increased participation in decision-making. It was a brave move to reserve around one-third of Panchayat seats for women, and as a result, one million women have been elected to serve on rural councils. The government started the SHG movement and microfinance in order to give women more economic power. Originally, the SHGs were supposed to be organizations that would empower women by reducing poverty and offering credit. However, the designs for neither of these programmes included a foundation in education upon which to acquire these abilities; instead, they concentrated solely on economic activity (SHGs) or political participation in Panchayats or local self-government. Consequently, as the literature suggests (Bhalla, 2011), women may continue to rely on their husbands—whether or not they are literate—as well as their dads or father-in-law, and it is likely that men will govern the Panchayat in a proxy capacity. Similarly, because they lack the foundational knowledge necessary to comprehend business, the women in SHGs may continue to rely on bank managers and other individuals who provide them with microfinance.

Panchayats, Self-help Groups and women's empowerment

In order to establish village Panchayats and give them the capacity to operate as units of self-government, the concept of local governance was incorporated into the Indian Constitution as a Directive Principle of State Policy (Article 40, 1950). There were times after independence when there was a lot of enthusiasm in putting this directing concept into practice. Women's literacy was the primary objective of government measures aimed at them, but political and economic empowerment were not taken into consideration at the time. The government established a National Committee for Women's Education in 1958 with the goal of formulating proposals aimed at closing the gender disparity in literacy. Regarding women in Panchayats, a resolution was made in 1957 stating that two women who would work with women and children were to be co-opted by representatives, of which there were roughly 20 in each block Panchayat (Buch, 2000).

The Ashok Mehta Committee did not provide up to 153 suggestions to fortify the Panchayat system in India until 1977–1978. Regarding women's representation, the Committee proposed two new ideas: first, women who polled highest but were unsuccessful in Panchayat elections should be included; second, if no women ran in an election, then qualified women should be co-opted. In a few states, like Karnataka and West Bengal, the recommendations of this committee have shown positive outcomes. In order to ensure women's reservation in the Panchayat system, it was necessary for women to hold at least one-third of the membership and chairperson posts in Panchayats across all three levels. Moreover, this reservation guarantees women's reservation regardless of caste or background by encompassing not only the full membership but also those reserved for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. As a result, at least one-third of Panchayats will have female chairpersons from district to village, and at least one-third of the members of all Panchayats will henceforth be female (who may also run for other seats). Giving elected individuals in rural communities' additional authority over matters of governance is the goal of local self-government through PRIs. In addition to overseeing village welfare, the Panchayats are in charge of managing the community's infrastructure. They distribute development funds and oversee their utilization (Duflo and Chattopadhyay, 2004), which means they are crucial to the fields of health, education, women's empowerment, and governance. With the 73rd Amendment, the Panchayats in West Bengal were granted further authority. This included overseeing the operation of two alternative education programmes: Madhyamik Shiksha Karmasuchi (an Upper Primary/Secondary Education Programme; also known as MSKs) and Shishu Shiksha

Karmasuchi (a Primary Education Programme; also known as SSKs). In 1997, the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development initiated this alternative education initiative.

Education and Empowerment for Women in Panchayati Raj Establishments and Self-Help Groups

39% of the 51 EWRs surveyed had completed their education before the eighth grade. Many of these women rely on their male family members for financial support. Fifty-seven percent of these women live in mud huts, eighty-eight percent are from lower-class backgrounds, and fifteen percent of these women's children do not attend school. All three of the PRIs' tiers are covered by this data.

The Panchayat members themselves identified the indicators of women's empowerment within Panchayats throughout the discussion. They claim that a lot of women nowadays are able to speak openly, share their thoughts, voice complaints, etc. People are growing increasingly conscious of health-related issues. Numerous women have obtained training in a variety of disciplines and have become literate. They show up to Gram Sansad gatherings. These days, the women produce a range of handcrafted items and market them. Women's involvement in cottage industries is evidence that they have attained some level of empowerment. These women also understand the importance of population control and other social development aspects. During 1997 and 2008, West Bengal's birth rate fell by 28%, while India's birth rate fell by 19.3% overall (Chandrashekhar and Ghosh, 2010). From 934 in the 2001 Census to 950 in the 2011 Census, the sex ratio has grown. Girls are now marrying at an average age of 19 instead of 14. All of this has been made possible by the women's representatives who have visited the homes in the villages and had one-on-one conversations with women about family planning and other related topics.

A recent study conducted by the Nielsen Company-ORG Marg on behalf of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj and with the assistance of an academic advisory committee offers numerous new insights regarding the social and political empowerment of women in the recently established Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This survey, which covers Gram Panchayats in 23 states, is the largest on any aspect of Panchayat functioning. It includes a sample size of over 20,000 people, including elected women representatives (EWRs), elected male representatives (EMRs), former EWRs, official employees, and community members. The Scheduled Caste, Scheduled

Tribe, and OBC categories comprised nearly three-fourths of the sample's EWRs, who were equally split between those who were above and below the poverty line. Given that four-fifths of the legislators were elected from reserved seats, reservations have had a big impact. Reservation played a significant effect, as evidenced by the fact that 43 percent of former women members cited it as a major incentive for running in the first election and 39 percent cited its withdrawal as a major deterrent. The percentage of first-timers in politics was equally high (86 percent), since the majority of elected legislators (87 percent) had only run in one election. About 14% of gramme panchayat members were re-elected more than once. Subsequent investigation revealed that the majority of the former female legislators were ineligible for reelection since the seat from which they had been elected was not earmarked for them in the next round. Although sixty percent of elected women members report no gender discrimination in the Panchayat, ninety-four percent indicated acceptance in Panchayat meetings and freedom to voice concerns. It is clear that elected women representatives are more motivated to perform well in a supportive professional environment because 60–64 percent of them reported increased interaction with parallel bodies and line departments.

Table 1: Comparison of the changes that SC & ST and the all-women representative have experienced*

Empowering changes after election	% SC/ST	All EWRs
Internal causes of low engagement include knowledge, fear, low self-esteem, proxy status, and adherence to gender norms and old caste systems.	72	22.9
Greater self-confidence	55	78
Increased leadership skills	31	69.8
Family share responsibility for looking after children	39.8	62.4
More role allowed in family decision making	39.8	68-75
More respected after the election	58.4	79
		65

Able to speak up in their households and Gram Sabha more freely	34.3	67.9
Greater self-esteem exhibited by SC/ST representatives	32.5	77.1
Officials accepted invitation to visit panchayat	39.3	43.1
Officials supported in implementing schemes	36.8	40.8
Officials took prompt action on women requests/complaints	34.2	40.8

*Data on SC/ST women representatives from Mangubhai et al. 2009, on All EWRs from the EWR Report (MoPR 2009)

It has been stated that there has been a rise in the involvement of ordinary women citizens in different activities, like going to Gramme Sabha meetings, among other things (68-78 percent). However, the Male Pradhans and Ward Members mostly discussed matters pertaining to the design of rural development projects and the identification of BPL families.

CONCLUSION

PRIs can be the first step towards women's political empowerment since they provide them the self-assurance and political literacy to run in elections for state legislatures and the legislature, so clearing the path from "Panchayat to Parliament." It is merely the start of a path that leads to empowerment. Women have not had a very lengthy history in local government leadership. Women are still in the process of learning. It is a fact that women are the only ones who can properly express their suppressed emotions, needs, and viewpoints during development processes. In order to represent the needs and opinions of this segment of society in growth, women's preparation is crucial. In the last century, women in India have achieved great strides, holding the highest positions and offices. However, there is still a need for a suitable solution to the numerous issues. Women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions and local reservations are insufficient for achieving women's empowerment. Even if we still have a ways to go, we shall eventually arrive. "That nation which does not respect women will never become great now and nor will it ever in the future," stated Swami Vivekananda. "Let us work towards giving women their much-deserved status in the pursuit of making India a great nation."

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