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Status of Women Sarpanches in Panchayati Raj

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ABSTRACT: The participation of women in Panchayati Raj institutions has given a new direction to their socio-economic development. By the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, under Articles 243 (D) and 243 (T) of the Constitution, one-third seats of members of local bodies and their heads were reserved for women respectively. In Madhya Pradesh, "Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Rajya and Gram Swarajya Act 1993" was made in compliance of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of the Constitution. Even after so many years of implementation of Panchayati Raj system, the level of participation of rural women is satisfactory, whether leadership has developed or not and how is their socio-economic status. This may be the subject of study. Because in the rural environment, due to illiteracy, conservatism, male dominated social system, economic and social inequality, lack of awareness affects the political participation and activity of rural women. Especially in Naxal affected areas where violent activities also take place. It is difficult to work. At present, Baihar, Paraswada, Birsa, Lanji, Kirnapur, Malajkhand etc. areas in Balaghat district are Naxal-affected areas. After so many years of implementation of Panchayati Raj system in such sensitive Naxal affected places, how is the socio-economic condition of rural women in Panchayati Raj system, it is an important topic. The question of ensuring the successful participation of women leadership in politics is relevant in the context of Naxal-affected areas at present.

KEYWORDS: women, panchayati, raj, sarpanches, India, equality, political

I. INTRODUCTION

It looks at the impact of the 73rd Amendment to India's constitution, which introduced reservations in the political arena for women. The Panchayati Raj Act of 1992 reserved one third of all Sarpanch positions for women, and granted constitutional status to the Panchayat system, outlining its specific functions and jurisdiction. This book enhances existing scholarship on the impact of these changes in that it provides the opportunity for women Sarpanches from Haryana to speak for themselves and reflect upon their journey. Ten elected women Sarpanches share their stories about their lives, from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. The political representation of women is crucial to deepening democracy and advancing gender equality. This also has tangible political and economic gains. Research shows that having more women in politics leads to more effective policy outcomes, reduced corruption, and less conflict; women leaders tend to foster economic and developmental growth while promoting more inclusion of women in the labour force.^[1] Indeed, according to the critical mass theory, the presence of a certain number of women, termed as a 'considerable minority', in governance structures is important to impact policy. The theory terms women representatives in politics as the 'critical mass' whose presence should not only ensure the descriptive representation of women in terms of their presence in the political and governance landscape but also result in substantive policy change for the empowerment of the female population.^[2] Many countries, including India, have adopted gender quotas as a means to address historical imbalances and the cultural, social, and economic barriers linked with women's political exclusion. Indeed, legislated gender quotas have proved to be effective at increasing women's political representation; countries with such quotas have a higher representation of women in local governments (by 7 percentage points) than countries without the quotas.^[3] As of January 2015, 88 countries have introduced legislated gender quotas for local elections.^[4]

India's 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act,^[a] which came into effect in 1993, reserved one-third of electoral seats for women in local governance structures in rural areas, known as Panchayati Raj Institutions [1,2,3] (PRIs).^[b] Thirty years

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since its enactment, India, a diverse and multilayered federal polity, has over 1.45 million women in local decision-making roles.^[5]

India climbed eight places in the 2015 Global Gender Gap report (ranking 127), which added the inclusion of women in local governance as a new indicator.^[6] Only 18 of the 146 countries surveyed have achieved representation of women of over 40 percent in local governance. India is ranked among the countries with the highest participation of women in local governance (44.4 percent of all elected local government representatives are women), ahead of Global North countries like Germany (30.3 percent) and the UK (35.3 percent), and Global South contemporaries like Brazil (15.7 percent), Indonesia (15.7 percent), and China (28.1 percent).

The inclusion of a target on women's political participation^[c] in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework underlines the importance of women's leadership at the local level in promoting and preserving democracy, and achieving the SDGs.

II. DISCUSSION

There is a growing recognition of the crucial link between local governance, development, and gender equality. Women play a critical role in emphasising local priorities, have an impact on developmental outcomes, and are essential in ensuring sustainable development in the spirit of decentralised governance. Research suggests that women political representatives have ensured better distribution of essential public goods than men, strengthening sustainable development at the grassroots in the true spirit of inclusive and decentralised democratic governance.^[8] By bringing attention to inclusivity, prioritising policies that support families, and advocating for gender equality, women contribute to creating more equitable and responsive local communities.^[9]

Until the 1990s, India accorded little priority to women's political participation, even as the number of women voters increased steadily. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment sought to upend the prevalent traditional structures and entrenched systems of male-dominated political patronage in rural areas, empowering women to participate in political processes hitherto dominated by men. Gender-related indicators from when the amendment was introduced in the early 1990s point to the severe constraints women faced as they entered grassroots politics for the first time. The literacy rate of rural women in 1992-1993 was 34 percent compared to 65.9 percent in 2017-2016; the total fertility rate of [4,5,6]rural women was 3.7 children per woman in 1992-1993, reducing to 2.1 in 2017-2016; the median age of marriage for women (in the 20-49 age group) has also improved, from 16.2 years in 1992-1993 to 19.2 years in 2017-2016.^{[10],[11]} In the decades since the amendment, India has witnessed increased women's representation in local governance. The impact can be felt in the improved delivery of public goods in villages with female leaders, and the weakening of stereotypes about women's abilities to lead.^[12]

However, there appears to be a "conspiracy of silence" around the good work of local governments in India.^[13] This is even more conspicuous when the elected representatives are women. The contributions of elected women representatives (EWRs) are largely undervalued and neglected, with studies from several Indian villages showing that EWRs are likely to receive less favourable reactions even when their performance is better than that of male elected representatives.^[14]

This paper attempts to review the role of women in local governance in rural India (at the panchayat level) over the years, delineate the achievements, and analyse persisting challenges. The paper also presents policy recommendations for enhancing women's participation in local governance. The paper draws insights from secondary literature, including books, research articles, news reports, and survey reports in this domain. The authors have also interviewed women panchayat-level representatives, officials, and bureaucrats who have worked in PRIs, as well as representatives from civil society organisations engaged in capacity-building initiatives for EWRs.^[d] These have been used as primary data to substantiate the paper's findings. This study is only confined to women's representation in local governance

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structures at the rural level. The state of women's representation in urban bodies of local governance is beyond the scope of this paper.

The Evolution of Women's Representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions

India's federal political system provides for three tiers of government—national, state, and local levels. Local-level institutions of self-governance fall under two categories: municipal bodies and town councils in the urban areas and PRIs in the rural areas. A sizeable majority (65 percent) of the total population in India resides in rural areas.^[15] This makes the PRIs a crucial instrument of political representation that impacts everyday governance and welfare for considerable sections of the populace. The panchayat system comprises councils at the village level (gram panchayat), block level (panchayat samiti), and district level (zilla parishad), with responsibilities for managing local public resources. Members of these councils are elected by local residents. The size of the gram panchayat can vary significantly in terms of the number of people and villages it covers, a variation observed across different states. During elections, locals vote to select council members and, in most states, directly elect a pradhan (council chief). Typically, candidates for these positions are put forward by political parties, but they must be residents of the villages they seek to represent. The council relies on majority voting for decision-making, and the pradhan does not possess the authority to veto decisions made by the council.^[16]

Although local village-level structures of self-rule have a long history, the idea of promoting local self-government, as enshrined in Article 40, was positioned within the non-enforceable Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian Constitution without any explicit mention of women's representation.^[17] The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), appointed to examine the working of India's community development programme to address issues of decentralisation, recommended that the 20-member panchayat samiti should co-opt or nominate two women with an "interest in work among women and children."^[18] The Maharashtra Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Act of 1961 followed this suggestion, allowing for one or two women to be nominated to each of the three PRI bodies if no woman candidate was elected. In 1978, out of 320 women representatives on the panchayat samitis and zilla parishads in Maharashtra, only six were elected. This demonstrated that the provision for co-option or nomination had a limited impact in accommodating women leaders in the panchayat system.

The Committee for the Status of Women in India, in its report titled 'Towards Equality' (1974), strongly highlighted that the concerns and viewpoints of rural women had not received adequate consideration in the government's plans and development policies.^[19] It also proposed the establishment of statutory women's panchayats at the local level but did not advocate for reservation. In 1978, the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions (also called Ashok Mehta Committee) recommended reserving two seats for women in each panchayat.^[20] The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988) recommended that 30 percent of the executive-head positions from the village to the district levels should be reserved for women.^[21] The same recommendation was put forth in the unsuccessful 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill of 1989.^[22] Eventually, in 1993, Panchayati Raj was formally incorporated into the Constitution through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (for panchayats at the village, block, and district levels) and the 74th Constitutional Amendment (for municipalities) Acts, with both providing for the reservation of one-third of elected seats for women.^[23] According to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, "Not less than one-third of the total number of seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes or, as the case may be, the Scheduled Tribes." It also provides that "Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat."^[24]

Before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment mandated the reservation of seats for women at the local level, certain states had already taken steps to implement women's reservations in panchayats. After Maharashtra adopted the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Committee in 1961, Karnataka initiated (in 1985) a 25 percent reservation for women in the mandal praja parishads (local people's council) along with an additional reservation for women from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Similarly, in 1986, Andhra Pradesh established a reservation of between 22

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percent and 25 percent for gram panchayats, with the provision of co-opting two women in the panchayat samiti in addition to the elected women members.^[25] However, it is the constitutional amendments that had a transformative impact, resulting in the eventual elevation of over 1.45 million women to leadership positions in India's local governance (see Table 1). Presently, 20 states—Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal—have expanded the reservation for women in their PRIs to 50 percent.^[26] In some states, like Karnataka, women have even surpassed this threshold, with more than 50 percent representation in PRIs, indicating that women are now succeeding in electoral wards that were not specifically reserved for them.^[27]

Table 1: Percentage of Elected Women Representatives in Panchayats in Indian States[10,11,12]

	States	Percentage		States	Percentage
1	Andhra Pradesh	50	16	Manipur	50.69
2	Arunachal Pradesh	38.98	17	Odisha	52.68
3	Assam	54.6	18	Punjab	41.79
4	Bihar	52.2	19	Rajasthan	51.31
5	Chhattisgarh	54.78	20	Sikkim	50.3
6	Goa	36.72	21	Tamil Nadu	52.98
7	Gujarat	49.96	22	Telangana	50.34
8	Haryana	42.12	23	Tripura	45.23
9	Himachal Pradesh	50.12	24	Uttar Pradesh	33.34
10	Jammu and Kashmir	33.18	25	Uttarakhand	56.01
11	Jharkhand	51.57	26	West Bengal	51.42
12	Karnataka	50.05			
13	Kerala	52.41			
14	Madhya Pradesh	49.99			
15	Maharashtra	53.47			

Source: PIB^{[e],[28]}

Though the reservation of seats has augmented women's participation, the stories of women's leadership at the local level are nuanced, multilayered, and replete with challenges.

State-level dynamics

Given India's widespread diversity, and varied sociocultural dynamics and developmental priorities, women representatives have faced distinctive challenges. In response, some states have seen the emergence of all-women panchayats, such as the 'Manje Rai Panchayat' at Indapur Tehsil and Ralegaon Shindhi in Ahmednagar district in Maharashtra, and the 'Kultikri Gram Panchayat' under the Jhargram subdivision in West Bengal. Factors such as the number of reserved seats for women in the panchayats, the level of participation of women in local politics, and the political party's bid to mobilise support among women propelled the establishment of such all-women panchayats. These panchayats have performed well, with special emphasis on campaigns for increasing women's literacy and initiatives to expand avenues of employment and entrepreneurship among local women in the villages.^[29]

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States like Karnataka, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan have introduced mahila (women) gram sabhas to strengthen women's participation. Due to a combination of social barriers and a lack of knowledge of rights and entitlements, women's participation in gram sabha meetings across states has remained low.^[30] A 2017 survey conducted by Participatory Research in Asia^[4] in Rajasthan showed that most women had never attended a gram sabha meeting and had a low desire to get involved in local governance processes. The concept of mahila gram sabhas originated in Maharashtra when self-help groups (SHGs)^[8] and female members of the community called a 'mahila sabha' (women's meeting) against alcoholism. Since then, such gram sabhas have also focussed on women-centric issues like maternal health, domestic violence, female infanticide, child marriage, and livelihood opportunities for women.^[31]

A 2008 study on EWRs by the Indian government's Ministry of Panchayati Raj observed that in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Assam, women pradhans were more likely to be engaged in household work, while it was least likely in states like Arunachal Pradesh and Kerala.^[32] Incidentally, high engagement by women leaders in panchayat-related activities was noted in Kerala.^[33] Another study revealed that while family members and community groups (such as SHGs, clubs, and mahila panchayats) motivate women leaders to contest elections, political parties are also extremely dominant in states like West Bengal, Sikkim, Tripura, and Kerala.^[34] This is possibly because of the greater politicisation of rural life in these states.

Several states have also initiated various skills development programmes to enhance the leadership skills of women representatives in the panchayats. For instance, women's empowerment training under the Kudumbashree initiative, a programme for SHGs in Kerala, facilitated women to develop efficient leadership skills in local-level politics in the last two decades.^[35]

A 2004 study in Haryana found that "the major difficulties faced by female Sarpanches [panchayat head] to be the purdah [veil] system, hesitation or apprehension about ability to perform duties, lack of education, lack of awareness about the Panchayat system, and restrictions derived from physical mobility."^[36] The study also revealed some of the positive impacts on women's empowerment by facilitating the "creation of political space for women, the opportunity to come out into the public and interact, the ability for women to share their problems with women leaders, and the construction of a new social status for women."^[37] Another study, based on interviews with 295 women sarpanches in 21 districts in Haryana, reveals that although EWRs face a slew of sociocultural hindrances, their willingness and ability to impact governance in panchayats has increased with time.^[38]

A critical challenge to women's representation is the placement of 'rubber stamp candidates' in reserved seats; a 2008 survey of three village panchayats in Punjab found that 75 percent of elected female representatives reported proxy participation by their husbands.^[39] More recent studies confirm that the earlier challenges of having women as proxies have not entirely diminished in many states.^[40] However, several studies have shown that women's political agency and their involvement in panchayat work have significantly increased with time.^{[41],[42]}

Despite being embedded in conservative societal environments, women leaders have emerged as instrumental drivers of social change in many villages across India. In Haryana, which is known for its low sex ratio, women panchayat-level leaders have made attempts to reduce the prevalence of the purdah system, encourage school education for girls, reduce open defecation, reduce school dropouts, and improve the sex ratio.^[43] Women leaders in many other states have fought against the deeply entrenched conservative patriarchal structures and created conditions for women to be economically self-reliant with initiatives like forming SHGs for women.^[44] There have also been instances of educated women giving up lucrative careers to contest panchayat elections in states like Rajasthan to contribute to developmental work in their villages^[13,14]

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Additionally, the inadequate devolution of funds by state governments to PRIs has impacted gender-inclusive growth at the grassroots.^[46] To counter this, some states, such as Kerala and Karnataka, have introduced gender budgeting in panchayats to mainstream gender concerns through the allocation of funds.^[47]

Major Trends

Even though women leaders work under social and cultural constraints—the burden of caregiving, deep-rooted cultural biases, low levels of mobility, lack of role models in a field dominated by men, and lack of information and opportunities to develop negotiation skills—there has been a perceivable increase in their awareness, knowledge, and confidence levels, as decentralisation and devolution have slowly taken root in the country.

Certain key trends in the socioeconomic and demographic profile of EWRs are discernible, as are variations in the political careers of female and male representatives. These trends emerge from large-scale studies covering different states.^[48] ^[49]

- Women representatives are found to be generally younger than their male counterparts, but also less educated. Education has a direct impact on their performance in office. Those who are illiterate or educated below the primary school level encounter challenges in performing well while in office.^[50]
- Women representatives are predominantly married. This affects the time they can give for work compared to male representatives. A survey showed that female panchayat members give a substantial portion of their time to household work in comparison to panchayat work, while male panchayat representatives can devote more time to panchayat work.^[51]
- Most female representatives are first-time candidates with no training or experience, unlike their male counterparts, who are likely to have a prior association with some form of local politics.^[52]
- Women are likely to rely on family members and neighbours to access information and conduct their work, compared to men, who are more likely to source information from panchayat office bearers, government officials, and media.^[53]
- Most women representatives do not get re-elected. This is because their seats are de-reserved in the next election, and many women are hesitant to contest from an unreserved seat.^[54]
- It is assumed that women from the rural elite enter politics through family connections. However, many EWRs also got elected from families without any land or with small landholdings and no family connections. Many of them function independently of male family members.^[55]

Impacts

The effectiveness of the work of EWRs can be analysed based on the impact on:

- Development and policy outcomes

The reservation of seats for women paved the way for the greater political participation of women, while also demonstrating the efficient leadership and governance skills of women leaders in panchayat-level politics.^[56] Women often differ from men in their policy preferences, and quotas for women have led to the more efficient utilisation of local resources in certain crucial spheres. A 2010 study across 11 states found that women-led villages saw improved delivery of services with lower levels of corruption. Greater investments were made in services like water infrastructure, sanitation, education, and roads, which were important to the community, especially women.^{[57].}^[58] The study also confirmed that female leaders receive a less favourable evaluation from citizens of the village, including its women. With greater access to education and more awareness of rights, the role of the new generation of EWRs has expanded as they work on welfare programmes by the government, which cover livelihoods and entitlements, sanitation, maternal and child health, nutrition and food security, education, childcare services, and social services.^[59]

- Citizen participation and inclusive governance

Women leaders have a positive impact on deliberative democracy and inclusive governance by improving participation in gram sabha meetings, which are organised at least twice a year to discuss local development issues. Studies show that female citizens are more likely to participate and speak in meetings where the elected representative is a woman, as

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they believe that female leaders are more responsive to their concerns and priorities.^[60] This ensures that the policy priorities of women who would otherwise not partake in decision-making are addressed. Studies have also indicated that electoral constituencies designated for women leaders experience an increased provision of civic amenities, schools, healthcare facilities, and fair-price shops.^[61] In a 2010 study as part of the India Policy Forum organised by the National Council of Applied Economic Research, it was observed that villages led by women had a noticeable rise in female engagement and a greater level of attentiveness to issues related to women's policies. The research also revealed that village councils with women in reserved leadership positions allocated greater resources to improve infrastructure for drinking water, sanitation, roads, school maintenance, health centre upkeep, and irrigation facilities.^[62] The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the role of women's leadership during a crisis. A survey revealed that a sizeable section of EWRs were engaged in identifying returning migrants and spreading awareness about the disease, while arranging rations, hospital beds for patients, and providing urgent medical support for pregnant women.^[63] Several institutions and organisations^[h] have initiated trainings for women members of local government to improve their attitudinal dynamics, skill development, and knowledge/awareness levels.^[64] These interventions have proven to be very effective in creating motivation and awareness among panchayat-level women leaders.^[65] Data also suggests that despite several limitations, women leaders proved to be faster learners in managing local administrative structures than men.^[66]

- Gender equality

Women's entry into non-traditional spaces and their ability to negotiate and influence decisions have impacted rigid gender norms. Many EWRs report a change in confidence levels, and in their status within their family and in the community after getting elected.^[12,13] They have also influenced the aspirations of families, as parents invest more in girls' education when there are female role models in politics.^[67] Additionally, EWRs are role models for other women in their communities and often spur women to participate in politics.

A 2012 study found a crucial link between political representation in local rural governments and crimes against women. There was an increase in documented crimes against women after an increase in the political representation of women, driven by a surge in reporting of crimes where there are female representatives.^[68] A 2016 survey in Bihar found that EWRs play a key role in providing redressal support on issues of domestic violence and child marriage; 61 percent of EWRs reported that they intervened to stop abuse reported by women in their constituencies, and 46 percent had intervened to stop child marriage. However, most women leaders were reluctant to talk openly about it because of prevalent social norms.^[69]

Challenges and Barriers to Participation

Despite the documented impacts of having more women representatives in local decision-making roles, EWRs face extensive challenges to join and then continue participating in local governance:

- Rotation of seats

Many women have drawn attention to the policy of rotating reserved seats^[i] every five years as a barrier.^[70] Rotation aims to bring in as many excluded groups and individuals as possible into the system. But this also means that women candidates cannot gain from their experience from one term to the next, and many return to their caregiving roles at home after a single term. Elected male representatives were found to be more likely to contest elections more than once than elected women.^[71] Women are usually not given the chance to contest from general unreserved seats as this decision mostly lies with the concerned political party or with senior male members of the household. Male-dominated political circles often view women candidates as less likely to win elections than men, resulting in political parties giving them fewer tickets.^[72] Even women from political dynasties are more likely to be given 'safe' seats—those previously occupied by a male family member—where their win is mostly assured.^[73] Recent data, however, belies this notion; certain election results show that women candidates have equal, if not higher, chances of winning than male candidates.^[74] However, due to deeply entrenched prejudice against women leaders, they could not extend their administrative experience gained from one term to another one.^[75]

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- Gender biases in perception and interactions

Most women representatives report facing gender-based discrimination and feeling ignored in the panchayat owing to their gender.^[76] Administrative roles, like that of panchayat secretary and other posts, are dominated by men. Most first-time EWRs find it difficult to deal with block and district administration and police officials, due to limited exposure to public life. As such, male representatives or leaders related to the women members play a more dominant role in interactions with external bodies and actors. A major apprehension remains that in many regions across India, women leaders in reserved seats are elected as proxy candidates who are controlled by male members of their family and community.^[77] A 2016 study indicates that 77 percent of the interviewed EWRs believe that they cannot change things easily in their constituencies due to societal challenges.^[78] Surveys have also revealed that women leaders receive less favourable assessments from their constituents than men—respondents appeared to be significantly less satisfied with the quality of services when the pradhan is a woman. Women who are elected to reserved seats tend to have a lower economic status compared to their male counterparts, along with less experience, lower educational qualifications, and a lower likelihood of being literate. Voters may factor in these attributes when evaluating the quality of their leaders. Additionally, it is possible that villagers may believe that women may be less effective as leaders and are hesitant to change this belief even when confronted with factual evidence.^[79] A majority of women representatives do not contest another election, while many of those who do contest are unable to get re-elected, possibly due to societal prejudices and structural disadvantages. Former EWRs said they felt that administrative work in panchayats was unsuitable for women and that they had felt incompetent in executing their responsibilities, often discouraging them from seeking re-election. Many also expressed that they were unable to maintain the balance between work and household chores due to resistance from their spouses or families. Notably, in a 2017 survey from Uttar Pradesh, women had significantly less knowledge about political institutions and electoral rules. Despite 30 years of gender quotas, 27 percent of women gave the wrong answer to the question of whether women can become panchayat members, by answering ‘no’. The same survey showed that women in villages with female pradhans are 6 percentage points more likely to try meeting with the pradhan to raise their problems.^[80] This shows that gender-based biases still persist.

- Digital divide

The gender digital divide, which predominantly affects women in rural India, hampers the work of women representatives.^[81] This is relevant as local governments are adopting more digitisation nationwide for public service delivery and redressal. A survey conducted in Bihar showed that only 63 percent of EWR participants owned a phone, with only 24 percent of them having smartphones.^[82] Low digital literacy among women remains a major hurdle for women leaders in discharging their administrative functions more efficiently in the panchayats.^[83]

- Two-child norm, minimum education qualifications

Some states (such as Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana) follow the ‘two-child’ norm,^[i] barring candidates with more than two children from contesting PRI elections. The Supreme Court has also validated this legal provision.^[84] States like Haryana and Rajasthan have also set minimum education qualifications for candidates. These policies inadvertently restrict women’s entry into politics as they are likely to lack access to education and choices in family planning.^[85] Women leaders at the panchayat level have also expressed their concern over being adversely impacted due to such provisions.^[86]

Policy Recommendations

While the provision for reservation of seats for women in panchayats has facilitated greater participation of women at the grassroots level in India, there are certain persisting challenges for women representatives that need to be addressed through institutional reforms, greater investment in capacity building, and socio-cultural transformations. The following recommendations are aimed at furthering a more robust participation of women in local politics in India’s villages.

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- Accelerate investment in capacity-building programmes

Well-trained EWRs are able to handle their roles and responsibilities independently. There has been a significant improvement in capacity-building and training programmes for newly-elected female representatives through government training institutes in partnership with civil society organisations. However, there is a need to scale up and reinforce such training at regular intervals. There is also a need to monitor the quality of these programmes. Emphasis must be given to skilling women on digital technology to increase their efficiency in panchayat responsibilities. Notably, the number of queries raised by women representatives in training sessions is lower than those by male representatives, due to their hesitation to speak in public.^[87] Therefore, there is a need to ensure conducive environments for training where women members feel comfortable to engage in discussions.

- Promote convergence with self-help groups

Across states, women's SHGs have been noted to support the work of women representatives in improving the reach and quality of public service delivery.^[88] Many women who contest elections have a background in the SHG movement. Indeed, a 2016 study has shown that involvement in SHGs has a significant impact on women's political participation since it provides them with larger networks and the capacity for collective action, and helps develop their civic skills.^[89] This convergence has been particularly successful in Kerala, where the Kudumbashree programme has played a part in the success of development initiatives by panchayats. More such collaborative endeavours of government and SHGs can facilitate greater political agency in women and ensure higher participation in local politics.

- Closer monitoring and awareness drives

Although data suggests a high participation of women in panchayats, on-ground reports indicate that, in many cases, male members continue [11,12] to control women functionaries, subverting their political agency by using them as rubber stamps. Local administrations in the respective states need to establish an institutionalised mechanism to monitor the work of women representatives to ensure they are able to discharge their functions without any interference from male members of the community. Also, the safety of women candidates and representatives must be ensured so that fear of violence does not deter women from contesting local polls. Government-initiated awareness drives and campaigns at the village level could help change conservative perceptions about women's participation in politics.

- Institutional reforms

Data indicates that women representatives typically belong to lower economic groups compared to men, and they suffer from financial constraints both as contestants and as representatives.^{[k],[90]} Provisions for state funding for women contestants belonging to economically weaker households or support from political parties would allow more women to contest panchayat elections and seek re-election. Greater financial remuneration for EWRs could also incentivise them to take part in the panchayat activities with greater interest despite multiple societal hindrances.

In states such as Uttarakhand and Karnataka, federations of EWRs have emerged as an effective tool and platform for improving the functioning of women representatives and bringing a greater focus on the issues and challenges faced by women in local governance.^[91] These federations should be nurtured and strengthened. Importantly, the 'rotation of reserved seats' provision should be altered to allow two-term reservation of seats.^[92] Additionally, recruiting more women as panchayat officials apart from elected representatives, and conducting gender sensitisation programmes for government officials and elected male representatives at all levels of PRIs would create a viable working environment for EWRs.

- Availability of more nuanced data

Although state-level macro data on EWRs in village panchayats is available, certain districts and regions do not have coherent updated data, hampering the ability to conduct holistic and fully informed assessments. The availability of comprehensive disaggregated data on the challenges faced by EWRs is important to ensure the numerically higher and qualitatively better representation of women at the panchayat level of politics across India. Such data is crucial to

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devise targeted policy interventions to tackle the structural hindrances that inhibit increased women's representation in panchayat politics.

The provision of reserved seats for women at the local level of government in India has resulted in the political empowerment of women at the grassroots across the country. Indeed, India is among the top-ranked countries for facilitating women's political participation at the local level. However, there is much to be done, particularly to address the existing gaps and challenges in ensuring the meaningful representation of women in local government structures. Institutional and administrative reforms, skills development and capacity-building programmes, and ensuring the availability of comprehensive data will pave the way to strengthen the political agency of women and encourage their equitable participation in India's electoral politics.

III. RESULTS

Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitutional Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantage section of the society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and women. The present study was an effort to know the extent of participation of women elected representative in Panchayat and the problems faced by them. Sample consisted of 33 women elected representatives from two Districts of Jammu and Kathua. Purposive sampling technique was adopted for selecting the sample from different blocks. The tool used for obtaining information was an Interview Schedule. The findings of the study revealed that neither the reservation for women or their actual presence in the Panchayat have become any more sensitive to the problems related to the village women. The women who are elected are not always treated with due respect. Many elected women complained that their suggestions were not considered seriously nor were they consulted while decisions were being made. Some felt that their views were ignored only because they are women. At times they were pressurized by their husbands to approve their decisions made by the male dominated Panchayats.

“Woman is the builder of nation's destiny. Though delicate and soft as lily, she has a heart, far stronger and bolder than of man. She is the supreme inspiration of man's onward march”.

Rabindranath Tagore

In the history of human development, woman has been as important as man. In fact the status, employment and work performed by women in society is the indicator of a nation's overall progress. Without the participation of women in national activities, the social, economic or political progress of a country will be stagnated. The fact is that most of the women's domestic role is combined with economic activities and utilization of their skill and labour to earn extra income for the family, which makes the family to lead a decent life. Women are regarded as the “better half” of the society and at par with the men. Efforts are being made to realize that women are real “better half” in men's life. They share abundant responsibility and perform a wide spectrum of duties in running the family, handling the house hold activities like rearing, feeding, attending to farm labour, tending domestic animals and the like, and the most important role now women need to perform more responsibly is her active participation in politics. Political empowerment of women should be one of her prime priorities and the governments and the society must contribute steps in that way to make women participate in the political arena. For that, participation in local self- governments provides initial steps as they are closer to the rural folk. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitutional Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantaged section of the society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and women. Panchayati Raj Institutions that work as grass-root units of decentralized democratic self-government have been considered as an instrument of socio-economic transformation in rural India. At the local level the 73rd Constitutional Amendment act of 1992 has made two important provisions for the involvement of women in decision making and preparation of plan for development. This Amendment has made a provision that at least one-third of women would be members and chair persons of Panchayats. Involvement of people at the grass-roots level is the most important means

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of bringing about socio-economic development. Decentralization of power to the Panchayati is seen as a means of empowering people and involving them in decision-making process. Local governments being closer to the people can be more responsive to local needs and can make better use of resources. The democratic system in a country can be ensured only if there is mass participation in the governance. Therefore, to achieve this objective, a system of democratic decentralization popularly known as Panchayati [10,11] Raj has been introduced in India.

Panchayati Raj was easily accepted because it meant administration by mutual consultation, consent and consensus. It fitted closely into the ancient cultural patterns in India. The adoption of the 73rd amendment by the Parliament in 1992 had a great revolutionary potential to create genuine democracy at the grassroots village level. It represented a historic opportunity to change the face of rural India. The amendment mandates that resources, responsibility and decision making power be devolved from central Government to rural grassroots people through Panchayati Raj Institutions. Their main objective was to realize Mahatma Gandhi's dream of reaching power to the people through Panchayats. Philosophically, Panchayati Raj is a multidimensional idea. It has its pluralistic definitions and wider connotations in the writings of different thinkers. Emphasizing the ideology of Panchayati Raj Gandhi viewed, "India lives in her village. Independence must begin at the bottom, thus making every village a republic or Panchayati, enjoying full powers". He particularly envisaged and envisioned the concept of Gram Swaraj along with Poorna Swaraj.

Gandhiji had aptly remarked that independence must begin at the bottom. And it is to emphasise that women's empowerment should also start from the villages, the grass-root level units.

Political Empowerment of Women:

Empowerment of women in all spheres and in particular the political sphere is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of gender equal society. It is central to the goals of equality, development and peace. The Indian democracy which is more than half a century old has entered the next century. But a large mass of women are kept out of political arena still. There can be no true democracy, or no true people's participation in governance and development without equal and proportional participation of men and women at different levels of decision making. Participation of women in political life is integral to the advancement of women. A general acuity in societies around the world is that women's major role is to cook food, take care of the children and the household. Different societies have different social norms and values. In some societies both men and women are assigned specific roles and duties. In most of developing countries, only the reproductive role of women is recognized. Under such circumstances, it is not possible for women to participate in the public sphere of life. Cultural factors therefore offer constraint to women participation in politics. Institutional factors may also impact women's political participation. Electoral system with more seats per district and proportional formula for allocating seats can enhance women's participation. Quota system is another important institutional device that can guarantee a minimum number of women seats-holders in legislature. Women are changing the governance in India. They are being elected to local councils in an unprecedented numbers as a result of amendments to the constitution that mandate the reservation of seats for women in local governments or Panchayati Raj Institution System (PRI). The women whom PRI has brought into politics are now governing, be it in one village, or a larger area such as 100 villages or a district. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started as recently as January 1994, and thus it is too early to assess the impact of women's entry into formal structures of the government. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a difference. The percentages of women at various levels of political activity have shifted dramatically as a result of the constitutional change, from 4-5 percent before to 25-40 percent after. But the difference is also qualitative, because these women are bringing their experience in the governance of civic society. In this way they are making the state sensitive to the issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of the country, directly or through the freely chosen representatives. A proper representation of women in political affairs will ensure their views and needs reflected in public policies that affect their lives most. Political

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empowerment can be defined 'as the capacity to influence decision making process, planning, implementation and evaluation by integrating them into the political system'. It implies political participation which includes right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership and representation in political office at all levels and effectively influences decisions thereby leading to political empowerment'. Political empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition on par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity. Political empowerment denotes a distinct role for women in the formation of policies and influencing decision-making process by integrating them into the political system. Indian women have had little representation in institutional politics since independence. There was more concern in the last two decades towards increasing women's participation in political institutions thereby leading to empowerment. Affirmative action has been accepted as a means to political empowerment. Leadership is necessary not just to govern but to change the nature of governance.

Women and Panchayati Raj:

Political Empowerment of women starts with the active participation of women in political institutions. The grass-root level democracy entails due importance to initial participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Even though in today's political system where some reservations have been provided to women in local bodies, that has been misused by some i.e. women have been used as rubber-stamps. Actual decision are being taken by their male family members. Women may have stormed the male bastion under the Panchayati Raj system, but in many cases it is the husbands or male members of their families calling their shots. Elected women representatives have reportedly been reduced to proxies of their male relatives. Such system of de facto rule by male counterparts have to be checked and due importance has to be given to women in PRIs. Political system and decision making process is seen clearly in the changes incorporated in the Panchayati Raj Institution. The objective of bringing improvement in the socio-economic condition of women could be successful only by taking suitable initiatives and measures for empowering them. Empowerment of women will not be possible unless they are provided proper representation in the political system. This objective should be achieved at desired level through making the provision of linking and associating maximum number of women in political affairs even at the lowest level of political activity. In recently introduced Panchayati Raj Institutions, the policy for reservation in favour of women has therefore, been thought as an important approach to maximize their participation in the local level.

Political system and decision making process in the activities of rural area.

Under the 73rd amendment of constitution of Panchayati Raj Institution, one third of the total seats for scheduled caste, backward class, scheduled tribes and general caste women members in Grampradhan of village Panchayat, Block Panchayat, District Panchayat are reserved for women candidate. Conceptually, providing representation to women in Panchayati Raj Institutions could be accepted as an important planning approach regarding minimizing the traditional felling of people about the status of women in our society, particularly in terms of keeping women under the subjugation of men, imposing restrictions by the households and society against them in the availing of certain opportunities and several other social, cultural and traditional bindings disfavoured them for improving personal life style and status in existing social and economic setting. Consequently this newly introduced policy would enhance the possibilities of increasing equalities in the process of socio-economic development, participation in different activities in mutual understandings, status and role to play in the house hold and the activities performed outside households and different decision making processes of the family among men and women. Factors such as the attitude and intention of elected women towards the initiation of various development programmes and capacity in making efforts in linking different segments of village population with the introduced programmes also matter very much in improving the status of women representatives in the social environment of the village Panchayats. As a consequence this process would lead to increase and strength of empowerment of women.

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Initiatives for active participation of women in PRIs:

Following initiatives and training programmes have to be adopted to improve the participation and decision making power of women even at the grass root level of governance and enhance their number in the PRIs

§ Measures have to be adopted to enhance the participation of women in governance in higher numbers.

§ The elected leaders of these institutions need to be at least literate, so that they could guide and tell the villagers about the various provisions of the PR-Act.

§ Literacy plays an important role in educating rural women and helps to detail about system of governance. Hence, steps to improve female literacy particularly in rural areas is the need of the hour.

§ Need to develop women's leadership and communication skills for enhancing social mobilization.

§ Essentially, to train them, find ways and means to interface with other layers of local self-governance within the state and claim the Panchayat's entitlements.

§ Familiarize them with the rural/women/child development programmes of state and central governments.

§ There should not be any factions and party politics in terms of planning i.e. selection and location of schemes rather genuine implementation of the projects are necessary for strengthening the decentralized planning.

§ To empower them to identify and break cultural barriers and improve their socio-economic condition.

§ Systematic awareness is needed for enhancing rural women's capacity to take up their new responsibilities as local legislators.

§ Besides, literature related to the various provisions of rural development should be provide to the panchayati leaders as well as to the common villagers so that they will be more acquainted with their functions and various developmental schemes. Further, all the guidelines of rural development programmes should be made available to panchayati leaders and common villagers.

§ The women panchayati members should be trained based on their local experience and elicit their involvement in preparing a framework that will enable them to analyse and understand their roles and responsibilities in accordance with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

§ In the ongoing e-Era, a broad and wide scope of importance has to be given to technology while making women empowered in all fields with due importance to political field. In the context of Digital India, women representative of PRIs should also be actively involved in utilizing the technology for their own self and village development.

IV. CONCLUSION

With the establishment of PRIs in our country a woman gets an opportunity to prove her worth as a good administrator, decision-maker or a good leader. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a milestone in this regard. It provides women a chance to come forward. This experiment is proving to be a big success particularly by providing opportunity to women to come out of their houses and participate in administrative and political field. It has to be considered that the inclusion of well qualified women in village Panchayati at the initial state of the interlocution of Panchayati Raj Institution in rural areas would be an important instrumental measure in planning for improving social status and empowering women. Women constitute half of the population of our country. It is our duty to encourage the

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women in such a largest democracy of the world. To give a proper status to the women, Government, NGOs, and Universities have to play a vital role in this field. This group of women, if provided representation at village Panchayati level can strongly rise and handle the issues related to the betterment of women, can play dominant role in decision making process and make suitable recommendation for improving the status of women in the meeting. It creates opportunities for women to exercise more control over design and provisions of services and the management of resources it may benefit. Good number of women competing with the men in local politics, forwarding gender related agendas is looked as a way towards the gender equity.[14]

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