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WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ: LEADING FROM THE FRONT OR CONTROLLED FROM THE SHADOWS?

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Abstract

The research paper titled "Women in Panchayati Raj: Leading from the Front or Controlled from the Shadows?" critically examines the role and challenges of women in India's decentralized governance system. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 mandated a minimum reservation of one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to promote grassroots democracy and gender equity. However, while this legal framework has increased female political representation, it has not necessarily translated into effective leadership due to deep-rooted patriarchal structures.

The study highlights that many women in PRIs function as mere figureheads, with their decision-making powers often usurped by male relatives—commonly referred to as Sarpanch Patis (husband proxies). Societal biases, lack of political training, and limited financial independence further impede women's leadership. The paper presents real-life success stories of women leaders who have defied these odds, such as Chhavi Rajawat and Rajani Kothari, who have driven social change through education, sanitation, and economic empowerment initiatives.

Despite these successes, numerous systemic challenges persist, including proxy leadership, limited participation in decision-making, and economic and educational barriers. To counter these issues, the research suggests strengthening legal frameworks, enforcing strict anti-proxy laws, implementing leadership training, and enhancing financial support for women in PRIs. Additionally, the study advocates for greater male sensitization, digital literacy initiatives, and grievance redressal mechanisms to empower women leaders effectively.

The paper concludes that while legislative measures have laid the foundation for women's political empowerment, genuine leadership requires a shift in societal attitudes, comprehensive training programs, and active enforcement of legal provisions. Transforming Panchayati Raj into a truly inclusive system necessitates dismantling patriarchal control and fostering an environment where women can exercise autonomy in governance.

Keywords – Women Empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Gender Equality, Proxy Leadership, Sarpanch Pati, Grassroots Governance, Political Participation, Decentralization, Patriarchy, Women Leadership, Rural Development, Gender Bias.

I. Introduction

In rural India, Panchayati raj institutions which function as grassroots units of decentralized democratic self-government have been viewed as a tool for socioeconomic change. Two crucial provisions for women's participation in decision-making and development plan

preparation have been made at the local level by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992. A minimum of one-third of Panchayat members and chairpersons must be women, according to this amendment. The most important factor that brings about socio economic development is the participation of people at the grass root level. It is felt that the

decentralization of power to the Panchayati will serve the dual purpose of empowering the people and involving them in the decision-making process. Local governments are closer to the people and therefore they are in a better position to address local issues and properly utilize available resources. The democratic system in a country can only be guaranteed if there is wide participation in the governance.

Women's political status indicates the degree of equality and freedom they enjoy in power sharing as well as the significance society places on their place in the political system. Active political participation and equality are inextricably linked. As a result, their political participation is crucial to upholding democratic norms. In addition to exercising their right to vote, they must also share power, collaborate to make decisions, and develop policies at all levels of state governance. The equal status of women in all fields is directly related to the progress and development of the country. Without sufficient representation in the political system, women cannot be empowered.

This goal should be accomplished at the intended level by providing. This aim 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.

The Report of the Committee on status of women in India (CSWI: 1974),¹²⁰⁴ which is regarded as a key document on the socioeconomic circumstances of Indian women, claims that although women's involvement in politics has grown, their capacity to influence it has been minimal due to the lack of focus political parties and women's organizations have placed on their political education and mobilization.

Gender inequalities in economic life also become a causal factor in the chronic poverty of all household members, not just of women, in poor households and the intergenerational

reproduction of poverty. Social standards surrounding the issue of child marriage, biases towards girl child schooling, restricted mobility of women, limited control over fertility choice, and the inequalities in gender wage and employment all make it challenging to break the vicious cycle of poverty and gender inequality.

On the contrary it has been observed that the elected representatives are handled 'as puppets' within the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Most of them become mere silent observers to the affairs of the panchayat meetings and take part only sparingly in the debates. They seldom express their own views while making decisions about identifying beneficiaries, allocating contracts, finding developmental projects, etc. Sitting silently and hearing proceeding of the meeting have been their way participation. Active participation in the form of being involved in the decision-making process, preparation of budget, planning etc, was found to be a rarity in the case of women representatives. Most of the elected women Sarpanches are viewed as a mere 'Rubber Stamp' and all the functions of the Panchayat are being executed by their husbands of local elites. Attendance of elected women Sarpanches are viewed as mere 'Rubber Stamps' and all the functions of the Panchayat are being executed by their husband of local elites. Attendance of elected women representatives in Gram Panchayat Meeting is seen very low. Majority of them did not attend the meeting regularly.

II. Legal and Policy Framework

1. 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Women's Reservation

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992¹²⁰⁵, was a landmark reform in India that institutionalized Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to enhance decentralized governance. A significant aspect of this amendment was the reservation of one-third (33%) of all seats for

¹²⁰⁴ <https://www.isical.ac.in/~wemp/Papers/PaperShivaLalRevised.doc>

¹²⁰⁵ '73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts' Drishti Judiciary, 30 October 2023.

women in Panchayats at all levels, including the positions of chairpersons. This provision aimed to promote women's participation in grassroots governance and address historical gender imbalances in political representation. Over the years, several states have extended the reservation to 50% to further empower women in local governance.

Though recent reservations for women in panchayats do not erase the impact of women's long exclusion from elected representation. We know that the average length of time in politics for women is far shorter than for men. The Indian central government attempts to eliminate gender disadvantages in political experience through large-scale training programs for women, as do civil society organizations and state governments.¹²⁰⁶

2. State-wise Variations in Women's Representation

Despite constitutional mandates, the extent of women's participation in PRIs varies across states due to socio-political and cultural factors. Some states, like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, have gone beyond the 33% reservation, ensuring 50% seats for women. The law has given women rights in panchayats, they should also be given the opportunity to work.¹²⁰⁷ However, states with deeply rooted patriarchal norms often witness lower levels of actual participation, where women are elected but remain under male influence. Comparative data on different states highlight disparities in women's effective decision-making roles despite legal provisions.

Then-Minister of Women and Child Development Maneka Gandhi suggested a slash-and-burn approach in response to the problem, with harsh penalties for husbands: 'If a woman doesn't exercise her rights as *pradhan* she should be removed. The

'pradhan pati' should be jailed and completely barred from any kinds of decision making.¹²⁰⁸

3. Government Schemes and Capacity-Building Initiatives for Women Leaders

To strengthen women's leadership in PRIs, the government has launched multiple schemes and training programs. Initiatives such as Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), Mahila Sabhas, and National Commission for Women's Leadership Training focus on skill development, awareness, and capacity-building. These programs provide financial support, legal literacy, and leadership training to enhance women's confidence in governance roles. Additionally, NGOs and civil society organizations play a crucial role in mentoring women leaders and ensuring their autonomy in decision-making.

III. Women's Leadership in Panchayati Raj: Reality vs. Expectations

1. Success Stories: Women Who Lead from the Front

Women leaders in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have emerged as powerful agents of change despite facing significant social and structural challenges. One such leader is **Chhavi Rajawat from Rajasthan**¹²⁰⁹, India's first MBA-educated Sarpanch, who left her corporate career to modernize governance in Soda village. She introduced e-governance, rainwater harvesting, and sanitation programs, significantly improving local infrastructure and livelihoods. However, she had to overcome bureaucratic resistance and gender biases to implement her vision. Similarly, **Rajani Kothari, a tribal woman leader from Madhya Pradesh**, fought for land rights and education for tribal communities. She played a crucial role in securing land ownership for marginalized groups and promoting self-help groups (SHGs) to enhance women's financial independence.

¹²⁰⁶ Sreeparna Chakrabarty, 'Training for Women to Break Free from Sarpanch Pati', *The New Indian Express*, 8 November 2015.

¹²⁰⁷ Times News Network, 'PM Modi Seeks End to Proxy Rule, Says No More "Sarpanch Pati"', *The Hindu*, 25 April 2015; 'End "Sarpanch Pati" Practice, Says Modi', 12 April 2016.

¹²⁰⁸ Ranjan Sweta, 'Maneka Wants "Pradhan Patis" in Jail', *GovernanceNow*, 21 August 2014.

¹²⁰⁹ 'How India's first female MBA sarpanch Chhavi Rajawat transformed Rajasthan's Soda village', *Money Control*, 6 March 2023.

Despite resistance from dominant caste groups and financial constraints, her leadership transformed the socio-economic landscape of her village.

Another inspiring leader, **Bhakti Sharma**, became one of India's youngest Sarpanches at the age of 25 in Madhya Pradesh. She championed solar energy projects, digital education, and sanitation initiatives, making her village an Open Defecation Free (ODF) zone. Overcoming age-related discrimination and administrative challenges, she set an example of youth-driven rural development. In Uttar Pradesh, Asha Devi, a former domestic worker turned Sarpanch, fought against domestic violence and gender-based discrimination by establishing women's grievance redressal cells and promoting maternal healthcare. Her leadership empowered women to actively participate in governance and gain financial independence, despite opposition from conservative community members.

2. Initiatives Led by Women That Have Brought Social Change

Women leaders in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) across India have spearheaded initiatives that have significantly transformed their communities. **Ruma Devi**, a grassroots leader from Rajasthan, empowered women through **self-help groups (SHGs)**, providing them with training in handicrafts and entrepreneurship. Her initiative has helped thousands of women gain financial independence and access global markets. Similarly, **Sushma Bhadu**, a Sarpanch from Haryana, prioritized **education for girls** by launching awareness campaigns to prevent school dropouts and advocating for scholarships. She played a crucial role in improving rural school infrastructure and ensuring **higher literacy rates** among girls. In Maharashtra, **Chhaya Waghmode**, a Dalit woman Sarpanch, led a **sanitation drive** in her village, successfully constructing toilets and making her community **Open Defecation Free (ODF)** while also promoting menstrual hygiene awareness.

In Karnataka, **Bhagirathibai Kadam**, a woman leader from a drought-prone district, initiated **water conservation programs** by building check dams and reviving traditional water sources, ensuring a steady water supply for agriculture and daily needs. Meanwhile, **Sangita Jatav**, a Sarpanch from Madhya Pradesh, took bold steps to eliminate **child marriage** and gender discrimination by working with local law enforcement and community elders. Her efforts led to the successful prevention of multiple early marriages and promoted **women's rights** within her Panchayat. In Gujarat, **Neeru Yadav**, known as the "Hockey Sarpanch," introduced **sports programs for rural girls**, helping them break social barriers and gain confidence through sports participation. These initiatives demonstrate how women in PRIs are driving **economic, social, and cultural transformation**, proving that grassroots leadership can bring real, lasting change to rural India.

3. Challenges Faced by Women Leaders

Women leaders in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) face numerous challenges that hinder their ability to fully exercise their leadership roles. Despite constitutional provisions and reservations ensuring their representation, deep-rooted gender biases, societal stereotypes, and structural barriers continue to limit their effectiveness.

One of the major challenges is gender bias and societal stereotypes, where women leaders are often seen as incapable of handling governance. Many communities still adhere to traditional patriarchal norms, leading to resistance against women holding decision-making positions. This is further exacerbated by the prevalence of proxy leadership, where male relatives—husbands, fathers, or brothers—make decisions on behalf of elected women representatives, diminishing their autonomy.

Where female and lower castes sarpanches are elected indirectly¹²¹⁰, institutional subversion is

¹²¹⁰ Direct elections are when sarpanches are elected directly by citizens of the village. Direct elections occur when the sarpanch is first elected to a ward seat, and then the ward members collectively vote on who will be

also common through imposed, informal 'rotation' systems. In such cases, members of the institution compel the elected sarpanch to resign prior to the end of their term, under the false pretense that other members need to be 'given the chance' to fill the role. For example, on 11 November 2019, during an interview with whom the panchayat samiti reported to be the female sarpanch of Jalwadi village, it was discovered that the woman she was interviewing was, in fact, no longer the sarpanch of the village. 'I was the sarpanch,' she explained. 'But I gave my resignation, and now Sujata Gole is the sarpanch,' she continued. 'Then, after one and a half years, Sujata will resign, and Priya Deshmukh will get a chance. The upa sarpanch decided it like this, so we all get an opportunity [to be sarpanch]¹²¹¹.

Another significant challenge is limited education and lack of political training. Many women in rural areas have lower literacy rates and minimal exposure to governance mechanisms, making it difficult for them to navigate complex bureaucratic systems. This often results in their dependency on male counterparts for guidance, reducing their ability to exercise independent leadership. Additionally, the lack of capacity-building programs further restricts their ability to participate effectively in policy implementation and decision-making processes.

Economic dependency and financial constraints also pose a major barrier. Many women leaders come from economically weaker backgrounds and lack financial resources to fund their election campaigns or implement development projects in their constituencies. The absence of financial independence often forces them to rely on male family members or political intermediaries, which weakens their decision-making power. Corruption and bureaucratic red tape also make it difficult for women to access

government funds meant for development initiatives.

Moreover, women leaders frequently experience harassment, threats, and political violence from opposing factions, making their leadership journey even more challenging. Cases of social ostracization, intimidation, and even physical harm discourage many women from actively participating in governance. The lack of institutional support, mentorship, and safety measures further aggravates these issues.

Despite these challenges, many women leaders continue to fight against these barriers and prove their capabilities in governance. With increased training programs, financial empowerment, community awareness campaigns, and strict enforcement of gender-equality laws, women's leadership in Panchayati Raj can become more effective and impactful.

IV. Proxy Leadership: The Role of Male Relatives

Despite the 73rd Constitutional Amendment reserving one-third of Panchayati Raj seats for women, many elected women representatives face the challenge of proxy leadership, where their male relatives—husbands, fathers, brothers, or even sons—exercise real power on their behalf. This undermines the goal of women's political empowerment and prevents them from making independent decisions in governance.

1. Concept of 'Sarpanch Pati' and Its Prevalence

One of the most visible forms of proxy leadership is the phenomenon of 'Sarpanch Pati' (Sarpanch Husband), where husbands of elected women leaders take control of their administrative duties. This occurs because many women candidates are chosen by male family members as a way to retain power while complying with reservation laws. These women often sign documents, attend meetings under pressure, or remain absent while their husbands function as the de facto leaders. The prevalence of this practice is especially high in states like Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya

the sarpanch (within the realm of possibility afforded by the reservation status of the sarpanch seat). Maharashtra has toggled back and forth between direct and indirect elections for the sarpanch seat for the past several years.

¹²¹¹ 'Ashaa prakaare, pratyekaalaa sandhi milel', in Marathi.

Pradesh, where traditional patriarchal structures continue to dominate rural politics.

2. Family and Community Influence in Decision-Making

Beyond husbands, other male relatives such as fathers, brothers, or even village elders often exert influence over elected women leaders. This happens due to a combination of low education levels, lack of political experience, and societal expectations that women should remain subordinate to men. Women leaders often face pressure to prioritize family or community interests rather than independently addressing the needs of the people. In many cases, male relatives decide on budget allocation, infrastructure projects, and social policies, while the elected woman leader remains a mere figurehead.

Additionally, community influence plays a major role in proxy leadership. Village councils dominated by men resist women's active participation, often sidelining their opinions in discussions. The fear of social ostracization discourages many women from challenging male dominance, leading them to comply with the decisions imposed by their male relatives.

Despite constitutional amendments mandating reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the practice of proxy leadership where male relatives, often termed 'Sarpanch Pati', wield authority on behalf of elected women representatives remains prevalent in India. This undermines the objective of empowering women in local governance.

In response to this issue, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has initiated several measures to combat the 'Sarpanch Pati' system. These include community radio broadcasts, informational campaigns, and focused training programs aimed at empowering elected women representatives. For instance, the "Jan Jan Tak Jankari" program¹²¹² is being piloted across 15 community radio stations in Bihar,

Karnataka, and Maharashtra to educate communities about the detrimental effects of proxy leadership and promote genuine female participation in village governance.

Furthermore, an Advisory Committee was established on September 19, 2023, under the chairmanship of Shri Sushil Kumar¹²¹³, to examine issues related to women Pradhans being represented by male family members. This committee, constituted following a Supreme Court order, is expected to submit its report by January 2025. Its recommendations aim to inform policy interventions that will empower women's representation and eliminate proxy practices in local governance.

While these initiatives are steps toward addressing proxy leadership, comprehensive data on its prevalence remains limited. Ongoing efforts in data collection, community education, and enforcement of supportive policies are essential to ensure that elected women representatives can exercise their roles effectively and independently.

V. MEASURES TO STRENGTHEN WOMEN AUTONOMY IN PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM

With the enforcement of 33 per cent reservation in panchayats, women have received a chance to raise their issue and opinion in gram Sabha. Thus, women's participation has been on the rise tremendously but is not satisfactory.

Women in panchayats form the bricks of democracy and a vehicle for the reconstruction of India from grassroots levels. At this point, political engagement of women in India through the Panchayati raj system has given them a platform of independence, development, confidence, participation and exposure to the external world.

Despite limitations and criticism, the socio-economic context and the patriarchal ethos prevailing in our country, the complete-grown political empowerment of women in India at the

¹²¹² 'Panchayati Raj ministry uses community radio programmes to fight 'sarpanch pati' practice', The Hindustan Times' 8 September 2024.

¹²¹³ 'Year End Review 2024: Ministry of Panchayati Raj', PIB Delhi, 4 January 2025.

grassroots level is an arduous task but not unthinkable.

The empowerment mission of women through Panchayati raj is not a failure but a change and a start to achieve the higher path. To maintain the process of change sustainable, a new perspective should be taken by which obstacles will be eliminated to make the mission of women empowerment real, effective and result-oriented at the grassroots level.

Enforce Representation:

Enact tough laws to end proxy representation (where male relatives make decisions instead of elected women).

- Stronger Legal Protection: Strictly enforce discrimination, harassment, and gender violence laws in local government.
- Mandatory Leadership Training: Provide training in governance, law, and policymaking for elected women representatives.

Social Empowerment

- Programs of Capacity Building: Hold workshops on decision-making, public speaking, and leadership for PRIs women.
- Awareness Campaigns: Create awareness among communities of the value of women's leadership.
- networking & Support Groups: Facilitate the establishment of women's SHGs to be able to back elected women.
- Sensitization of Male Counterparts: Train the male members of PRIs in order to help support women's leadership.

Economic Independence

- Allocation of Funds Directly: Provide direct funding and decision rights to women panchayat leaders and a say in the budget.

- Income Generation Programmes: Offer skill training and financial literacy programs for women.
- Shiver on SHGs and Cooperatives: Organize government scheme linkage and credit facilities with women-led SHGs.

Political Strengthening

- Women's Political Mentorship: Form mentoring schemes whereby veteran women leaders' mentor new representatives.

Technological & Digital Inclusion

Digital Literacy Programs: Educate women representatives in the use of technology for governance (e-governance, financial transactions, etc.). Online Networking Platforms: Establish platforms for women in PRIs to exchange experiences, seek advice, and cooperate.

Grievance Redressal Mechanisms

Set up helplines or complaint mechanisms for women leaders who are discriminated against or threatened.

VI. CONCLUSION

In Indian Constitution there is assurance of equality and dignity of the individual and it asserted the basic rights of women to political and legal equality and assured non-discrimination in employment and office under the states. It had given numerous channels for the growth and advancement of the women. The preambles of the Constitution, the chapters of Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of the State Policies and various other statutes are the basic purpose. India stands out as one of the few developing nations that has been exploring democratic decentralization to foster development since gaining independence. These political structures offer a chance to uplift previously marginalized groups within society. The establishment of a democratic framework, especially the introduction of adult suffrage, has opened new avenues for political engagement

among the general populace. while states advocate for the transfer of powers from the top down, they often hesitate to devolve authority to the grassroots level. Additionally, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) face significant challenges, including corruption, the influence of muscle power, bureaucratic overreach, and political infighting. To enhance the effectiveness of PRIs, it is crucial to ensure active participation in Gram Sabha meetings. A robust campaign involving media, students, NGOs, self-help groups, women's organizations, schools, colleges, and the National Cadet Corps (NCC) can facilitate this. The Gram Sabha should meet at least for four times a year. There is the need of transparency and maximum decentralisation in the democracy at the grassroots level.¹²¹⁴ Furthermore, local administrations must be accountable and responsible for effectively implementing government policies. Systematic training and orientation are also essential to empower women representatives, enabling them to exercise their authority and access resources to improve their living conditions. The 21st century represents a time of advancement, progress, and development across all aspects of life. In this context, younger and educated women leaders are increasingly positive, enthusiastic, and actively working to address village issues through political representation.

Providing reservation through the 73rd Amendment to women in Panchayati Raj institutions marked a crucial advancement in political empowerment. However, it falls short of guaranteeing genuine leadership and decision-making authority for women in rural communities. The perception of women as mere proxies continues to thrive, fuelled by entrenched patriarchal norms, insufficient awareness, and socio-cultural obstacles.

The popularly applied "Proxy"-view has a tendency to emphasize the elected woman's dependence on her (male) "political

protector"¹²¹⁵ – that is, in the majority of the cases, her husband – in whatever activity she is engaged in and whatever decision she is taking. Depending on the speaker this is read as 'a failure of the woman herself to assert her rights and take an active role in local politics' or else it is seen as 'the only method local government can operate, because women are unaware and simply incapable of playing the political game' or as 'the omnipotent social structure of Indian patriarchal society, which is at work'. The wife's dependency and therefore the power relationship of wife and husband with respect to involvement in local politics is portrayed as extremely adverse to women and as solely dominated by the husbands. For the elimination of the proxy issues, there has to be a change in patriarchal social values and to motivate women towards leadership activities and roles. To achieve this, it must develop appropriate as well as positive values and cultural norms in the society, through dissemination of education through an efficient role of media.

¹²¹⁴ Kaur, P., Right to Political Representation and 73rd Amendment Act: The Critical Assessment of Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institution in Punjab, NIU Int'l J. Hum. Rts., at 340.

¹²¹⁵ Strulik, Stefanie. Women-Panchayat-Electives at the Interface of State and Village Politics. In Gendered Constructions of the Political Space, Paper for the 18th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, Lund University, Sweden (2004)