

Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Panchayati Raj plays a formidable role in enhancing the status of women in India during post-Independent times. In the colonial regime, women were not given adequate opportunity to involve and participate in the affairs of local bodies. However, in the 19th century, women gradually participated in the Panchayati Raj bodies when they were formally included in the electoral roll. During post-independent Era, due to the implementation of the Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) recommendation, National Perspective Plan, and 30 percent reservations seats for women in panchayats, there has been a substantial increase in women's participation at all the levels of the Panchayati Raj bodies. Subsequently, the 72nd Amendment Bill and the 73rd amendment introduced in our parliament recommended 33 percent quotas for women. Encouraged by this, women have come forward in an ever-increasing number to join hands with the activities of Panchayat Raj Institution.

Consequently, Central and State Governments encouraged women by implementing the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1993 (adding Article 243D and 243T), which also extended the privilege of seat reservation for SC/ST women in the local bodies. Due to this positive impetus, there has been a perceptible improvement in women's participation in the last two decades. Due to unrestrained encouragement, the participation of women in Panchayati Raj is highly effective; thus, across India, more than 26 lakhs of women representatives got elected in PRI. This paper attempts to delineate the gradual growth of women's participation in the Panchayati Raj Institution in various states in India.

Keywords: Panchayati raj, Constitution, Amendment, Reservation, Electoral roll, Empowerment, Institutions, Elected representatives, Women and committee

Introduction

In India, since the beginning, women were not given adequate opportunity to represent and participate in the grass-root level of democracy of the Panchayati Raj institution. Scholarly studies on the Panchayati Raj institution in India revealed the fact that there was no woman representation either in "Gramini or in any sort of village panchayats. History exposes that, either in the traditional caste panchayats, village panchayats or also in the British system of local governments, women were kept entirely excluded¹. The Franchise Committee² set up by the British government though discussed the constitution of statutory village panchayats, never considered the inclusion of women's representation in panchayats. In 1923, for the first time, names of women appeared in the electoral rolls and in 1926, the first women members were nominated to the Indian Legislature. In 1931 though, there were women's voices for a universal adult franchise but are said to have opposed reservation, nomination, or women's cooption.³

1. Mandal, Aman. *Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions*, 2003.

2. Indian Franchise Committee Report (Volume I), The Indian Franchise Committee 1932 Presented by the Secretary of State for India to Parliament by Command of his Majesty, May 1932.

3. Singla, Pamela. *Women's Participation in Panchayat Raj: Nature and Effectiveness*, 2007.

The Legendary Initiative

Thanks to the efforts of the two legends of India, i.e., Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, who envisioned and envisaged the inclusion of women in Rural Democracy. “As long as Indian women do not take part in public life,” so emphatically Mahatma Gandhi remarks, “that there can be no salvation for the country and the dream of decentralization could never be fulfilled.” Nehru also further emphasized that ‘In political life, everyone has a vote, in economic matters, everyone has equal opportunities and in our Panchayats also everyone should be considered equal.’⁴ After Independence, India’s efforts to secure and enable women to participate in the rural development process was evident. The Balwant Rai G. Mehta Committee⁵ (1957) recommended co-option of two women from among those interested in works among women and children in each Panchayati Raj body in the suggested three tiers Panchayati Raj.

Ashok Mehta Committee⁶ (1978) also persisted with the incorporation of two women either through election or, if necessary, through co-option. The emphasis on and suggestion of integrating women in the PRIs was in sharp contrast to other Indian Political Strata. In establishing panchayats, most state governments appended the provision of co-option of two women if no women could come through direct elections.⁷ A decade later, the National Perspective Plan⁸ (1978), discussed

4. Desai, Neera, and Usha Thakkar. *Women and Political Participation in India*, 2000.

5. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, appointed by the Government of India on 16/01/1957 and the committee submitted its report on 24 November 1957. It recommended the establishment of the scheme of ‘democratic decentralization’ which finally came to be known as Panchayati Raj. The main aim of the Panchayat raj system is to settle the local problems locally and to make the people politically conscious.

6. Ashok Mehta Committee Report on Panchayat Raj 1978, Dept of Rural Development, Ministry of Agriculture, 1978.

7. Mandal, Aman. *Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions*, 2003.

8. In 1977-78 as an exercise for the Sixth Plan, the Government appointed the Working Group on Employment of women. Two other critical reports on village-level organizations and participation of women in agriculture and rural development were prepared as part of the exercise.

the issue of under-representation of women at all levels of the Panchayat Raj System. Quoting the experience of successful states, it recommended 30 percent reservation for women at local bodies. The recommendations and efforts of the committees and commissions finally materialized.

Initiating the Reservation Process

The Union Government headed by Rajiv Gandhi initiated the reservation process by recommending 30 percent reservations of seats for women in Panchayats at all three levels through the 64th Constitution Amendments Bill⁹ in 1989. The V.P. Singh government took up the issue too who introduced the 72nd Amendment Bill in Parliament. But unfortunately, the Bill did not come up for discussion as his government had to resign sometimes later. Congress took up the issue again when it came back to power in 1991. The Bill was finally introduced as the 73rd Amendment¹⁰ in 1992 and was ratified by all the states in April 1993. The Amendment reserved 33 percent seats for women to come through open elections at all three levels.¹¹

Importance of Voting

Voting is the simplest form of political participation. It provides a peaceful mechanism for the participation of people in the electoral, political, and administrative process and institutions of a democratic nation.¹² In a democracy, voting determines the sovereign will of the people.’ It is

9. The suggestion of giving panchayats constitutional status was opposed by the Sarkaria Commission. Still, the idea, however, gained momentum in the late 1980s, especially because of the endorsement by the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who introduced the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill in 1989. The 64th Amendment Bill was prepared and introduced in the lower house of Parliament. But it got defeated in the Rajya Sabha as non-convincing

10. The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992, The Gazette of India, Ministry of Law, Justice and Company Affairs, New Delhi, 1993. Also refer, T M Thomas Issac with Richard Franke: Local democracy and development – Peoples Campaign for decentralized planning in Kerala, New Delhi, Leftward Books, 2000.

11. Singla, Pamela. *Women’s Participation in Panchayat Raj: Nature and Effectiveness*, 2007.

12. Gehlot, N.S. Elections and Electoral Administration in India, 1992.

the “right to vote” by which the people vote for a government in and out. Voting is the means for choosing leaders for determining who shall govern. Participation of voters at the time of election indicates their involvement in the political process. In a country like India, most of the citizens participate in government affairs only through voting.¹³ The voting is the most common mode of political participation among women.

Women in Local Bodies

Given the low representation of women in politics, there has been a consistent demand for more meaningful ways to increase their representation in decision-making bodies. In pursuance of this notion of empowerment of women, the Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act 1993 and the Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act¹⁴, 1993 reserved seats for women at the local level bodies, namely, the Panchayats and Municipalities with the hope that these measures will set the trend to provide women their legitimate place in public life. After these amendments, Articles 243 D and 243 T were added to the Constitution. It intends to provide 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 the direct election in the local bodies. Those Local bodies, including Panchayats and Municipalities, would be reserved for women. Such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in the local bodies. This, indeed, makes a historic beginning for the effective participation of women in the decision-making process at the grassroots level. In the elections to these local bodies, more than one million women were being elected every five years. In 2006, 9 75,116 women were elected to Gram Panchayats; 58,094 women to Panchayats at Intermediate level; and 5779 women to Panchayats at the District level. It is but natural that a larger number of women have participated in these elections and this signifies a very encouraging trend for women’s empowerment. Though it has taken time for women to translate

their numerical strength into active participation in the rural and semi-urban areas, the results have been truly astounding.

Before reservation, the percentage of women in this area was merely 4.5 percent, which after the reservation has gone up to 40 percent. As per the Fifteenth Anniversary Charter on Panchayati Raj¹⁵, “Today more than 26 lakh representatives stand elected to the three levels of Panchayats. Of these, over 10 lakh are women. The last fifteen years of Panchayati Raj have succeeded in empowering marginalized groups who have gained political representation and valuable experience. Many of them have successfully taken on the challenge of governance and brought about enduring social change through their close links with the community. Women have prioritized health issues, education and access to basic services and, in some cases, have ensured a significant change in living conditions for the entire community. The efforts and work of several women representatives in Panchayats in Maharashtra, Gujarat and West Bengal have been widely acclaimed.¹⁶ It must be observed that the number of elected representatives across India (both state and union Territories) for 2019 has shown a tremendous turn out with 31 lakhs representatives - stand elected to three levels of Panchayats- Gram Panchayat around 29 lakhs, Block Panchayat 1.80 Lakhs and 17527 for District Panchayat. Among them, elected Women Representatives as of March 2018 stands as follows: For Gram Panchayat 12.29 Lakhs, Block Panchayat 75,260 and District Panchayat 8091. The total turnout is around 13 75,914. It comes to around 44.38%.

13. Jharta, Bhawana. *Women and Politics in India*, 1998.

14. The Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) & (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992.

15. Fifteenth Anniversary Charter on Panchayati Raj. Inclusive Growth through Inclusive Governance, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2008.

16. Rajya Sabha Secretariat, Reservation of seats for women in Legislative Assemblies: Perspectives. Occasional Paper Series, 2008.

Table 1: State-wise Number of Panchayat Institutions¹⁷ (2013)

States	Village Panchayat	Intermediate Panchayat	District Panchayat
Andhra Pradesh	21,649	1,098	22
Arunachal Pradesh	1,734	155	16
Assam	2,206	191	21
Bihar	8,474	534	38
Chhattisgarh	9,777	146	18
Goa	190	n.a.	2
Gujarat	13,883	223	26
Haryana	6,081	124	21
Himachal Pradesh	3,243	77	12
Jammu & Kashmir	4,098	143	22
Jharkhand	4,423	259	24
Karnataka	5,631	176	30
Kerala	977	152	14
Madhya Pradesh	23,024	313	50
Maharashtra	27,935	353	33
Manipur	160	n.a.	4
Odisha	6,235	314	30
Punjab	12,430	139	20
Rajasthan	9,193	248	33
Sikkim	176	n.a.	4
Tamil Nadu	12,524	385	31
Tripura	511	26	8
Uttar Pradesh	51,972	821	72
Uttarakhand	7,555	95	13
West Bengal	3,239	333	18
All-India	237,539	6,325	589

17. Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India website.

State-wise Proportion of Elected SC, ST and Women Representatives¹⁸ in Panchayats (Percent) (as on 1st March 2013)

States	SC	ST	Women
Andhra Pradesh	18.4	8.3	33.5
Arunachal Pradesh	NA	100	41.6
Assam	5	3.3	36.9
Bihar	16.3	0.8	50
Chhattisgarh	12.4	40.2	54.5
Goa	NA	5.9	32.3
Gujarat	7	20	33
Haryana	21.5	NA	36.5
Himachal Pradesh	26.8	4.4	50.1
Jammu & Kashmir	NA	NA	NA
Jharkhand	11	34.1	58.6
Karnataka	18.6	10.8	43.6
Kerala	4.5	0.6	51.9
Madhya Pradesh	15.1	27.3	50.5
Maharashtra	10.9	14.9	49.9
Manipur	1.2	2.2	48.5
Odisha	16.2	22	50
Punjab	32	NA	34.9
Rajasthan	17.2	12.6	50
Sikkim	7	38	50
Tamil Nadu	24	1	35
Tripura	26.6	5.4	36
Uttar Pradesh	23.9	NA	40
Uttarakhand	19.9	3.4	56.1
West Bengal	34.2	8.1	38.4
All-India	19.4	11.7	46.7

18. Strengthening of Panchayats in India: Comparing Devolution across States, Empirical Assessment, 2012–13, Indian Institute of Public Administration and Ministry of Panchayati Raj website.

**State-wise Number of Panchayati Raj Institutions 2019
(District, Intermediate and Village Panchayats)¹⁹**

S. No.	Name of the States /UTs	District Panchayats	Intermediate Panchayats	Village Panchayats	No. of Traditional Bodies
1	Andaman and Nicobar Islands	3	9	70	201
2	Andhra Pradesh	13	660	12918	N.A
3	Arunachal Pradesh	22	177	1785	N.A
4	Assam	26	191	2201	512
5	Bihar	38	534	8386	N.A
6	Chandigarh	1	1	1	N.A
7	Chhattisgarh	27	146	10978	N.A
8	Dadra and Nagar Haveli	1	N.A	20	N.A
9	Daman and Diu	2	N.A	15	N.A
10	Delhi	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A
11	Goa	2	N.A	191	N.A
12	Gujarat	33	248	14292	N.A
13	Haryana	21	126	6197	N.A
14	Himachal Pradesh	12	78	3226	N.A
15	Jammu and Kashmir	22	306	4482	N.A
16	Jharkhand	24	263	4370	N.A
17	Karnataka	30	176	6021	N.A
18	Kerala	14	152	941	N.A
19	Lakshadweep	1	N.A	10	N.A
20	Madhya Pradesh	51	313	22817	N.A
21	Maharashtra	34	351	27870	N.A
22	Manipur	6	N.A	161	3533
23	Meghalaya	N.A	N.A	N.A	6746
24	Mizoram	N.A	N.A	N.A	905
25	Nagaland	N.A	N.A	N.A	1250
26	Odisha	30	314	6798	N.A
27	Puducherry	N.A	10	98	N.A
28	Punjab	22	147	13279	N.A
29	Rajasthan	33	295	9892	N.A
30	Sikkim	4	N.A	185	N.A
31	Tamil Nadu	31	385	12523	N.A
32	Telangana	9	438	13057	N.A
33	Tripura	8	35	591	628
34	Uttar Pradesh	75	822	58791	N.A
35	Uttarakhand	13	95	7762	N.A
36	West Bengal	22	342	3340	1
Total		630	6614	253268	13776

19. <http://lgdirectory.gov.in> Report Generated on 18/04/2019 04:50:37 PM.

States/UTs wise Numbers of Elected Representatives²⁰ (ERs): 2019

S. No.	Name of the States / UTs	Elected Representatives (ERs)			
		Gram Panchayat	Block Panchayat	District Panchayat	Total
1	Andhra Pradesh	143992	11398	660	156050
2	Arunachal Pradesh	7416	1785	182	9383
3	Assam	24200	2200	420	26820
4	Bihar	114733	11497	1161	127391
5	Chhattisgarh	166910	2973	402	170285
6	Gujarat	137762	5168	1086	144016
7	Haryana	66622	2997	416	70035
8	Himachal Pradesh	26800	1673	250	28723
9	Jammu & Kashmir	33847	--	--	33847
10	Jharkhand	54807	5432	543	60782
11	Karnataka	99981	3903	1083	104967
12	Kerala	15962	2079	331	18372
13	Madhya Pradesh	385339	6790	852	392981
14	Maharashtra	234193	3939	1990	240122
15	Manipur	1663	0	60	1723
16	Mizoram	3502	--	--	3502
17	Odisha	99833	6801	853	107487
18	Punjab	94118	2731	331	97180
19	Rajasthan	117604	6236	1014	124854
20	Sikkim	986	--	110	1096
21	Tamil Nadu	111857	5056	686	117599
22	Tripura	6111	419	116	6646
23	Telangana	96533	6497	438	103468
24	Uttarakhand	60904	3266	436	64606
25	Uttar Pradesh	745567	77769	3122	826458
26	West Bengal	49262	9306	834	59402
27	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	125	--	11	136
28	Daman & Diu	152	--	20	172
29	Goa	1514	--	50	1564
30	Chandigarh	144	15	10	169
31	Lakshadweep	85	--	25	110
32	A & N Island	753	70	35	858
Total		2903277	180000	17527	3100804

20. Ministry of Panchayati Raj, New Delhi, (Compilation as of 27.03.2018)

States/UTs Wise Numbers of Women Elected Representatives²¹ (ERs): 2019

S. No.	Name of the States/UTs	Elected Women Representatives (EWR)			
		Gram Panchayat	Block Panchayat	District Panchayat	Total
1	Andhra Pradesh	71996	5699	330	78025
2	Arunachal Pradesh	2966	625	67	3658
3	Assam	12100	1100	210	13410
4	Bihar	51998	5341	548	57887
5	Chhattisgarh	91469	1595	223	93287
6	Gujarat	68880	2582	526	71988
7	Haryana	28060	1258	181	29499
8	Himachal Pradesh	13409	862	127	14398
9	Jammu & Kashmir	11169	--	--	11169
10	Jharkhand	27664	2812	281	30757
11	Karnataka	48335	2018	539	50892
12	Kerala	8360	1102	168	9630
13	Madhya Pradesh	192669	3395	426	196490
14	Maharashtra	118496	1989	1005	121490
15	Manipur	836	0	32	868
16	Mizoram	828	--	--	828
17	Odisha	49840	3273	438	53551
18	Punjab	31373	910	110	32393
19	Rajasthan	66823	3118	586	70527
20	Sikkim	493	--	55	548
21	Tamil Nadu	37310	2426	239	39975
22	Tripura	2760	192	54	3006
23	Telangana	48267	3249	219	51735
24	Uttarakhand	34106	1633	218	35957
25	Uttar Pradesh	246038	25664	1031	272733
26	West Bengal	24991	4743	423	30157
27	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	43	--	4	47
28	Daman & Diu	82	--	10	92
29	Goa	499	--	17	516
30	Chandigarh	49	6	3	58
31	Lakshadweep	32	--	9	41
32	A & N Island	262	28	12	302
Total		1292203	75620	8091	1375914

21. Ibid.

States/UTs wise percentage of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) viz-a-viz Total Elected Representatives²² (ERs): 2019

S. No.	Name of the States / UTs	Total ERs	Total EWRs	% EWRs
1	Andhra Pradesh	156050	78025	50.00
2	Arunachal Pradesh	9383	3658	38.99
3	Assam	26820	13410	50.00
4	Bihar	127391	57887	45.44
5	Chhattisgarh	170285	93287	54.78
6	Gujarat	144016	71988	49.99
7	Haryana	70035	29499	42.12
8	Himachal Pradesh	28723	14398	50.13
9	J & K	33847	11169	33.00
10	Jharkhand	60782	30757	50.60
11	Karnataka	104967	50892	48.48
12	Kerala	18372	9630	52.42
13	Madhya Pradesh	392981	196490	50.00
14	Maharashtra	240122	121490	50.60
15	Manipur	1723	868	50.38
16	Mizoram	3502	828	23.64
17	Odisha	107487	53551	49.82
18	Punjab	97180	32393	33.33
19	Rajasthan	124854	70527	56.49
20	Sikkim	1096	548	50.00
21	Tamil Nadu	117599	39975	33.99
22	Tripura	6646	3006	45.23
23	Telangana	103468	51735	50.00
24	Uttarakhand	64606	35957	55.66
25	Uttar Pradesh	826458	272733	33.00
26	West Bengal	59402	30157	50.77
27	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	136	47	34.56
28	Daman & Diu	172	92	53.49
29	Goa	1564	516	32.99
30	Chandigarh	169	58	34.32
31	Lakshadweep	110	41	37.27
32	A & N Island	858	302	35.20
Total		3100804	1375914	44.37

The above table indicates that the following states have more than 50% of selected women Representatives. In the order of the ranking, they are Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Daman & Diu, Kerala, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Manipur, Himachal Pradesh, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Sikkim and Telangana. Between 49 to 24 percent in the order of ranking they are Gujarat (16), Odissa (17), Karnataka (18), Bihar (19), Tripura (20), Haryana (21), Uttar Pradesh (22), Lakshadweep (23), Andaman & Nicobar Island (24), D & N Haveli (25), Chandigarh(26), Tamil Nadu (27), Punjab (28), Jammu & Kashmir (29), Uttar Pradesh (30), Goa (31), and Mizoram (32).

Basic Statistics of Panchayati Raj Institution²³ (April 2019)

S. No.	Unit	Numbers
1.	Number of PRIs in the country	2,60,512
2.	Number of Village Panchayats	2,53, 268
3.	Number of Intermediate Panchayats	6,614
4.	Number of District Panchayats	630
5.	Number of Elected Members of PRIs	31.00 lakh (approx.)
6.	Number of Elected Women Representatives	13.75 lakh (approx.)

It may be concluded that the preceding discussion, has indicated the fact that tremendous changes have occurred in the social life of women when they have the opportunity to participate in the Panchayati Raj institutions actively. Nearly twenty states had conceded around 50% quota to women representatives in Panchayati Raj. On the other hand, few states considered only a very low percentage of women representatives in their Panchayati Raj Institution. It is highly desirable to have a uniform percentage of women representation across all the states of India. Further, it is suggested that every Indian State Government should encourage the active participation of women through the Gram Sabhas, District Level, and Panchayat Level Government Bodies, including the women self-help organization. Special attention shall be shown in the rural areas for women's active participation in the PRI.

23. S.No.1,2,3&4 <http://lgdirectory.gov.in> Report (18/04/2019) & S.No.5&6 MoPR Compilation (27.3.2018)

22. Ibid.

It must be pointed out that, even as of now, in certain remote hamlets and villages, male domination is still rampant and caste-based politics plays havoc, thus spoiling the very spirit of grass-root democracy. Corrective measures are urgently required to weed out these abusive anti-democracy activities. It is suggested, therefore, that the respective State Governments should take serious note of it and enforce forthwith remedial initiatives before it is too late.

With a sad note and observation about the kind of caste discrimination prevalent in Tamilnadu,

as reported in most of the Dailies - is the incident involving one Mrs. Rajeshwari, Therukuthittai Women Panchayat President from Cuddalore- who was forced to sit on the floor by the Upper Caste Male Vice President during a Panchayat meeting. This ruthless, merciless, and inhuman ill-treatment is meted out to this poor soul because she belongs to a Lower Caste (ST) which is no fault of her own. Such further nasty complications can be prevented only with the intervention of the State Government- which should initiate necessary punitive legal actions against those anti-social and anti-national elements.

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