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# PROXY REPRESENTATION AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EMPOWERMENT IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to focus on the irony of higher political representation without women's empowerment in the Indian local government system by examining the concept of proxy representation in PRIs. Due to the quota system, the 73rd Amendment Act of India has facilitated the descriptive representation of women significantly. It does not, however, guarantee their political empowerment. An example of such irony can be seen in the form of Sarpanch Pati. In this case, the male relatives of the female Sarpanch use their latent powers for their wives, sisters, uncles sake. This research examines the issue with the help of the theory of descriptive and substantive representation. Through secondary data sources, it will examine some issues which hinder women's decision-making capacity. Such problems include socio-cultural and structural issues like patriarchy, dependence, castes, and illiteracy. From the findings, it can be concluded that women have been empowered due to the quota system, but they are not politically empowered.

**Keywords:** Women's political participation, Proxy representation, Sarpanch Pati system, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Descriptive representation, Substantive representation, Gender and politics, Women's empowerment, Patriarchy, Local governance in India.

## INTRODUCTION

One important indicator that measures the level of inclusiveness and strength of the democratic framework of a nation may be evaluated with respect to participation of women in political affairs.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the numerous constraints imposed by patriarchal traditions, lack of educational opportunities, and economic problems, there have been several instances where participation of women in politics has dramatically increased in India, the largest democracy in the world.<sup>2</sup> Several measures have been taken both at the policy-level and in terms of constitutional amendments in order to correct this anomaly and include women in the process. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 that ensured reservation of women in PRIs as well as one-third representation of women had proved extremely useful in this respect.

However, this increased participation does not always translate into empowerment. When women are included in the process but continue to work under the proxy or Sarpanch Pati system, the involvement of their male kin leads to their subordination and curtails their decision-making power.<sup>3</sup>

This study on proxy representation in local government systems of India and the implications for empowerment of women will help explain the difference between the two concepts.

The premise here is that there are socio-cultural barriers that have hindered the involvement of women in politics even after implementing changes in legislation.

The idea is not only to focus on quantitative aspects but to ensure that there is interaction and dialogue. For women's involvement in politics to be empowering, it is imperative to develop institutions, increase political consciousness, and deal with patriarchy.

### **Conceptual Framework: Descriptive vs Substantive Representation**

A clear understanding of the difference between descriptive and substantive representation is required for explaining the political participation of women. Descriptive representation involves the physical presence of women in the political realm.

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1. Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).
  2. Bina Agarwal, "Gender and Command over Property," *World Development* (1994).
  3. The Constitution of India, Articles 14–16.

That is, descriptive representation depends on the degree to which political representatives resemble the society in terms of gender. Due to the establishment of women's reserved quota in the local government, there has been a great increase in descriptive representation in India.

Unlike descriptive representation alone, the concept of substantive representation does not amount to real political participation.<sup>4</sup> The ability of elected members to make a significant difference in the process of decision making in order to voice the concerns of the represented members is referred to as substantive representation

In terms of proxy politics, however, this difference is made clear. Although they hold high offices in the political structure, their autonomy is hindered by their dependency on the male proxy representatives, therefore rendering any notion of substantive representation out of reach.<sup>5</sup> It is crucial to make such distinctions in order to determine whether the effects of political reservations were just a formality or an empowering experience for these women.

With regard to assessing the effectiveness of women in participating in politics in India, the current study will utilize the methodology of descriptive and substantive representation. Through this process, one is able to assess whether the rise in representation is actually translated into power or still bound within the framework of patriarchy.

#### Literature Review: Women's Political Participation in India

The studies on women's involvement in Indian politics show both the successes they have achieved in terms of numbers and the limitations that prevent their empowerment. In light of previous research, it may be observed that institutional and constitutional changes like the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution will revolutionize the involvement of women in grassroots democracy.<sup>6</sup> Such developments are regarded as major landmarks in the evolution of democracy in the country. But, some researchers claim that mere representation does not mean participation in decision-making. Even when women gain a position of power, it is usually done under male control, who act either as their kinship or local leaders as revealed by

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4. Government of India, *73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992*.

5. Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India data on women representatives.

6. Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo, "Women as Policy Makers," *Econometrica* (2004).

empirical evidence relating to the Panchayati Raj institutions.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the aims and objectives of political reservation fail to achieve realization.

Sociocultural constraints in the case of women political empowerment also offer potential for further research. Patriarchy, illiteracy, mobility problems, and economic dependence are some of the major sociocultural constraints faced by women. These factors reveal that it is impossible to empower women just through institutional efforts.<sup>8</sup>

However, there is also research that adopts a more optimistic view and suggests that confidence and competence among women may be enhanced by their active involvement in politics, which would lead to an eventual progression from tokenism to active participation. Taking into consideration the aforementioned arguments, it becomes evident that there is a contradiction inherent in the literature on Indian women's political involvement.

### **Research Gap: Underexplored Dimensions of Proxy Representation**

One of the most glaring problems that need to be addressed in the current literature is the paucity of research examining the issue of proxy representation through structural and longitudinal lenses.<sup>9</sup> Although it is clear from many studies that the "Sarpanch Pati" syndrome is a well-known concept in the descriptive sense, there is not much literature analysing its effect on the governance of the state and women's political independence.

Another issue that needs to be addressed more rigorously is the issue relating to the contextualisation of proxy representation. Ignorance of the dynamics of proxy control is mainly because of the inability to consider such issues as education, caste politics, rural-urban variations, and power dynamics in current research agendas. A further significant gap in current research includes the lack of effort towards longitudinal examination of whether women come out of their proxies even after multiple rounds of elections or continue to suffer in structural binds.

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7. Hanna F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

8. Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

9. Drude Dahlerup, "The Theory of Critical Mass," *Politics & Gender* 2, no. 4 (2006).

There is also a lack of effort to see if reservation schemes really empower women or serve as tokenism.<sup>10</sup> Through this paper, I seek to address these lacunae by considering proxy representation as an important analytical issue.

## Methodology and Research Design

The issue of proxy representation in the local governance system in India is discussed in this paper. Qualitative analysis is used to explore the topic. The main goal of this research is to investigate how women's political participation through reservations translates into decision-making authority at the grassroots level.<sup>11</sup> When researching the problem of proxy representation, secondary sources will be widely used: textbooks, official documents, and empirical data on PRIs. In contrast to simply counting the number of women participating in politics, the analysis is interpretive in nature and attempts to reveal the dynamics of power relations and institutional mechanisms that influence the political engagement of women. The current research explores the problem of proxy representation within India's local governance system using qualitative methods.<sup>12</sup> The goal of the paper is to comprehend the relationship between women's political involvement through reservations and decision-making authority at the grassroots level. In order to understand the issue of proxy representation, extensive use will be made of secondary sources: academic literature, official documents, and empirical data on PRIs.

As opposed to the measurement of women's political involvement, this study will focus on the interpretation of the political process, examining the power relationships that determine women's engagement in politics. Examining the dynamics of independence, authority, and dependence in political elections carried out by women.

## Findings and Analysis: Proxy Representation in Practice

### 1. Origin and Longevity of the “Sarpanch Pati” System

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10. Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Democracy and the State: Welfare, Secularism and Development in Contemporary India* (Oxford University Press, 1999).
  11. Nirmala Buch, “Women’s Experience in New Panchayats,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 40 (2000).
  12. Renu Khanna, *Gender, Governance and Grassroots Democracy* (Sage Publications, 2012).

Undoubtedly, one of the most vivid examples of the practice of using proxy representation in Indian governance bodies is the “Sarpanch Pati” system when the women who are elected delegates act as proxies for decisions that depend on the will of their husbands or any other men. It should be noted that this practice is illegal from the point of view of the provisions of the 73rd Amendment since powers are delegated from elected women to non-elected men in this context. The participation of male relatives is inevitable when it comes to negotiations, administrative decisions, and communication with government institutions. Elected women, though participating in elections, are mainly present symbolically and are not very influential in terms of resource distribution.<sup>13</sup>

According to the political tradition of the village that links power with masculine characteristics, this situation is also a sign of structural discrimination.

## **2. Participation in the System vs Authority in Decision Making**

The participation of women has been significantly augmented in the local governance systems due to reservations. Yet, it should be noted that their presence in this process does not equate to holding any authority over decisions.<sup>14</sup> In other words, either the opinions of those women representing the community are simply ignored or mediated via men, or the women are actively discouraged from voicing their opinion.

As per the findings of empirical research, the core figures in politics networks in the local context generally enjoy agenda setting, budgeting, and administration rights.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the two levels of governance can be seen.<sup>15</sup> First, there is a certain level involving people who actually make decisions yet remain invisible to ordinary people, while another level involves female representatives of the population.

Such discrepancy clearly underlines the problem related to the opposition between descriptive representation and substantive representation when the former is hindered by patriarchy, while the latter is achieved thanks to quotas.

## **3. Gender Power Structures and Socio-cultural Constraints**

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13. M. A. Oommen, *Devolution of Resources to Rural Local Bodies in India* (Institute of Social Sciences, 2004).

14. George Mathew, *Panchayati Raj in India: From Legislation to Movement* (Concept Publishing, 1994).

15. Rekha Datta, “Women’s Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions,” *Social Change Journal*.

Gender power structures within rural India are dependent on the socio-cultural constraints that exist within the process of proxy participation. The mobility of women, as well as their engagement with public institutions, may be limited due to patriarchal norms.<sup>16</sup> In these circumstances, political offices would be considered an extension of family power rather than individual empowerment. Economic dependency is another aspect through which the cycle becomes stronger. In order to navigate the process and overcome conflicts arising within political offices, women lacking a financial or educational background would be more reliant on men from their families.

Another aspect influencing gender power structures is class and caste hierarchies. Women coming from less privileged social strata experience double discrimination: their ability to exercise power in politics is constrained not only by class inequalities but also gender ones.

#### **4. Difference in the Level of Empowerment**

Despite the wide prevalence of proxy participation, the degree to which women representatives engage in it varies significantly depending on the geographic and social context<sup>17</sup>

Representatives of the opposite gender are found to demonstrate greater freedom in decision-making in regions characterized by a higher literacy rate among females.

Another aspect influencing gender power structures is class and caste hierarchies. Women coming from less privileged social strata experience double discrimination: their ability to exercise power in politics is constrained not only by class inequalities but also gender ones.

On the other hand, proxy control is quite common in patriarchal and economically less developed areas where the political responsibility of women continues to have only a formal character.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, without societal change, purely institutional reforms can hardly bear fruit.

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16. Susanne Rudolph and Lloyd Rudolph, *Explaining Indian Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

17. World Bank, India: Empowering Women through Local Governance (Policy Research Report).

18. John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (SAGE Publications, 2014).

Furthermore, there is research which demonstrates that multiple involvement in political life is empowering for women, resulting in the development of self-respect and decreasing reliance on male proxies.

### **5. Constraints of the Reservation-Empowerment Approach**

As can be concluded from the results presented above, while the reservation approach has been efficient in promoting the involvement of women in political systems, the structural barriers preventing women from participating are still left unresolved.<sup>19</sup> The very existence of proxy control clearly implies that inclusion does not necessarily alter the balance of power in place. Instead, the process takes place within a socio-economic system that evolves according to its external environment while preserving gender-based inequality intact. From this perspective, empowerment proves to be partial and mediated rather than complete and autonomous.

### **Discussion: Descriptive Representation Without Substantive Empowerment**

Clearly, the results obtained in the research can support the hypothesis presented at the outset. It may be said that the legislation concerning the implementation of reservation in India provides some degree of descriptive representation of women. However, at the same time, it fails to ensure their political empowerment.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the political involvement of women in the Panchayati Raj institutions may be viewed as a significant achievement from an institutional perspective, whereas the existence of patriarchal systems of governance is reflected by the lack of political autonomy of the female population. The analysis of the phenomenon of proxy politics shows that political inclusion does not have the required effect on power structures.<sup>21</sup> Thus, decision-making powers remain in the hands of men irrespective of the position held by a woman. Informal practices in the system coexist with formally adopted democratic principles.

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19. Sandra Harding, *Feminism and Methodology* (Indiana University Press, 1987).

20. Madhu Kishwar, "Women and Politics: Beyond Quotas," *Economic and Political Weekly* (1996).

21. Jean Drèze and Reetika Khera, "Rural Governance in India," *Indian Journal of Human Development* (2009).



The theoretical differentiation put forward by Pitkin between descriptive and substantive representation, which implies that the presence of one or another social stratum in a democratic institution does not imply the reflection of its interests in the decision-making process, proves the above-stated argument.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the results show that proxy representation is a structural outcome of affirmative actions, and not just a temporary phenomenon. The existing power dynamics have adapted themselves by transferring power to informal spaces and maintaining the facade of gender-sensitive administration without giving up patriarchal dominance.<sup>23</sup> This reflects a wider process of institutional transformation wherein discrimination exists in reality even when there is formal equality.

But one could argue that women have become empowered to some extent. There may be times when women's self-confidence and freedom of movement have increased because of their consistent association with political institutions, making them more visible and participatory in administrative systems.

It is natural for such a situation to arise considering that substantive representation may also be achieved gradually through different means, such as institutional pressure, social welfare, and education.

Anyhow, it is clear that the discussion has indeed brought out a significant paradox – though reservations have made political candidacy easier, political power is yet to be democratised.

### **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

Through emphasizing proxy representation, the study intends to investigate the connection between empowerment of women and their political representation within the decentralized political institutions of India.<sup>24</sup> From the findings, it can be seen that even though there have been many women in Panchayati Raj Institutions because of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and reservations, their political power has not been enhanced.

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22. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), *Gender Quotas and Women's Political Empowerment* (Stockholm, 2014).

23. UN Women, *Women's Participation in Local Governance in South Asia* (2015).

24. UNDP India, *Decentralised Governance and Women's Empowerment in India* (2009).

The existence of the "Sarpanch Pati" system reveals that the decentralized political system of India suffers from an important structural problem because women politicians are used for political gain by male members of their family. In this sense, socio-economic dependence, patriarchy, and unequal distribution of institutional resources are involved in the practice of political representation.<sup>25</sup> Through applying the concept of proxy representation, the study points to the inability of equal treatment to ensure empowerment in terms of the distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation. In other words, democratic change can coexist with the status quo in terms of social power relations. However, it can also be seen that some form of empowerment still exists because women politicians may gain self-confidence and independence in the process.

The thesis of the research is that the participation of women in politics in India is still the example of partial democracy.<sup>26</sup> This means that the participation of women is purely formal in nature. Hence, there is a need for transition from quantitative changes into qualitative changes.

### **Policy Recommendations**

There are a number of policy reforms that are required to be done to ensure that the concept of political reservation actually works in favor of women.

The first recommendation in this regard is that the accountability of Panchayati Raj institutions has to be improved significantly. All the decisions should be taken by elected members, and any kind of interference will have to be stopped and punished.

The second recommendation is that the capacity of female members should be improved. This will allow them to learn about finance, laws, and administration in particular.

Finally, decreasing reliance upon male intermediaries will mean empowering women economically and intellectually.

Moreover, to break away from the traditional patriarchal culture and customs which inhibit the freedom of movement and power of women, there needs to be more comprehensive social reform policies.

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25. UNICEF India, *Role of Women in Local Governance and Development* (Programme Reports).

26. Govind Kelkar, "Women and Local Governance in India: Issues of Participation and Empowerment," *Journal of Rural Development*.

Otherwise, the impact of whatever modifications may be done in the government would not be so effective.<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, it can be stated that the presence of the concept of proxy representation itself signifies that empowerment entails not only accessing the political arena but also implementing social, economic, and cultural reforms, despite the tremendous progress made by India in its reservations policy. At this juncture, the involvement of women in politics will indeed carry a lot of meaning.

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27. D. Bandyopadhyay, "Panchayats and Rural Development," *Economic and Political Weekly*.

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