
IMPACT OF WOMEN'S RESERVATION IN PANCHAYATS: TRANSFORMING GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, introduced through the Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment, represents one of the most transformative experiments in democratic decentralization in independent India. By mandating women's participation in local self-governance, the reform sought not only to correct historical political exclusion but also to reconfigure the nature of grassroots leadership. This article critically examines the impact of women's reservation in Panchayats by moving beyond numerical representation to assess its substantive, social, and institutional consequences. Drawing upon empirical studies, policy analyses, and illustrative case studies, it argues that women leaders have often reoriented governance priorities toward basic services, social welfare, and community well-being, while simultaneously challenging entrenched gender norms. At the same time, the article highlights persistent constraints, including proxy leadership, caste- and class-based discrimination, and institutional weaknesses that limit women's effective exercise of power. By situating women's political participation within broader debates on democratic inclusion and empowerment, this paper contends that reservation has not merely altered local governance structures but has also contributed to a slow, uneven, yet profound transformation of India's democratic imagination. Ultimately, the article underscores that women's reservation in Panchayats is not simply a policy of representation, but a continuing project of social change from below.

The introduction of women's reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a historic shift in India's democratic framework. By mandating that at least one-third of all seats in local self-government bodies be reserved for women later expanded to 50 percent in several states the Constitution sought to address centuries of political exclusion faced by women. This reform was not merely numerical; it was transformative in intent. It aimed to democratize power at the grassroots level and enable women to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their everyday lives. Over three decades later, women's reservation in Panchayats has fundamentally reshaped local governance, social relations, and political culture in India, though not without challenges.

One of the most visible impacts of this policy has been the dramatic increase in women's political participation. India today has the highest number of elected women representatives in local governments in the world, with more than 1.4 million women actively serving in Panchayats. This mass inclusion has normalized the presence of women in public office, dismantling long-held beliefs that leadership and governance are inherently male domains. In many villages, women sarpanches and ward members have become role models, altering how communities perceive authority and competence. For young girls, seeing women occupy positions of power expands their sense of possibility, encouraging aspirations that go beyond traditional domestic roles.

Beyond symbolic representation, women's reservation has also influenced the substance of governance. Studies indicate that women leaders often prioritize issues rooted in everyday survival and well-being, such as access to clean drinking water, sanitation, healthcare, nutrition, education, and social welfare schemes. These concerns, though deeply significant to community life, were frequently sidelined under male-dominated leadership structures that emphasized infrastructure projects or patronage networks. Women representatives tend to be more responsive to social needs, particularly those affecting children, the elderly, and marginalized groups. This shift in policy focus demonstrates that who governs matters, not just how governance is conducted.

The social consequences of women's political participation have been equally profound. For many women, entering Panchayat politics is their first exposure to public speaking, administrative processes, and interaction with state officials. Initially, several struggle with confidence, literacy barriers, and unfamiliarity with bureaucratic procedures. However, over

time, these experiences foster a sense of agency. Women begin to articulate demands, negotiate resources, and hold authorities accountable. This transformation often extends into their private lives, where they gain greater respect, autonomy, and decision-making power within their households. In several regions, the presence of women leaders has encouraged other women to attend gram sabhas, question local authorities, and demand their rights, gradually expanding democratic participation.

Nevertheless, the success of women's reservation is not without serious limitations. One of the most persistent criticisms is the prevalence of proxy leadership, where male relatives exercise power on behalf of elected women representatives. Popularly referred to as the "sarpanch-pati" phenomenon, this practice undermines the spirit of reservation and reinforces patriarchal control. In many cases, women are discouraged from attending meetings, interacting with officials, or making independent decisions. However, scholars argue that this is often a transitional phase. As women gain exposure, experience, and confidence, many gradually assert autonomy and challenge male dominance in governance.

It is also important to recognize that women's experiences in Panchayats are shaped by caste, class, religion, and regional contexts. For women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other marginalized communities, reservation has offered a rare opportunity to access formal political power. Yet, they often face compounded discrimination both as women and as members of socially oppressed groups. This highlights the need for an intersectional understanding of empowerment, one that acknowledges how multiple forms of inequality intersect and intensify each other.

Institutional barriers further constrain the effectiveness of women representatives. Lack of proper training, limited access to information, bureaucratic resistance, and elite capture often hinder meaningful participation. Many women leaders struggle to navigate complex administrative systems without sustained institutional support. Where training programs, legal literacy workshops, and leadership development initiatives have been implemented, the performance and confidence of women representatives have improved significantly. This suggests that reservation must be accompanied by structural support to achieve genuine empowerment.

Numerous studies have shown that women leaders often focus on basic services and social welfare needs that were traditionally neglected. Research in Indian villages reveals that female-

led Panchayats tend to prioritize **clean drinking water, sanitation, primary education, and healthcare services** more than their male counterparts.¹ This isn't accidental it reflects lived experience and an intuitive understanding of what families, especially women and children, need most.

For example, in Haryana's Hisar district, women sarpanches have championed sanitation drives and ensured better implementation of welfare schemes because they experienced first-hand the daily challenges of fetching water and caring for children's health.² Yet such gains are often limited by institutional weaknesses incomplete data, inadequate capacity-building, and lingering socio-cultural barriers that continue to constrain women's independent authority.

Nauroti Devi is a Dalit woman from Harmada village in Rajasthan, embodies the transformative potential of political inclusion.³ Born into poverty and once working as a stone-cutter, she fought for fair wages among labourers and took her struggle all the way to the Supreme Court. Elected sarpanch in 2010, she used her position to secure public toilets, housing, and civic facilities for her village, while safeguarding funds and infrastructure projects that benefit all residents.

In Rajasthan's Jhunjhunu district, **Neeru Yadav**, famously known as the "Hockey Wali Sarpanch," has turned her village into a beacon for girls' empowerment. Investing her own earnings into sports and skill development, she built a girls' hockey team that competes at state levels, promotes academic and vocational training, and encourages financial literacy among women.⁴ Her leadership highlights how women sarpanches can link cultural transformation with tangible developmental outcomes.

Bina Devi, from Dhauri Panchayat in Bihar, offers yet another powerful narrative. Nicknamed the "Mushroom Mahila," she transformed her village economy by popularizing mushroom cultivation and organic farming.⁵ Her work helped thousands of women gain economic

¹Raghabendra Chattopadhyay & Esther Duflo, *Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India* (2004)

²Tanya Schrawat, *Women in Village Panchayats in Haryana: Representation and Realities* (2025), <https://www.ispp.org.in/women-in-village-panchayats-in-haryana-representation-and-realities>

³*Nauroti Devi*, Wikipedia (last visited Jan. 14, 2026) (reporting that she was born into an underprivileged Dalit family, worked as a stone-cutter, and later became sarpanch of Harmada village).

⁴*Neeru Yadav*, Wikipedia (last visited Jan. 14, 2026) (noting her election as sarpanch of Lambi Ahir village and her identity as "Hockey Wali Sarpanch").

⁵*Bina Devi*, Wikipedia (last visited Jan. 14, 2026) (describing her role as "Mushroom Mahila" popularizing mushroom cultivation and organic farming).

independence through agriculture and self-help groups which are a rare example of public office directly catalyzing economic empowerment.

Across central India, women like **Sunita Bhalavi in Dewas, Madhya Pradesh**, and **Prabala Kerketta and Alka Mahto in Jharkhand** are rewriting local governance norms by tackling issues from education to infrastructure, ensuring that community priorities are reflected in development planning.⁶

These stories demonstrate that when women have the power to decide, governance becomes more humane and inclusive but it also highlights that leadership is not singular or uniform. Each woman brings unique priorities shaped by her identity, education, and experiences.

Women's participation in Panchayats has also contributed to the deepening of democracy. Research suggests that women leaders are often more transparent, more responsive to grievances, and more inclined to encourage collective decision-making. Their leadership styles tend to be consultative rather than hierarchical, promoting a more inclusive form of governance. While women are not inherently better leaders, their distance from traditional patronage networks sometimes enables them to govern with greater independence and accountability.

Perhaps the most significant long-term impact of women's reservation lies in its ability to reshape the political pipeline. Panchayats serve as training grounds for leadership, offering women the experience, visibility, and confidence required to contest elections at higher levels. Over time, this can help correct the gender imbalance in state legislatures and Parliament, making Indian democracy more representative.

In conclusion, women's reservation in Panchayats stands as one of the most ambitious and far-reaching social reforms in independent India, not merely because it altered electoral arithmetic but because it reimagined who has the right to govern. By inserting women into the heart of local decision-making, this policy has unsettled deeply entrenched hierarchies of power based on gender, caste, and class. It has forced Indian democracy to confront the fact that representation is not only about numbers, but about whose experiences, priorities, and voices shape public life. While obstacles such as patriarchy, proxy leadership, bureaucratic resistance,

⁶ Prabala Kerketta & Alka Mahto & Sunita Bhalavi, *3 Women Sarpanches Transform Rural Jharkhand and MP*, The Better India (Aug. 1, 2025) (interviews documenting their leadership in Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh).

and uneven institutional support continue to limit the full realization of its promise, the broader trajectory remains unmistakably progressive.

What makes this reform particularly significant is that its impact extends beyond governance into the social fabric of rural India. Women's participation in Panchayats has slowly begun to transform how leadership is imagined, how authority is exercised, and how communities perceive women's capabilities. For many women, political entry has translated into personal empowerment with greater mobility, confidence, and autonomy while for younger generations, it has created new horizons of aspiration. Even in cases where women initially enter office under constrained conditions, their presence itself begins to destabilize traditional power relations.

At the same time, the story of women in Panchayats cautions us against romanticizing empowerment. Structural inequalities do not disappear simply because a seat is reserved. True empowerment requires sustained investment in education, training, legal literacy, and institutional reform. Without these, representation risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. The challenge ahead lies not in questioning the value of reservation, but in deepening its impact so that women are not only present in governance but are able to exercise real, independent authority.

Ultimately, the story of women in Panchayats is not just a story about decentralization or administrative reform it is a story about dignity, voice, and democratic belonging. It reveals how democracy becomes meaningful when it reaches those who were once excluded from it, and how political inclusion can serve as a catalyst for wider social change. The slow, uneven, yet persistent transformation unfolding in villages across India reminds us that democracy is not only shaped in Parliament or courts, but also in gram sabhas, community meetings, and everyday acts of leadership. In this sense, women's reservation has not only strengthened local governance; it has quietly and profoundly reshaped Indian democracy from below.