

## Local Governance: History of Panchayati Raj System and women in PRIs

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### Abstract

Women are one of the biggest assets in our society. Women are perfectionists and have power to create, nurture and transform. Women's education, marital status, family structure and political affiliation of family affect their participation. Women are becoming more active and responsible in their duties outside the home. Still, they need more active participation to achieve democracy at grass root level. It is, undoubtedly, as much a challenge as it is a welcome change.

Political Participation simply means participation or involvement in political activities. The development of society will be incomplete without the contribution of women. They are one of the most important part of the society by constituting half of the population. Women have to be active participants in administrative responsibilities and take leadership roles. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have opened the door of opportunities for women at various fronts. Through their active participation in these institutions, they are showing their decision-making capabilities in the field of comprehensive development of rural society viz. financial, cultural, social and educational development etc.

This Paper will discuss about the history of Local governance, the role of women in politics and their behaviour in Politics by focusing on how PRIs is a tool to uplift the women in all the sphere of their lives. This paper includes primary and secondary data in descriptive methods.

**Keywords:** Women, History, political behaviour, vote, motivation and decision making, political system, vision and choice

### Introduction

Panchayat is assembly of five wise and represented elders chosen and accepted by the village community. Panchayat is a three-tier system i.e., Village, Block and District. The Father of the Nation advocated Panchayati Raj through his vision/concept of Gram Swaraj (Self Governance Village), where each village is responsible for its own affairs. It was adopted by state

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government during the 1950-1960s as laws were passed to establish Panchayats in various states. In the history of Panchayati Raj in India, on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1993, the Constitutional (73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment) Act, 1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institution. From 24<sup>th</sup> December 1996 Panchayats were extended into 8 States, i.e. Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Himanchal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan. Now except in Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram and all the UTs except Delhi, it exists everywhere else. The Act aims to provide 3-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all states having a population of over 2 million, to hold Panchayat elections regularly every 5 years, to provide reservation of seats for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women, to appoint State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats and to constitute District Planning Committee to prepare draft development plan for the district. Recent number of Panchayat in India is Gram Panchayat 269446 and 57712 is in Uttar Pradesh (GOI, n.d.).

**Table 1: Number of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in India and UP**

| <b>Representation of women in panchayat</b> | <b>Year</b>    | <b>Total PRI Representatives in India</b> | <b>Total EWRs in India</b> | <b>Total PRI Representatives in U.P.</b> | <b>Total EWRs in U.P.</b> |
|---|----------------|---|----------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| <b>1</b>                                    | 23 SEP<br>2023 | 3187320                                   | 1453973                    | 913417                                   | 304538                    |

Source: [https://gdpd.nic.in/currentFocusReport.html?OWASP\\_CSRFTOKEN=RE1B-P3OR-R1KT-6OP2-0YK2-Z91B-RFIO-2EMK](https://gdpd.nic.in/currentFocusReport.html?OWASP_CSRFTOKEN=RE1B-P3OR-R1KT-6OP2-0YK2-Z91B-RFIO-2EMK)

**Development of Panchayat in Indian History:**

Panchayat was found on the roots of ancient Indian history in Rigveda in the form of Sabha and Samiti. Manu distinguishes three kinds of settlements village (Gram), town (Pura) and city (Nagara). But even according to him, the village was a fundamental unit of administration (Majumdar & Singh, 1997). The political units during the Rig Vedic or the early Vedic period comprised of Grama (village), Vish and Jana. The biggest political unit was that of Jana, after which came Vish and then, Grama. The leader of a Grama was called Gramani, of a Vish was called Vishpati and that of Jana was known as Jyeshta. The rashtra (state) was governed by a Rajan (King) and he was known as Gopa (protector) and Samrat (supreme ruler). The king ruled with the consent and approval of the people. There were four councils, namely Sabha, Samiti, Vidhata and Gana, of which women were allowed to attend only two, Sabha and

Vidhata. The duty of the king was to protect the tribe, in which he was assisted by the Purohita (chaplain) and the Senani (army chief) (Culturalindia, 2023).

The Valmiki Ramayana mentions two kinds of villages - the 'Ghosh' and the 'Gram', the former being smaller than the latter. Its officials were called 'Ghosh' and 'Gram'. 'Ghosh' are indicated as being smaller in size, generally situated near a forest, where dwell the gods, that is those people who maintain the cowherds (GOI, 2022). When we look into the great epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, we find some explicit references to village institutions. There are references to the assembly of elders of a hamlet (Ghosh) village (Gram) and headman of the village (Gramini) The headman (Gramini) was responsible for collecting the state dues, keeping village records, settling disputes, controlling crime etc. The council of elders used to exercise control over the headman. We are not certain, whether the office was elective or by appointment. But in the post Mahabharata period, he was nominated by the king and was accountable to his next highest authority, "Gopa" of the village. Five to twenty-five villages were under the charge of "Gopa" (GOI, 2022). In the Manusmriti and Shantiparva of Mahabharata, there are many references to the existence of Grama Sanghas or village councils. The earliest reference to panchayat is derived from the word Pancha, that refers to an institution of the five (pancha panchasvanusthitah) is found in the Shanti-Parva of Mahabaratha, pancha and panchavanustitah are semantically close to panchayat. An account of these village councils are also found in Arthashastra of Kautilya who lived in 400 B.C. Arthashastra gives a complete account of the system of village administration prevailing at that time. During this period, the village administration was carried under the supervision and control of Adyaksha or headman. There were other officials such as Samkhyaka (accountant), Anikitsaka, Jamgh karmika, Chikitsaka. The village headman was responsible for ensuring the collection of state dues and controlling the activities of the offenders. In Ramayana of Valmiki, there are references to the Ganapada (village federation) which was perhaps a kind of federation of village republics (Culturalindia, 2023).

The popular assemblies of the villages are referred by Prof A.S. Altekar by three different names, Sabha, Samiti and Vidhatha. The Sabha was primarily the village social club, but a few times the simple village meetings were also transacted there by its members, like the steps for communal safety and decisions in the matter of village disputes. Evidences show that the sabha was usually the village assembly meeting for social as well as political purposes (Altekar, 1958).

Jain and Buddhist texts dating from the 5th century B.C. indicate that the village headman was called 'Bhojak'. His duty was to collect the revenue for the state and to organize constructive programmes. He was selected by villagers on the basis of local customs and traditions but in practice his post was hereditary. In each village there was a main gate known as 'Gram-Dwara'. The Gopalka was there to protect the village cattle heads. During this period, various occupational Panchayats were also active. Each group had its own Panchayats. The Sarpanch of the Panchayat was known as 'Pramukhi' (Chairman of Pramukh) (Tak, 1973).

### **PRIs in Mauryan Period**

Kautilya in his famous *Arthashastra*, gives an elaborate classification of villages on the basis of revenue, economy and defence purpose and makes a mention of Gramika or the village headman. Villages were classified according to population and administration during this period and were closely linked with agriculture. The village size varied from 100 to 500 families. The boundaries were demarcated by rivers, hills, forests, ditches, tanks, ponds and trees situated at one or two kroscha (1 kroscha equal to 2 miles) presumably for mutual protection with the neighbouring village (Vinita, 2007).

The village administration during 324-236 B.C. was clearly linked with agriculture. The villages were organized under a union of 10 called *Samgrahna*, of 200 called *Karvatika*, of 400 called *Dronomukha* and of 800 villages constituting a *Mahagram* and administration termed as *Sthatnuja*. The Sthatnuja was a centre of trade and fair of the neighbourhood villages which comprised of the following administration staff.

- (i) The '*Adhyaksha*' (village headman) used to have control over the village administration and had the responsibility of collected revenues. Arthashastra talks about many other officials such as:
- (ii) The '*Samkyaka*' (accountant);
- (iii) '*Sthanikas*' (village officials of different grades),
- (iv) '*Anikitsaka*' (Veterinary Doctor),
- (v) '*Jamgh Karika*' (Village Courier),
- (vi) '*Chikitsaka*' (Village Medical Officer), and
- (vii) '*Ashwa-Damak*' (House Trainer).

The above officials were also village leaders (Sekar, 2008).

This view is strengthened by the writings of Megasthenese who visited the Court of Chandra Gupta 303 B.C, stayed in the 90 subcontinents for a long period, and compiled an extremely elaborate account of Indian life and community. He describes the system well, classifying village communities as also but rural units and little republics, aptly said to be self-contained and self-governed (Megasthenes & Schwanbeck, 2012).

In Vedic period the village was essentially considered as an independent unit of administration and the village government had almost carried out the activities through the village headman 'Gramins' who were assisted by village elders. During the Mauryan period, Panchayats organized works of common utilities, education and settlement of disputes between groups (Sekar, 2008).

Local elements become important in the local administration. They were given due regard in local affairs. Inscriptions refer to the participation of leading elements in the village administration or small towns called Vithis. No land transactions could be effected without their consent and this may also be true about other affairs (Sharma, 1959).

### **PRIs in Gupta Period**

In Gupta period, village councils become regular bodies which had the permanent features of local administration. Village was the smallest and lowest units of administration. The administrative units below the district level included clusters of settlements known variously as vithi, bhumi, pathaka and peta. The group of villages (i.e. modern tehsil) was known as 'Vithis' in the north (India) and 'Pattala' and 'Kurram' in the south (India). There are references to officials known as ayuktakas and vithi-mahattaras. At the village level, villagers chose functionaries such as gramika and gramadhyaksha. The Damodarpur copper plate of the reign of Budhagupta mentions an ashtakula-adhikarana (a board of eight members) headed by the mahattara. Mahattara has a range of meanings including village elder, village headman, and head of a family community. The Sanchi inscription of the time of Chandragupta II mentions the panch-mandali, which may have been a corporate body Gramika at the village level, villagers chose functionaries such as gramika and gramadhyaksha. The administration under Gupta Empire was largely dependent upon the old bureaucratic form of administration; however, they organized it much systematically and elaborately. The village administration was under the control of rural bodies consisting of a headman and the village elders. During

Gupta period, there was a remarkable growth of the local self-governing institutions such as the village committees and district committees (Tutorial Point, 2023).

### **PRIs in Chola Period**

In Chola period well organized village Panchayat system i.e., local self-government was in existence. The villages had the economic and administrative freedom. The elected representatives forming village council performed the administration of the village. The functions of village councils were: (i) Control village land; (ii) survey and measurement of agricultural land, (iii) collection of land revenue, (iv) settlement of village disputes, and (v) management of education " (Ghosh & Praminik, 1999).

### **PRIs in Harsha Period**

After the Guptas, the great king Harsha ruled northern India. During this period, the smallest unit of administration was the Grama (village). A cluster of a dozen households and a dozen of such cluster may be called Grama (Mridula, 2010).

### **Pre-& Post British Period**

The British Parliament passed the Government of India Act 1921-26. Panchayat Acts were passed in eight provinces in British India for the establishment of village Panchayats. Thus, the Acts were passed in Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Bombay, Madras, the Central Province, Punjab and United Provinces. These Acts aimed at lowering the franchise, at increasing the elected elements in local bodies and at passing executive direction into non-official hands (Majumdar & Singh, 1997).

After the independence from the British rule the importance of panchayat was laid by our constitution makers. Article 40 of Directive Principle of State Policy in the constitution of India states: "the state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government". At various points of time these autonomous bodies of governance have proven their importance despite the political disturbances within the country. Sanyukt Prant Panchayat Raj Act 1947 was signed by the Governor General on 7th December 1947 and Panchayats were established in the state from 15th August 1949 (Khan, n.d.). After this when the constitution of the country was drafted, it had broad arrangements for the establishment of the Panchayats.

Post-Independence, the Taxation Enquiry Commission (1953-54) (GOI, 1955) correctly pointed out:

"It was the need for the association of Indians with administration (in order, for one thing, that taxes could be more readily imposed and collected) that prompted the early British Indian administration to embark on the introduction of local self-governing institutions in the country. The resolution of Lord Mayo (1870) on financial decentralization also visualized the development of local self-government institutions, but this was subordinate to the need for tapping local resources of revenue and of effecting economy by decentralized administration".

After years, several committees were formed to reform the existing state of affairs of the village society; the recommendations made were regarded as a vehicle for fulfilling the demands of the people. The committees are:

1. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, 1957
2. Ashok Mehta committee, 1977
3. GVK Rao Committee, 1985
4. LM Singhvi Committee, 1986

Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were the first to adopt Panchayati raj institution in 1959. Two amendments were passed by the parliament to make Panchayati raj system as local self-governmental institutions. In India, the Constitution (73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act), enacted in 1992, mandated the reservation of a minimum of one-third of seats for women (both as members and as chairpersons) within all of India's locally elected governance bodies commonly referred to as *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs). The amendment also entrusted panchayats with the responsibility of furthering the agenda of economic development and social justice. A 30% reservation for the women representatives was given during the same year. In year 1994, 72<sup>nd</sup> Amendment was presented in the Lok Sabha in order to streamline the workings of the Panchayats. The act provided the direct elections at village level to choose their local leader and mandates all the states to adopt the system. This act has transformed the whole democracy of India. In year 2000, the second general elections of three-tier Panchayat were successfully completed. At that time India has about 253,400 rural local bodies at the village level (gram Panchayats), and 6613 intermediary or block-level Panchayats, and 630 district level panchayats. There are about 3 million elected representatives of these panchayats, out of which

1.3 million are women. Thus, 70% of India's population is covered through these local governance institution (UN, 2019).

### **The Constitution (73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment) Act, 1992**

The main characteristics of the Act are:

1. In all States there shall be a Gram Sabha (GS) in each village to which the Panchayat will be accountable. The powers and functions of the GS shall be assigned by a law passed by state legislature.
2. All States will have a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj (except the States whose population is less than 20, 000) by forming Panchayat at the village, intermediate and district level. The composition and members of these bodies will be determined by a law passed by the State Legislature.
3. All members of village Panchayats, intermediate Panchayats and district level shall be chosen by direct election and method of the Chairperson of the village Panchayat will be decided by the State Government, while Chairperson of intermediate Panchayats and district Panchayats shall be elected indirectly by the members from amongst the elected members only.
4. The terms of the office of Panchayats at every level shall be for five years and if dissolved earlier, fresh elections must be completed within six months from the data of dissolution.
5. (a) Reservation for the candidates of SCs and STs at all levels in proportion to their population, (b) one third of the total numbers of seats has been reserved for women (including the numbers of seats reserved for women belonging to SCs and STs). (c) The offices of the Chairpersons in the Panchayat shall be reserved for SCs and STs in proportion to their population in the State and one-third of such offices shall be reserved for women by rotation in different Panchayats.
6. The legislature of the State, by law will provide for the representation of Chairperson of the village Panchayats in the Panchayat at the intermediate level and to MPs and MPLs whose constituency fall in the area of intermediate and district level Panchayats. All the directly elected members, chairpersons, MPs and MLAs, shall have the right to vote in the meetings of the Panchayats. But MPs and MLAs are debarred from



becoming Chairpersons of these Panchayats and they cannot even have right to vote in the election of Chairpersons.

7. The State Legislature shall make laws for maintenance of accounts by the Panchayats and relating to audit of such account.

8. Panchayati Raj Bodies will prepare plans for economic development, social justice and social welfare and the subjects enumerated in the Eleventh Schedule (Singh H. , 1993).

9. PRIs got constitutional recognition and it is included in 11<sup>th</sup> schedule and Chapter 9<sup>th</sup> of the Constitution.

10. Twenty-one years is the minimum age for the membership as well as Chairperson.

11. Elections to the Panchayats are to be conducted regularly under the overall supervision of Panchayati Raj Election Commission of a State.

12. A person who is disqualified under any law for election to the legislature will not be entitled to become a member of Panchayat.

13. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 does not apply to the States of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and certain other areas as specified in the Article 243-M.

14. There shall be a separate institution for the election petition of Panchayats and these

15. Election to PRIs at every level would preferably be held on non-party basis.

16. Panchayati Raj Bodies will receive finance from the State Governments in the form of grants. They can also earn money by imposing taxes and fees on the commodities falling within their purview. Every five years the State Finance Commission (SFC) will review the financial position of Panchayats and recommend principles for governing, distribution of tax and grant-in-aid to PRIs (Mohanpuria, 1993).

### **Post – 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment**

The Parliament extended the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act to the Scheduled areas located in eight States on 24 December, 1996 according to D. S. Bhuria Committee Report by legislating the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. Although one year time limit was given to the eight States to amend the State Panchayat Acts, to bring them in conformity with

the provisions of the Extension Act, Bihar and Rajasthan did not amend their Acts within the stipulated period (Singh S. , 2001).

The 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution provides for constitution of District Planning Committee (DPC) under Article 243-ZD to prepare a draft plan of the whole district comprising Panchayats and Municipalities. The States have agreed to extend this provision in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act. (Civil Services India, 2023).

### **PESA Act of 1996 (panchayat extension to scheduled area)**

The parliament may extend the provisions of part 9 to scheduled areas; provide self-rule to tribal people, government in accordance with their local customs and traditions. With these significant amendments and several acts, the positions of government at local level has widened in terms of decision making, representation and it has led to redressal mechanism for the concerns related to vulnerable and backward people. The country has moved towards the multi-level federalism with strong democratic base at its grass root level.

### **Constitutional provisions and policies for women**

The Preamble of Indian Constitution recognizes the principles of social, economic, and political justice to all its citizens and equality of status and of opportunity and also promotes them among all. The Fundamental Rights as guaranteed by the Constitution (Part III, Articles 12-35) try to remove the inequalities which Indian women have suffered. Some guidelines are also given in the Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV, Articles. 36-51) which are non-justiciable. Article 51(e) (Fundamental Duties, Part IVA 42<sup>nd</sup> Amendment Act, 1976) directs the state to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992) facilitate women's participation in the Panchayat Raj system. The act has mandated as 1/3<sup>rd</sup> seats be reserved for woman. According to ministry of Panchayati Raj, 22 states have increased this reservation to 50% (Govt of Odisha). Women representation in PRI (1453973 elected) is nearly 45% of total number of seats (PIB, 2020). All the Five-Year Plans have given importance to the development of women, with a major objective of raising their economic and social status. Despite all such constitutional provisions and plans, there has been no adequate development in their social status.

The plans and constitutional provisions have been provided to women in order to make them equal with their male counterparts. Women empowerment is a prerequisite to transform society. Women are no more in minority because their representation is now prominent and practical. Women demonstrate their leadership qualities inside their homes as well as outside. Elected women representatives of the PRIs of Haryana are exploring the extent of their empowerment as a result of the implementation of the 73rd Amendment Act (Sing, 2004). In the Indian context, constitutional amendment became necessary in order to ensure active participation of women because of the prevailing socio economic and political condition in India. Before the 73rd Amendment came into force, the Government of Orissa had adopted some important provisions such as the reservation of women, SCs and STs in its existing Panchayati Raj Acts (Bharti, 2011).

Women's representation as citizens in political spaces is important on normative grounds of political inclusion and on political economic grounds because it is likely to cause policy changes. A significant body of research has since been carried out to consider the impact of the policy, demonstrating a sharp increase in the number of women elected as village *sarpanch* (Duflo, 2005).

Women political representation is an important step in spreading democracy and constructing local governance. Effective participation or issues of concerns to the community neither be ensured nor guaranteed in general, but Issues of women will be automatically addressed by local governments. Elected women representatives either members or sarpanches continue to face several institutional and social barriers. Socially, the work of rural household women is defined to manage the family daily needs, food, water, healthcare, childcare etc which shows their status in society. So, PRIs can play an effective role in transforming the women's life. This can be done by giving facilities like door-to-door services by healthcare workers, Asha Behan etc, implement reforms, institutionalise accountability systems, decentralise functions, provide to basic amenities and infrastructure. Even PRIs can facilitate women's active engagement, play a role in determining whether women are able to emerge as political agents and actors. Women change their mindset after getting the power and become prominent in Panchayat. Social barriers include lack of education, lack of respect for women in PRIs, physical violence against women in the public and domestic spheres, and oppressive patriarchal and caste structures. Power is titled in favour of men traditionally. Women should get opportunity to enter in politics. Political participation varies in different socio-economic

backgrounds. Political participation actually acts on area of locality, culture and practicing political system too.

As the relationship of women and men are mainly based on compulsion and social responsibility to follow the family norms. In the past, the reality of relationship is socially and practically based on the man. This concept is creating trouble in the egalitarian society where women enjoy their rights in respect to the notion that men are the natural masters.

Participation at grass roots is significantly work where people can discuss, debate, etc. The success of panchayats is focusing on women's issues such as violation of women rights, gender inequities, alcoholism and violence against women. Sometimes they solve their issues in village which affect their lives and day to day activities. It involves the local people with their social hierarchy and stratification. There is a need that PRIs can become more engaged and proactive around such issues and provide space to promote women overall. Women in PRIs are facing challenges in political structure, so it is important to suggest strategies to overcome from the challenges. Women as a group or as individuals actively involved in political affairs, directly (contesting elections, membership of political parties and voting) or indirectly (involve diverse acts of election company communication with the political leader and party members, protest and demonstration). In modern democratic governance, men or women should have equal rights and opportunities to fully participate in all aspects and levels of political process. The right enjoyed which is sanctioned by democracy where participation plays an essential role as consent, accountability, rule of majority, equality and sovereignty. Active female participation means political parties, voters, female representation at the higher level of decision-making forum, family community groups, associations, trade unions and other local units.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Population is growing day by day, Indian village also need essential development on strong infrastructure, education institution, Health, transportation facilities, availability of cooking gas, electricity, water and food. Participation of women in politics is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and covers social, economic, political, cultural, personal and environmental aspect. Equal participation in life as well as political life plays a pivotal role in the enhancement, uplift and make them more advance in all. Women are changing their time

management & vision and starts walking through streets while arguing at public platforms when they participate and contested for the elections.

The government amendment actually provided a bigger and better portion to understand the political process in male dominated public space and local governance. Government should educate women through training and different education programmes. Government proposed total number of training listed below in different financial years.

Training/workshop (According to financial year)

| S,N. | Year    | Total Number | U.P(state) |
|------|---------|--------------|------------|
| 1    | 2019-20 | 95900        | 5044       |
| 2    | 2020-21 | 89824        | 4711       |
| 3    | 2021-22 | 85308        | 3972       |

Source: Gram Panchayat Development Plan Campaign 2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22 at [www.gdp.nic.in](http://www.gdp.nic.in)

But still Government needed more training to enhance their knowledge. The allocation of funds and the number of training organised should be increase in numbers. The moto behind the training should be in their local language and make them aware of their work, leadership (quality & technique), improving decision making, planning and strategy formulation according to their requirement, where to get support if they seeking help in any policy implementation issues. This can help them to update the public policy for the local governance. The programme should be women oriented and focused on them. Even media can provide gender-sensitive coverage of election reports. So, the policy should come from the root not from the bureaucracy directly and it should be more and more focused and relevant with time and space.

*"You can tell the condition of a Nation by looking at the status of its Women."* **Jawahar Lal**

**Nehru**

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