

Women Empowerment Through Panchayati Raj Institution: A Survey of Rajouri District

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Abstract:

This research study explores the multifaceted dynamics of women's empowerment through the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) in District Rajouri in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, India. The Panchayati Raj system, established as a decentralized governance mechanism, has played a pivotal role in reshaping the political landscape of rural India. One of its key objectives has been to enhance the participation and empowerment of women in decision-making processes at the grassroots level. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, to comprehensively investigate the impact of PRI on women's empowerment in Rajouri District. The findings of this research highlight the significant progress made in women's political participation and leadership roles within PRIs, shedding light on the transformation of gender dynamics in rural governance. We identify various factors influencing women's empowerment, including socio-economic background, education, and awareness. Furthermore, the study analyses the challenges women face in PRI leadership positions, such as social norms, cultural barriers, and limited access to resources. The research also underscores the role of PRI in addressing issues concerning women's economic empowerment, healthcare, and education. Through various development schemes and initiatives, PRIs in Rajouri District have contributed to improving the overall socio-economic status of women. This research provides valuable insights into the interplay between the Panchayati Raj Institution and women's empowerment in Rajouri District, offering policymakers and stakeholders a foundation for crafting more targeted interventions to further enhance gender equity and inclusivity within rural governance structures. The findings underscore the need for continued efforts to strengthen the role of women in PRI leadership positions and ensure their meaningful participation in shaping local development agendas.

Key Words: - Women, Empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Rural, Equality.

1. Introduction

Democratic decentralization is the most significant characteristic of the democratic governance system, which is incomplete without the public dimension and the dimensions of public governance. In the context of India, the notion of decentralization is driven by Mahatma Gandhi's views. This essential topic is dealt with in Article 40 of our constitution's policy aspects; the 73rd amendment has also given it constitutional substance; the Government of Jammu and Kashmir has also approved the 73rd amendment and the J & K Panchayati Raj Act 1989. The 2011 Panchayati Raj election, on the other hand, provides important chances for the renaissance of people's trust through the empowerment of elected representatives through the democratic system, and, in reality, secures people's participation in the democratic process. It is also a significant challenge for the administration to realize the democratic expectations of the masses, who have demonstrated genuine involvement in the local-level political process (Choudhary, 2018). Democracy is one of the most prized inventions of humankind. It allows people to choose the way of life they choose for themselves. It provides an opportunity for them to express their creativity. Human society has long struggled to attain democracy (Saxena, 1994). With the legislative reservation provision, over one million rural women now hold Panchayat seats as members, with one-third of them serving as chairpersons in practically all states and union territories. Women's inclusion in Panchayat institutions stands in stark contrast to their participation in other political tiers and earlier Panchayat entities. However, the very integration of women has elicited opposing waves of ecstasy, and euphoria, particularly in print and public announcements, as well as fear and even hatred in social and political debate. In this light, the current study attempted to

investigate various issues concerning the socioeconomic and political backgrounds, as well as the personal characteristics of women elected to PRIs, and their participation in various stages of the implementation of development programs and welfare activities, as well as the extent of improvements that have occurred in their mobility, freedom, socioeconomic status, and empowerment after representing panchayats (Makwana, 2009).

2. Context and literature

Empowerment can be defined as the process of building a social context in which one can make decisions and make choices for social transformation, either individually or collectively. It improves intrinsic ability by gaining knowledge, power, and experience (Schuler and Riley, 1996). Empowerment is the process of allowing or authorizing an individual to think, act, and govern their work autonomously. It is the process of gaining control over one's fate and the conditions of one's life. Control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, and financial) and ideology (beliefs, values, and attitudes) is part of empowerment (Baltiwala, 1994). It is not just a sense of increased extrinsic control; it also increases intrinsic ability, self-confidence, and an internal alteration of one's consciousness, allowing one to overcome external hurdles to obtaining resources or changing traditional beliefs (Pinto, 2001).

Women's empowerment is fundamentally the process of raising the economic, social, and political position of traditionally underprivileged women in society. It is the process of protecting kids from all types of violence. Women's empowerment entails creating a society, a political climate in which women can live without fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination, and the general sense of persecution that comes with being a woman in a traditionally male-dominated organization. Deepa Narayan defines empowerment in her edited book "Measuring Empowerment" (www.oup.com) as "the expansion of poor people's assets and capabilities to participate in, negotiate with, influence control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives."

India is one of several countries, especially in East and South Asia, with abnormally male-dominated sex ratios at birth. Under-enumeration of girl children may be a contributing factor, but the greater cause is the selective abortion of female fetuses in civilizations where males are preferred culturally or economically over girls (Population and Development Review). After the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta advisory group were accepted, the name "Panchayati Raj" was coined. The Government of India established this committee to investigate the effectiveness of the Community Improvement Program (1952) and the National Extension Program (1953) (Ganie, 2019). The 73rd Amendment includes two crucial provisions for rural PRIs. The first distinguishing element is that every state in India's union is required by law to establish a three-tier system of governance at the lower level of administration. The gram or village council, taluk or block council, and zilla or district council are the three tiers. The mandatory inclusion or "reservation" of women is the second element of PRI. Thirty- three percent of all village, block, and district council seats, as well as thirty-three percent of all council president (adhyaksh or pradhan) seats, must be designated for women. Furthermore, mandated reservations exist for the two most historically marginalized social groups in India, which are classified as Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), proportionally to their population in the district, with at least one-third of these seats reserved for SC and ST women (Kalaramadam, 2012). Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, India's then Prime Minister, inaugurated the three-tiered Panchayati Raj system on October 2, 1959, in the Nagaur region of Rajasthan. It was followed by several different Indian states (Ganie, 2019). PRI was designed to improve efficiency, transparency, accountability, and the integration of "local" and "national" development goals, and it has entailed deliberation of "development" requirements and community affairs within village, block, and district councils or panchayats in rural India. The reservation for women in PRI councils has been extended to 50% since 2011. Between 1995 and 2006, 1.2 to 1.8 million women were elected to India's new decentralized political structures as elected women representatives, or EWRs (Kalaramadam, 2012). Governments around the world have recently concentrated on improving socioeconomic circumstances by decentralizing power to local organizations (Ivanyna & Shah, 2012; World Bank, 2016). Women's empowerment is a critical component of this decentralization. Taking this concern into account, countries have been adopting measures to promote women's empowerment in economic, social, and political sectors. In line with this notion, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) included gender equality as a crucial development goal. This is consistent with existing data - both academic and policy - that women's empowerment boosts economic growth, reduces output loss, and reduces poverty (IMF, 2013; 2018). Perhaps as a reflection, the proportion of women in national legislatures has risen from 11% in 1995 to 25%

in 2020 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021). This improvement at the national level is mirrored at the local government level. For example, data from 133 nations show that women make up nearly 2 million (or 36% of elected members in municipal governments). Regionally, these figures are among the lowest in East and South-East Asia (25%) and among the highest in Central and Southern Asia (41%), according to the United Nations (2020).

Financial empowerment is one aspect that is frequently associated with women's empowerment. To be more explicit, women's financial inclusion remains elusive. In 2017, almost 240 million women held a financial institution or mobile money service provider account, yet nearly a billion women lacked access to formal financial services (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018). These difficulties are exacerbated by laws and conventions that limit a woman's ability to participate in the labour market, obtain funding, and make her own economic decisions (World Bank, 2020). Not surprisingly, the gender disparity in account ownership and use remains significant. In 2017, 72% of men held a formal financial institution or mobile money provider account, but just 65% of women did. The evidence for use is more compelling: 29% of men (resp., 24% of women) saved at a financial institution, whereas only 12% of men (resp., 9% of women) borrowed from one. In response to these concerns, the G-20 Summit in 2020 produced a Report outlining a variety of policy alternatives that can

help women achieve financial inclusion (G20 Presidency, 2020). In this regard, it has been proposed that women's political empowerment can lead to greater financial inclusion. On the one hand, enhancing women's political leadership and decision-making participation through proper interventions can have a considerable impact on women's economic empowerment (Sundstrom et al., 2017; United Nations, 2018). Expanding female representation in administration, political participation, and engagement in informal groups, on the other hand, can create an enabling climate for promoting women's empowerment (Bardhan & Klasen, 1999; Ostry et al., 2018). However, it has to be shown whether political empowerment influences financial inclusion. We analyze the impact of political empowerment on financial inclusion in India to contribute to this debate. We take advantage of the phased adoption of the 73rd Amendment (known as the Panchayati Raj Amendment) in districts between 2013 and 2015. The increase in female office-holders in these district panchayats has an impact on female financial inclusion. According to the political science literature (Budryte, 2014; Wolak, 2020), such empowerment can be either descriptive (e.g., number of elected female representatives) or substantive (e.g., consequences of elected female representatives). Thus, the latter would include women in Panchayats, allowing female financial inclusion through literacy promotion or supporting physical or even health infrastructure improvements.

3. Panchayati Raj in Jammu & Kashmir

In terms of Panchayati Raj, the state of Jammu and Kashmir has its own single account. The political turmoil that has occupied it for a long time now has not allowed any beneficial social reconstruction programs to proceed as planned.

In J&K, the concept of grassroots empowerment evolved as part of a national movement that had taken the form of an organized mass movement since 1931. The Maharaja's government began a series of changes in response to the strength of this public movement. In 1935, it passed the J&K Village Panchayat Regulation Act No. 1. The National Conference, which drove the valley's liberation campaign, included an institutional accord for grassroots empowerment in its party policy "New Kashmir Manifesto" adopted in 1944. In March 1948, the National Conference took control. At the time, the state's development position was typified by economic stagnation and educational backwardness. The Zamindars had amassed vast tracts of land throughout their tenure as administrators. The vast majority of the population was destitute. In light of this circumstance, the government has made the abolition of landlordism its main priority. It resulted in the passage of the massive Landed Estates Abolition Act of 1950. This was a watershed moment in J&K history because it was the subcontinent's first land reform research of its type. It laid the groundwork for the reactivation of the Panchayati Raj system in changing the State's rural economy. Recognizing this, the government repealed the Panchayat Act of 1935 (as revised in 1941) and replaced it with Act-V of Samrat 2008 (equal to 1951).

4. Panchayat elections in 2011

After a ten-year hiatus, the panchayat elections in Jammu and Kashmir were announced in early 2011. After a 23-year hiatus, panchayat elections were held in the state in 2001-02. From April 13 to June 18, panchayat elections were held in 16 phases for the election of 4130 sarpanches (2164 in Kashmir and 1966 in Jammu) and 29,719 Panches (15, 959 in Kashmir and 13,760 in Jammu). More than 29,000 polling stations were set up to conduct these elections, and over 50 lakh individuals were eligible to vote. These panchayat elections shaped excellent surroundings for rural folks. They have taken an active interest in and participated in the panchayat elections. Over 79% of the electorate voted. These elections were significant because, for the first time, women and SC/STs were granted reservations in Panch seats. Due to reservation, 9424 of the 28248 Panches elected across the state are women, accounting for 33.3% of all elected Panches. However, in the case of sarpanch posts, the fairer sex in Jammu and Kashmir has been unable to break into the State's male-dominated politics. Only 28 women were elected to the 4,113 sarpanch posts in the State's 22 districts, resulting in a 0.68 percent success rate. It is because there is no reservation for women in sarpanch constituencies.

5. Panchayat elections in 2018

Panchayat elections were held in 2018 after a seven-year hiatus, after those held in 2016. The total number of women Sarpanch representatives in the 2018 Jammu and Kashmir Panchayat elections was 1131 out of 3572, representing a ratio of 31.66%. In the 2018 Jammu and Kashmir panchayat elections, there were 6675 women panch representatives out of 26139, for a percentage of 31.66 %. Women's representation in panchayat elections in 2018 is lower than in 2011. Women were represented at 29.22% in the 2011 elections, but just 26.72% in 2018.

6. Objectives:

1. To analyze the socio-economic background of the respondents.
2. To identify the awareness and participation of women in PRIs.

7. Research Methodology

This study was based on primary as well as secondary sources. Primary sources included questionnaires and scheduled interviews. It also involved empirical research in nature. The current study was conducted in Rajouri district in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Data was collected keeping in mind the representation of all age groups, income categories, levels of education, religion, occupation, and sex. It also included secondary sources based on governmental and non-governmental reports, records, books, magazine articles, and journals relevant to the research. The sample size was 36. An interview schedule was prepared for the collection of data.

Table No. 1 Respondents Age

S.No	Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
1	21-30	12	33.33
2	31-40	12	33.33
3	41-50	4	11.11
4	51-60	5	13.9
5	61 and above	3	8.33
	Total	36	100.00

While conducting our research work in Rajouri District about the Role and developmental activities of women in Panchayati Raj Institution of Rajouri District of Jammu and Kashmir we first of all tried to know the age group of our respondents. However, after collecting and analyzing the data we concluded that 12 respondents fell in the age group of 21-30, and after this age group came those respondents who fell in between the age group of 31-40 and such respondents were 12 in number. Similarly, 4 respondents fall in age the group of 41-50, and 5 respondents fall in the age group of 51-60. Lastly, respondents falling 61 and above age group were 3 in number.

Table No. 2 Respondents Category

S. No	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	General	24	66.7
2	Schedule Tribe	11	30.5
3	Schedule Caste	0	0
4	Other Backward Classes	0	0
5	RBA	1	2.8
	Total	36	100.00

Now, the respondents were asked about their category, i.e. whether they belonged to the General category, Schedule Caste, Scheduled tribe, or O.B.C category, and it was discovered that the majority of the women were from the General category, with 24 respondents out of a total of 36 selected. However, 11 respondents were found to be from the Scheduled tribe group, and 1 was from the OBC category.

Table No.3 Respondents Marital Status

S.No	Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage
1	Married	35	97.2
2	Unmarried	1	2.8
3	Widow	0	0
4	Divorcee	0	0
	Total	36	100.00

According to the findings of the aforementioned study, 97.2 percent of respondents were married, while 2.8 percent were unmarried. Marital status influences an individual's emotional security and insecurity to some extent. Those that are happily married are usually tension-free, relaxed, hardworking, and ambitious to provide a better life for their wife and children. Those who are unhappy in their marriage tend to be irritable, fault-finding, and do not put their heart and soul into their employment.

They become emotionally unstable, prefer to brood, and are anxious. Unmarried people, in general, and young ladies in particular, find it difficult to sublimate their desire for the other sex. For a suitable husband, as long as their bloom and youth do not fade. Marriage, in general, is the ultimate method to have a happy existence and discover the true meaning of life.

Table No. 4 Respondents Family Occupation

S.No	Family Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
1	Unemployed	9	25
2	Labourer	1	2.8
3	Agriculturer	24	66.6
4	Buisness	0	0
5	Politician	1	2.8
6	Social Worker	1	2.8
	Total	36	100.00

From the above study it was found that the dominant number of the respondents were reaming engaged in the agricultural occupation and their number is 24 whereas 9 respondents were unemployed in the district Rajouri. However, 1 respondent out of 36 was a laborer, 1 out of 36 was a politician, and the remaining was a social worker. Hence the above study proves that majority of the people are dependent on agricultural sources.

Table: No. 5 Are you aware about constitutional and legal provisions on PRI

S.No	Options	Frequency	Percentage
1	YES	25	69.5
2	NO	11	30.5
		36	100.00

The contemporary period is characterized by modernity and competition. People from all over the world have shrieked and are aware of the day-to-day happenings as a result of the advent of mass media, and nothing remains hidden. However, when we go through the awareness regarding educational and legal regulations on Panchayati Raj Institutions in the modern world, we find that even though our data assisted us in masking the above truth, and 25 respondents were well aware of the constitutional and legal provisions on Panchayati Raj Institution, the remaining 11 respondents were oblivious of the constitutional and legal provisions on Panchayati Raj Institution.

Table: No. 6 Do you agree that women's political participation can be increased by providing good education to them

S.No	Options	Frequency	Percentage
1	YES	30	83.3
2	NO	6	16.7
		36	100.00

Thirty percent of all respondents said that giving decent education can boost women's political participation. PRIs and administrative assistance from government officials would go a long way toward encouraging women to participate in the panchayat. Six respondents stated that they do not believe this. In summary, the preceding study shows that education is critical to the establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

8. Policy responsibilities and summary

In nations like India, it appears that empowering women is the first step towards mainstreaming gender, in line with the UN's goal of achieving gender equality. It is undeniable that after decades of interventions, the full potential of women's emancipation has yet to be realized. Then and only discussions about gender equality in patriarchal emerging nations like India's participatory rural development are worthwhile. According to this publication, both large organizations and donor organizations fall short of ensuring gender equity or equality at the grassroots level. This failure did not occur at a single stage or degree of implementation of their intervention. Instead, it is largely attributable to the spread of conceptual understanding at all levels - national, sub-partners, and practitioners alike. Even practitioners who attend sensitization workshops fail to apply the techniques on the ground due to a lack of understanding of the importance of both concepts--gender and engagement among community members. Participatory school scholars focus on the behavior modification of development practitioners (Mansuri & Rao, 2009, 2012). Thus, gender-sensitive involvement can only be achieved if the ideas, realities, and issues of people at the grassroots are captured while keeping community-level cultural aspects in mind. As a result, 'cultural understanding of the locals' is critical for any intervening agency – PRI.

Observations made during fieldwork in all of these states about women's representation in PRIs were very similar. The community identifies and refers to husbands or in-laws as village representatives (pradhan). Women were only present in the paperwork by their signatures for the PRIs to function. Reservation, it might be argued, is the first step towards women's growth and may occur in the long run, i.e. women may one day be in a position to capture the representation they deserve in society through these PRIs. The main question is how long this will take. In a country like India, which is battling to close the gender gap in terms of sex ratio, maternal mortality rate, and female feticides, as well as to close the literacy gap between males and females, it is nearly impossible to talk about gender equality without empowering women.

The government is preparing to implement a 50% reservation for women in PRIs by the 110th amendment to the constitution. The measure was lapsed in 2014, and the administration now seeks to reintroduce it. This is a good sign that political will is in support of women holding positions of authority. Women already have 50% reservations in Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Madhya Pradesh. Various studies across different Indian states, however, strongly suggest that there is widespread resentment, particularly among the weaker sections, i.e. lower caste groups and women, of PRIs' active involvement in village affairs (Baviskar & Mathew, 2009; Chhotray, 2004; Das, 2014; Raghunandan, 2012; Sahas, 2013; Sharma, 2010; Singla, 2017; Williams, Srivastava, Corbridge, & Veron, 2003).

If we are to deliver women empowerment through PRIs, we must also consider strengthening the village committees and other key members (pradhan, pramukh of block, district, or national level) so that the PRIs are empowered enough to carry the women and later gender empowerment spirit forward. There may also be considerations for including women in these village-level committees for planning, monitoring, and social audits.

Nonetheless, based on the examples provided in the study, we can conclude that women's empowerment, particularly

through education and thorough training to increase their competence, is critical to the other empowerment efforts made by the government. As a result, before considering gender empowerment in Indian patriarchal society, women's empowerment is required.

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