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Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions: Representation, Empowerment and Challenges at the Grassroots Level

(*Shayna*)

Introduction: Women and the Public Sphere

Women in India have faced systematic marginalisation for a long time. Despite constituting nearly half of the Indian population, their presence in the public and political sphere has remained limited and significantly curtailed. The deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset, which India has unfortunately inherited as a social and cultural legacy, has consistently acted as a restraint on women's participation in public life, political decision-making, and governance structures.

Traditionally, women's roles have been confined to the household-as caregivers, child-bearers, and symbolic bearers of family honour or *izzat*. The irony, however, lies in the fact that those who regard women as the honour of the household often deny them access to freedom, autonomy, and decision-making power. In many cases, women are denied even the effective exercise of basic fundamental rights, despite being central to the functioning of the family and society.

The Supreme Court of India has, on several occasions, referred to women as the "largest minority" in the country-an observation that starkly highlights the structural disadvantages faced by women despite their numerical strength. This statement by the apex court reveals an important truth: marginalisation is not merely about numbers, but about access to power, voice, and representation. Women's exclusion from the public sphere is therefore not accidental, but socially produced and politically sustained through institutions, norms, and practices.

Women, Justice and Feminist Critique

The exclusion of women from the public sphere has been widely debated in political theory. One of the most influential contributions to this discourse was John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971), which brought a paradigm shift in discussions on rights, equality, and fairness. Rawls proposed principles of justice based on fairness and equality, aiming to create a just social order

through impartial rules chosen behind a “veil of ignorance.” His theory gained global recognition for its attempt to balance liberal individualism with concerns of social justice.

However, Rawls’ theory also attracted significant criticism, particularly from feminist scholars. Susan Moller Okin, in her seminal work *Justice, Gender and the Family*, critiqued Rawls on two major grounds. First, she questioned the exclusion of the family from the realm of justice. Rawls treated the family as part of the private sphere and implicitly assumed it to be just, thereby ignoring the deeply embedded gender inequalities that operate within it. In reality, the family often serves as the primary site where gender roles, power hierarchies, and unequal divisions of labour are produced and normalised.

Second, Okin argued that the Rawlsian individual was implicitly male-characterised by traits such as rationality, self-interest, autonomy, and independence. Traditionally feminine attributes such as care, nurturing, emotional labour, and relational responsibility were largely neglected. This made the theory appear gender-neutral on the surface while reproducing male-centric assumptions at a deeper level.

This feminist critique revealed how political theories that claim universality often fail to account for women’s lived experiences. The neglect of the family as a site of injustice led to the emergence of the powerful feminist slogan: “The Personal is Political.” This assertion challenged the artificial division between public and private spheres and emphasised that inequalities within households directly shape women’s participation in public and political life. Importantly, this theoretical debate establishes that women’s political underrepresentation is not unique to India, but a global phenomenon shaped by patriarchal structures across societies.

Global Recognition of Women’s Political Rights

Feminist movements across the world have struggled to secure recognition of women’s political exclusion and marginalisation. These struggles gradually led to the development of international frameworks aimed at addressing gender-based discrimination.

In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), often regarded as an International Bill of Rights for women. Article 7 of the Convention explicitly upholds women’s right to participate in political and public life, including the right to vote, contest elections, and hold public office.

Similarly, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), endorsed by nearly 180 countries, aimed to eliminate discrimination, violence against women, and ensure equal opportunities and equal pay for equal work. These international interventions strengthened

women's political participation globally and influenced domestic policies in several countries, including India.

While such global frameworks highlight a universal struggle for gender equality, the Indian context presents a uniquely layered reality where gender intersects with caste, class, literacy, and regional disparities. It is within this complex socio-political environment that women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) assumes critical importance.

The Indian Context: Panchayati Raj Institutions

India's experience with women's political marginalisation closely mirrors the feminist critiques discussed above. Patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and socio-economic inequalities have historically limited women's access to political power. A major institutional shift, however, occurred with the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992).

These amendments granted constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural areas and Urban Local Bodies in urban regions, strengthening decentralised governance. Most significantly, they mandated one-third reservation for women, including women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, in local self-government institutions. Several states later increased this reservation to 50 percent, further strengthening women's numerical presence in grassroots governance.

The amendments also devolved powers and responsibilities to local bodies through the Eleventh and Twelfth Schedules, covering subjects such as health, education, sanitation, drinking water, and social welfare. State Finance Commissions were established to ensure financial devolution, enabling PRIs to function more effectively.

Significance of Women's Representation in PRIs

The institutionalisation of women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions opened new avenues for challenging patriarchal barriers. It enabled women to move beyond domestic confines and actively participate in governance and decision-making processes that directly affect their lives.

India today has approximately 14.5 lakh women representatives, constituting nearly 46 percent of all elected PRI members-making it the largest experiment in women's political participation in the world. This scale of representation has significantly enhanced women's political visibility, social mobility, and self-confidence.

Women's participation in PRIs has drawn attention to long-neglected issues such as health, sanitation, drinking water, education, and nutrition. Several studies suggest improved service delivery and social outcomes in areas where women actively participate in local governance. Women representatives have also raised issues related to domestic violence, alcoholism, safety,

and wage inequality, aligning with constitutional principles such as Article 39(d), which mandates equal pay for equal work.

Challenges Faced by Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions

Despite these achievements, women in PRIs continue to face several structural and societal challenges that limit the transformative potential of political reservation.

1. The Phenomenon of ‘Sarpanch Pati’:

One of the most widely criticised aspects of women’s reservation is the practice of *Sarpanch Pati*, where male relatives-often husbands-exercise power on behalf of elected women representatives. In such cases, women function as nominal office-holders while real authority rests with men. Although scholars like M. John argue that political entry is often mediated through networks for both men and women, the persistence of this practice undermines genuine empowerment.

2. Clash with Patriarchal Norms:

Women representatives often face resistance from families and communities when they attempt to exercise authority. They continue to shoulder domestic responsibilities alongside public duties, reinforcing gendered expectations and limiting their effectiveness.

3. Gender Bias and Institutional Hostility:

Women frequently encounter dismissal, ridicule, and non-cooperation from male colleagues and officials. Informal power structures often silence women’s voices despite formal equality.

4. Lack of Education and Training:

Limited access to education, political awareness, and administrative training hampers women’s independent functioning, particularly among first-time representatives.

5. Intersectional Disadvantages:

Caste and class intersect with gender, resulting in compounded discrimination. Dalit and Adivasi women often face layered exclusion within political institutions and society.

Government Initiatives to Strengthen Women’s Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions

To address the structural and social challenges faced by women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, the Government of India has undertaken several initiatives aimed at strengthening women’s participation beyond numerical representation.

The Sashakt Panchayat–Netri Abhiyan, launched by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, focuses on capacity building of Women Elected Representatives (WERs). This year-long campaign provides leadership training, governance orientation, and decision-making skills, enabling women to function more independently and confidently.

Similarly, digital inclusion initiatives such as e-Panchayat under the Digital India programme aim to bridge the digital divide by enhancing digital literacy among women representatives. This enables better access to information, monitoring of welfare schemes, and participation in administrative processes.

Further, over two-thirds of Indian states have increased women's reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions to 50 percent. As a result, India today has nearly 14.5 lakh women representatives, constituting around 46 percent of total PRI members—the highest level of women's grassroots political representation globally.¹

The initiative of Model Women-Friendly Gram Panchayats promotes gender-sensitive governance by ensuring inclusive decision-making and attention to women-centric concerns. In addition, Mission Shakti (Sambal and Samarthya) strengthens women's safety and economic empowerment, reinforcing their public participation.

Lastly, the provision of Mahila Sabha, held prior to the Gram Sabha, ensures that women's issues receive focused discussion and are formally incorporated into local governance agendas.

Conclusion: Beyond Representation to Real Empowerment

The Panchayati Raj system, as the third tier of governance, has played a transformative role in expanding women's political representation in India. However, challenges such as proxy leadership, inadequate training, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to restrict substantive empowerment.

While constitutional provisions and government initiatives have laid a strong foundation, real empowerment requires moving beyond numbers. Political reservation must be accompanied by sustained capacity-building, social sensitisation, and institutional support. Only when women are able to exercise authority independently can Panchayati Raj Institutions truly become instruments of democratic decentralisation.

In this sense, women's participation in PRIs is not merely an administrative reform—it is a democratic imperative that strengthens the foundations of inclusive and participatory governance in India.

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