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GENDERED PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR'S PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE RESERVATION AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES.

AUTHORED BY - IMRAN RASHID DAR¹

Abstract

Decades ago, a landmark law promised to give women in Jammu and Kashmir a real voice in their local government by reserving seats for them in village councils, or *Panchayats*. But has this promise been fulfilled? While more women are now in these roles than ever before, this paper asks a tougher question: Do they have **real power**, or are they often just filling a seat? The research shows a starkly mixed picture. In some areas, like the Anantnag district, women leaders are making independent decisions and driving real change for their communities. But in other places, like Ganderbal, many feel they are leaders in name only, acting as "proxies" for their husbands or male relatives who hold the actual influence. They face major hurdles: deep-seated cultural norms that sideline women, a lack of practical training for the job, and little control over the funds needed to make things happen. This paper argues that simply having a seat at the table isn't enough. To move from **tokenism to true empowerment**, we need more than just quotas. We need deep, practical changes to the system to ensure that every woman elected has the support and autonomy she needs to lead effectively.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Gender Reservation, Local Governance, Political Participation, Tokenism, Proxy Representation.

A. Introduction

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a significant turning point in Indian democracy, aiming to extend governance to the grassroots level through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).² A critical aspect of this amendment was the mandate for not less than one-

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² Aamir Iqbal, "Problems and Challenges faced by Panchayati Raj Institutions in the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir," 8 *Shanlax International Journal of Management* 79–84 (2021), at p. 79.

third (33%) reservation of seats for women in PRIs at all levels, a provision that has since been increased to 50% in many states and Union Territories, including some districts within Jammu & Kashmir (J&K).³ In J&K, this reservation was implemented following the 2002 Reservation Act, with women gaining entry into Panchayats around 2001-2002.

Research Question: To what extent has the mandated reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, available in Jammu and Kashmir since 2003, genuinely empowered women representatives, and what specific economic, technical, administrative, and socio-cultural barriers continue to hinder their effective participation?

B. Rationale for Reservations

The implementation of reservations, particularly for women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Indian local governance (PRIs and ULBs) via the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, is grounded in a theoretical commitment to positive discrimination and inclusive governance.⁴

1. Rationale and Justification for Reservation

A. Promoting Representation and Inclusion: The primary rationale is to ensure the political presence of historically excluded or marginalised groups—SCs, STs, and women—in local self-government.⁵ The goal is to correct long-standing social inequalities by mandating representation proportionate to population for SC/STs, and a minimum of one-third of seats for women.⁶ This move shifts democracy towards a "politics of difference," emphasizing the rights of marginalised communities.⁷

B. Necessity in the Absence of Natural Entry: Reservation is viewed as necessary because, without it, very few women, SCs, or STs would be elected, as political parties

³ D. Rajasekhar, R. Manjula and M. Devendra Babu, *Decentralisation in Contemporary India: Status, Issues and the Way Forward*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at p. 9.

⁴ B. S. Baviskar and George Mathew, *Inclusion and Exclusion in Local Governance: Field Studies from Rural India* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2009), at p. 79.

⁵ D. Rajasekhar, *Handbook of Decentralised Governance and Development in India*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at p. 10.

⁶ M. V. Nadkarni, N. Sivanna and Lavanya Suresh, *Decentralised Democracy in India: Gandhi's Vision and Reality*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, 2017), at p. 171.

⁷ B. S. Baviskar and George Mathew, *Inclusion and Exclusion in Local Governance: Field Studies from Rural India* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2009), at p. 79.

are unlikely to nominate them for unreserved seats.⁸ Studies focusing on women's reservations cite the following justifications:

- **Gender Justice:** Women's political presence should be proportional to their societal presence.⁹
- **Women's Interests:** A sizeable presence of women is needed for their interests to be adequately represented.¹⁰
- **Resource Argument:** Women possess specific qualities, such as sincerity, honesty, or the ability to get more work done, that justify their inclusion in politics.¹¹

2. Theories of Impact: Agency vs. Tokenism

A major theoretical debate revolves around whether reservations result in genuine empowerment (agency) or merely symbolic inclusion (tokenism).¹²

A. Agency and Positive Impacts: The promise of reservations is that they will lead to the "deepening of democracy"—a process where formal rights translate into effective and substantive gains.¹³

- **Enhanced Welfare and Policy Outcomes:** Bringing women and SCs into politics may improve their welfare.¹⁴ Female leaders tend to be less corrupt and more efficacious, and reservations for SC/ST may lead to enhanced targeting of resources.¹⁵
- **Political Awareness and Experience:** Reservations have motivated women to contest elections and participate in the political process.¹⁶ Women elected to reserved constituencies gain experience, preparing them for the electoral fray and encouraging them to stand for elections in unreserved constituencies later.¹⁷

⁸ M. V. Nadkarni, N. Sivanna and Lavanya Suresh, *Decentralised Democracy in India: Gandhi's Vision and Reality*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, 2017), at p. 226.

⁹ T. R. Raghunandan, *Decentralisation and Local Governments: The Indian Experience* (Orient Blackswan, India, 2018).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Timothy Besley, Rohini Pande and Vijayendra Rao, "Panchayats and Resource Allocation: A Comparison of the South Indian States" (World Bank, 2005), at p. 34.

¹³ B. S. Baviskar and George Mathew, *Inclusion and Exclusion in Local Governance: Field Studies from Rural India* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2009), at p. 79.

¹⁴ T. R. Raghunandan, *Decentralisation and Local Governments: The Indian Experience* (Orient Blackswan, India, 2018).

¹⁵ D. Rajasekhar, *Handbook of Decentralised Governance and Development in India*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at p. 19.

¹⁶ Kuldeep Mathur, *PANCHAYATI RAJ*, Edition (Oxford, 2013), at p. 83.

¹⁷ Siddhartha Mukerji, "Social Roots of Local Politics: Women Contestants in the Panchayat Elections of Uttar Pradesh (2015)," 28 *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 113–26 (2021), at p. 121.

- **Long-Term Persistence:** Some studies suggest that the positive effects persist beyond the period of reservation, leading to continued qualitative participation.¹⁸

B. Tokenism and Institutional Constraints (Critiques of Reservation): Scholars have identified significant institutional and social obstacles that undermine the effectiveness of reservations, often resulting in tokenism.¹⁹

- **The "Proxy" Phenomenon:** This theory suggests that women representatives serve as stand-ins for male relatives, usually politician husbands, thereby vitiating the basis of reservation. It is openly admitted in some cases that men attend PRI meetings and speak on behalf of their wives. However, the proxy problem is viewed as complex; while some fit the label, others (referred to as "political housewives") develop active roles, even if their position is used by the family to retain the seat.²⁰
- **Elite Capture:** Dominant groups (traditional elites, politically active families, or upper castes) maintain control by actively "selecting" malleable candidates from the reserved categories, especially through the use of financial resources and liquor, ensuring that the new representatives do not challenge the traditional power structure.²¹ This influence can deny citizens the chance to participate in free and fair elections.²²
- **Adverse Impact on Leadership Quality:** Reservations may adversely affect the quality of political leadership due to the election of less-educated and less-experienced leaders, especially when coupled with a lack of competition.²³ If executive positions (like Adhyaksha or Upadhyaksha) are reserved and rotated,

¹⁸ D. Rajasekhar, M. Devendra Babu and R. Manjula, *Decentralised Governance, Development Programmes and Elite Capture* (Springer Singapore, Singapore, 2018), at p. 7.

¹⁹ Mahbub Alam Prodip, "Exclusion Through Inclusion: Institutional Constraints on Women's Political Empowerment in India and Bangladesh," 184 *World Affairs* 213–44 (2021), at p. 234.

²⁰ T. R. Raghunandan, *Decentralisation and Local Governments: The Indian Experience* (Orient Blackswan, India, 2018); Siddhartha Mukerji, "Social Roots of Local Politics: Women Contestants in the Panchayat Elections of Uttar Pradesh (2015)," 28 *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 113–26 (2021), at p. 122.

²¹ B. S. Baviskar and George Mathew, *Inclusion and Exclusion in Local Governance: Field Studies from Rural India* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2009), at p. 102; Madhusudan Bandi, "Samras in gram panchayats of Gujarat: a threat to the idea of democracy?," 23 *Journal of Social and Economic Development* 181–98 (2021), at p. 196.

²² D. Rajasekhar, *Handbook of Decentralised Governance and Development in India*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at p. 178.

²³ *Ibid.*, , at p. 199.

it might impose leaders who are ill-equipped, making them puppets in the hands of vested interests and bureaucrats due to their ignorance and inexperience.²⁴

- **Bureaucratic Dominance:** Newly elected women members may be more reluctant to deal with state bureaucrats than elected men. Bureaucratic officers often dominate elected representatives due to their higher education, permanent jobs, and administrative expertise.²⁵

The existence of reservations ensures the physical inclusion of disadvantaged communities in political space (over 60 per cent of political space in PRIs is held by SCs, STs, OBCs, and women in some areas). However, the simultaneous operation of rotation, elite capture, and weak party support means that this inclusion is often "through inclusion," failing to translate fully into political empowerment and sustained leadership.

C. The Impact of Reservation

The introduction of the 33% (and subsequently 50% in some areas) reservation for women has dramatically increased their numerical representation in PRIs across India, including J&K.²⁶ In J&K, early panchayat elections in 2001-2002 showed a limited female presence, but the implementation of the 2002 Reservation Act significantly increased the number of women elected in the 2011 elections.²⁷ By 2020 DDC elections and Halqa Panchayat elections, female Sarpanches in the Kashmir division constituted 31.85%, and 35.19% in the Jammu division, with districts like Anantnag (43.5%) and Bandipora (34.8%) exceeding the 33% mandate.²⁸

While impressive in numbers, the translation of this descriptive representation into genuine, effective political participation and empowerment remains a complex challenge. Many studies, including those in J&K, reveal that despite increased presence, women's active participation in decision-making and influence over the power structure are often limited.²⁹ The expectation

²⁴ Vijay V. Bengeri, *Panchayat Raj in India* (Nudi Pusthaka, Bangalore, 2014), at p. 104.

²⁵ Mahbub Alam Prodip, "Exclusion Through Inclusion: Institutional Constraints on Women's Political Empowerment in India and Bangladesh," 184 *World Affairs* 213-44 (2021), at p. 221.

²⁶ D. Rajasekhar, *Handbook of Decentralised Governance and Development in India*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at p. 199.

²⁷ Tosib Alam et al., "Efficiency and Challenges of Women Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of Kashmir Valley," 8 *Sexuality, Gender & Policy* e70007 (2025), at p. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, , at p. 6.

²⁹ Bhaskar Kumar Kakati, "Gaon Panchayat, Tribal Women and Their Participation: A Case of Tiwas of Assam," 68 *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 285-98 (2022), at p. 289; Mithilesh Kumar Jha and Kamal Nayan Choubey, *Indian Politics and Political Processes: Ideas, Institutions and Practices*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2023), at p. 399; B. S. Baviskar and George Mathew, *Inclusion and Exclusion in Local Governance:*

that numerical presence would automatically lead to substantive changes in policy, particularly for women's issues, is often unmet.³⁰

Awareness Levels and Performance of Elected Women Panchayat Members

Awareness and performance among elected women representatives (EWRs) in J&K show a notable disparity between districts. In Anantnag, 95.2% of EWRs reported acting independently, 80.5% believed they were regarded as equals to men, and 100% attended Panchayat meetings regularly. They demonstrated active involvement in diverse roles, achieving successes in infrastructure development (100% in roads and streetlights), public services like water and drainage facilities (90.4%), and administering the Public Distribution System (95.2%). A high percentage (71.4%) also took measures to protect the environment.³¹ Conversely, in Ganderbal, EWRs exhibited lower awareness and involvement. Only 37.5% were familiar with the election process, and a substantial 71.4% were unaware of the 33% reservation for women in Panchayats. None were aware of the 2019 Reorganization Act. While 68.7% felt they acted independently, 31.2% perceived themselves as proxies, and 62.5% believed they were not considered equal to men. Their achievements were also lower in some areas, with only 62.5% contributing to roads/streetlights, 43.7% in water/drainage, and 37.5% administering PDS effectively.³²

Generally, across India, women leaders have demonstrated a capacity to make a difference. Studies by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) in West Bengal and Rajasthan showed that women pradhans invested more in public goods relevant to women's needs, such as drinking water and roads.³³ However, awareness levels of schemes and participation in implementation can be low.³⁴

Field Studies from Rural India (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2009), at p. 74; Gayadhar Malik and Smita Nayak, "Participatory Democracy of Women in Rural India: A Field-based Experience of Palli Sabha from Odisha," 17 *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 158–69 (2025), at p. 162.

³⁰ Siddhartha Mukerji, "Social Roots of Local Politics: Women Contestants in the Panchayat Elections of Uttar Pradesh (2015)," 28 *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 113–26 (2021), at p. 117.

³¹ Tosib Alam et al., "Efficiency and Challenges of Women Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of Kashmir Valley," 8 *Sexuality, Gender & Policy* e70007 (2025), at p. 8.

³² *Ibid.*, , at p. 8.

³³ D. Rajasekhar, *Handbook of Decentralised Governance and Development in India*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at p. 156; D. Rajasekhar, M. Devendra Babu and R. Manjula, *Decentralised Governance, Development Programmes and Elite Capture* (Springer Singapore, Singapore, 2018), at p. 6.

³⁴ D. Rajasekhar, R. Manjula and M. Devendra Babu, *Decentralisation in Contemporary India: Status, Issues and the Way Forward*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at pp. xv, 16.

Identification and Ranking of Problems Faced by Women Sarpanches

The challenges faced by women representatives are multi-faceted and consistently highlighted across various sources. These can be grouped and generally ranked by their pervasiveness and impact:

- 1. Socio-cultural Barriers (High Impact/Pervasive):** Patriarchal societal norms are a fundamental obstacle.³⁵ Women are less mobile, burdened by domestic responsibilities, and face historical prejudices.³⁶ They are often reluctant or shy to speak in public meetings, especially before men or traditional elders, and their voices may not be taken seriously.³⁷ In J&K, religious orthodoxy and societal norms are specifically cited as obstructing political participation.³⁸
- 2. Lack of Capacity, Knowledge, and Training (High Impact/Pervasive):** EWRs often suffer from illiteracy, lack of education, inexperience, and poor understanding of Panchayat laws, procedures, functions, and resources. This hinders their ability to function effectively, assert influence, and lead.³⁹
- 3. Proxy Representation ("Sarpanch-pati" phenomenon) (High Impact/Specific Manifestation):** A very common problem where women representatives are de facto replaced by their husbands or male relatives who attend meetings, take decisions, and wield actual power.⁴⁰ In J&K's Ganderbal, 31.2% of EWRs felt they acted as proxies.⁴¹
- 4. Lack of Funds and Financial Autonomy (Systemic/High Impact):** PRIs, including those in J&K, often lack sufficient funds and financial autonomy to discharge their

³⁵ M. V. Nadkarni, N. Sivanna and Lavanya Suresh, *Decentralised Democracy in India: Gandhi's Vision and Reality*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, 2017), at p. 240; Radhika Kumar, "Dalit Women Panchayat Members in Haryana: Gender, Caste and Political Representation," 41 *South Asia Research* 203–19 (2021), at p. 208.

³⁶ T. R. Raghunandan, *Decentralisation and Local Governments: The Indian Experience* (Orient Blackswan, India, 2018).

³⁷ Yatindra Singh Sisodia, Ashish Bhatt, and Tapas Kumar Dalapati, *Two Decades of Panchayat Raj in India: Experiences, Issues, Challenges and Opportunities* (Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2018), at p. 249; Bhaskar Kumar Kakati, "Gaon Panchayat, Tribal Women and Their Participation: A Case of Tiwas of Assam," 68 *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 285–98 (2022), at p. 153; Snehlata Panda, "Competency Framework for Tribal Women Panchayat Members," 58 *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 532–43 (2012), at p. 538.

³⁸ Tosib Alam et al., "Efficiency and Challenges of Women Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of Kashmir Valley," 8 *Sexuality, Gender & Policy* e70007 (2025), at p. 1.

³⁹ D. Rajasekhar, R. Manjula and M. Devendra Babu, *Decentralisation in Contemporary India: Status, Issues and the Way Forward*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at p. 216; Yatindra Singh Sisodia, Ashish Bhatt, and Tapas Kumar Dalapati, *Two Decades of Panchayat Raj in India: Experiences, Issues, Challenges and Opportunities* (Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2018), at p. 231.

⁴⁰ Mithilesh Kumar Jha and Kamal Nayan Choubey, *Indian Politics and Political Processes: Ideas, Institutions and Practices*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2023), at p. 404; M. V. Nadkarni, N. Sivanna and Lavanya Suresh, *Decentralised Democracy in India: Gandhi's Vision and Reality*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, 2017), at p. 317.

⁴¹ Tosib Alam et al., "Efficiency and Challenges of Women Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of Kashmir Valley," 8 *Sexuality, Gender & Policy* e70007 (2025), at p. 7.

responsibilities effectively. This limits their ability to implement development plans prepared at the village level, reducing motivation and autonomy.⁴²

5. Bureaucratic Resistance and Lack of Political Will (Systemic): State governments and bureaucracy are often reluctant to genuinely devolve powers, functions, and funds to PRIs. This political motivation, rather than commitment to devolution, often sidelines crucial aspects of decentralisation in J&K. The rotation system of reserved seats also limits EWRs' ability to build a constituency or gain experience, as they may not contest from the same seat again.⁴³

6. Political Violence and Instability: In J&K, militancy and political instability have historically paralysed the development process and made people reluctant to participate in elections, especially in the Kashmir Valley.⁴⁴ The fear of being targeted by militants has created significant deterrence.⁴⁵ While political violence is a notable issue in Anantnag, Ganderbal representatives face different constraints related to high poverty rates and inexperience.⁴⁶

Assessment of Government Initiatives

The primary government initiative is the **mandatory reservation policy** itself, which has successfully brought a large number of women into political office. This is seen as a "landmark piece of legislation".⁴⁷

However, the implementation of the 73rd Amendment has been "plagued by many problems and shortcomings". State governments have responded with **capacity building initiatives**, often designating State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs) to conduct centralised

⁴² Bhaskar Kumar Kakati, "Gaon Panchayat, Tribal Women and Their Participation: A Case of Tiwas of Assam," 68 *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 285–98 (2022), at p. 289; Aamir Iqbal, "Problems and Challenges faced by Panchayati Raj Institutions in the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir," 8 *Shanlax International Journal of Management* 79–84 (2021), at p. 82.

⁴³ Mahbub Alam Prodip, "Exclusion Through Inclusion: Institutional Constraints on Women's Political Empowerment in India and Bangladesh," 184 *World Affairs* 213–44 (2021), at p. 221; Manoranjan Mohanty et al., *Grass-Roots Democracy in India and China: The Right to Participate* (SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, B-42, Panchsheel Enclave, New Delhi 110 017 India, 2007), at p. 302.

⁴⁴ Tosib Alam et al., "Efficiency and Challenges of Women Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of Kashmir Valley," 8 *Sexuality, Gender & Policy* e70007 (2025), at p. 5.

⁴⁵ Farooq Ahmad Waza and Jos Chathukulam, "Jammu and Kashmir on the Path of Empowering Grassroots Democracy," 70 *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 386–97 (2024), at p. 388.

⁴⁶ Tosib Alam et al., "Efficiency and Challenges of Women Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of Kashmir Valley," 8 *Sexuality, Gender & Policy* e70007 (2025), at p. 1.

⁴⁷ T. R. Raghunandan, *Decentralisation and Local Governments: The Indian Experience* (Orient Blackswan, India, 2018).

training.⁴⁸ NGOs and international organisations also contribute to this. In J&K, enhanced training programs and educational support are recommended. Karnataka, for example, has historical examples of innovative orientation programmes for women.⁴⁹

Other initiatives include:

- **Constitutional provisions for sound finances:** Articles 243I and 243Y of the Constitution require local self-government bodies to have "sound finances," and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has urged states to release funds.⁵⁰
- **Decentralised planning:** Panchayats are made responsible for planning and executing plans for economic development and social justice based on the 11th and 12th schedules.⁵¹
- **Legal amendments:** Some states like Uttar Pradesh have introduced laws to prohibit husbands of female PRI representatives from being in the same room during meetings to counter proxy representation.

Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of capacity building has remained weak due to inconsistent state support, limited decentralisation, and a focus on quantitative rather than qualitative training.⁵²

D. Achieving Substantive Empowerment

The goal of reservations, particularly the mandatory one-third of seats and chairpersons reserved for women in local bodies in India (PRIs/ULBs), is to achieve not just numerical presence, but substantive political empowerment. Empowerment involves expanding women's ability to participate in collective decision-making, leading to better choice and agency.

However, the studies consistently note that representation alone is insufficient, and women often remain constrained by social, political, and institutional barriers, resulting in a gap between formal inclusion and real empowerment.

⁴⁸ D. Rajasekhar, *Handbook of Decentralised Governance and Development in India*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at p. 15.

⁴⁹ T. R. Raghunandan, *Decentralisation and Local Governments: The Indian Experience* (Orient Blackswan, India, 2018).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Atul Sarma and Debabani Chakravarty, *Integrating the Third Tier in the Indian Federal System* (Springer Singapore, Singapore, 2018), at p. 76.

⁵² D. Rajasekhar, *Handbook of Decentralised Governance and Development in India*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at p. 14.

1. Recommendations for Institutional and Legal Reforms

To ensure the effectiveness of reservations and move beyond tokenism, specific structural changes are required in the design and implementation of the quota system:

a. *Modifying the Reservation and Tenure System*

- **Extend the Rotation Term:** The mandatory rotation of reserved seats every term (typically five years) is a major institutional weakness. Rotation prevents women from applying acquired experience, limits their efficiency, and discourages them from investing in their constituencies since they know they cannot be re-elected there.⁵³ Legislatures should allow for **at least two consecutive terms** or even 10 to 15 years of continued opportunity in the same seat to nurture assertiveness and independence.⁵⁴
- **Ensure Accountability:** Reservation should be made legally with the involvement of the local people, not dictated by political pressure. Furthermore, women representatives should be made accountable for development programmes for at least two terms in continuation.⁵⁵

b. *Safeguarding Women Leaders Against Political Maneuvering*

- **Curb No-Confidence Motions:** The abuse of no-confidence motions is rampant, often used to unseat women, Dalits, and Tribals elected on reserved seats.⁵⁶ State governments should be advised to ensure that women Sarpanches cannot be removed for **at least one and a half years** by a no-confidence motion.⁵⁷
- **Mandate Female Replacement:** If a no-confidence vote is passed, the replacing incumbent must also be a woman from the same social group as the earlier incumbent, ensuring continuity of representation (as done in Kerala and Himachal Pradesh).⁵⁸
- **Repeal Restrictive Eligibility Criteria:** States should revisit and repeal the **two-child norm** which prevents those with more than two children from holding office. This law disproportionately impacts poor, SC, ST, Muslim, and

⁵³ M. V. Nadkarni, N. Sivanna and Lavanya Suresh, *Decentralised Democracy in India: Gandhi's Vision and Reality*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, 2017), at p. 158.

⁵⁴ Yatindra Singh Sisodia, Ashish Bhatt, and Tapas Kumar Dalapati, *Two Decades of Panchayat Raj in India: Experiences, Issues, Challenges and Opportunities* (Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2018), at p. 251.

⁵⁵ Srivastava K, *Decentralized Governance and Panchayati Raj* (Kalpaz Publications, Delhi, 2011), at p. 238.

⁵⁶ M. V. Nadkarni, N. Sivanna and Lavanya Suresh, *Decentralised Democracy in India: Gandhi's Vision and Reality*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, 2017), at p. 239.

⁵⁷ Srivastava K, *Decentralized Governance and Panchayati Raj* (Kalpaz Publications, Delhi, 2011), at p. 40.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

tribal women, encouraging the use of "puppet candidates" and potentially reducing women's agency.⁵⁹

c. *Increasing Formal Participation Mandates*

- **Enforce Attendance and Voice:** Measures are needed to ensure the **physical presence** of women representatives at every level, without their husbands (*Pati*).⁶⁰ The law should make attendance of all women mandatory in meetings from Gram Panchayat to Zilla Parishad.⁶¹
- **Gram Sabha Quorum:** To ensure crucial women's participation in Gram Sabhas (the fulcrum of the system), a **sub-quorum of female attendance** should be built into the overall quorum requirement.⁶²

2. Recommendations for Capacity Building and Training

A major constraint is the lack of training, education, and experience among elected women representatives (EWRs), particularly when compared to their male counterparts and administrative officials.

- **Implement Targeted and Frequent Training:** Frequent and robust training programmes and workshops must be organised at all tiers of the PRI system.⁶³ These training programs should be tailored to the specific needs of EWRs, which are often sidelined in general training sessions.⁶⁴
- **Core Curriculum:** Training must cover essential knowledge areas:
 - Governance and Administration:** Panchayat functions, rules, legal frameworks, and recent legislative changes.
 - Financial Literacy:** Understanding budget jargon, the budget process, the monetary impact of requirements raised.
 - Political and Soft Skills:** Training should emphasize compulsory participation for speaking and expressing views, assertiveness training, political skill building, lobbying ability, and communication skills.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Dr. Ritesh Dwivedi and Krishna Mohan Poddar, "Functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India: A Status Paper," 3 *Adhyayan: A Journal of Management Sciences* (2013), at p. 20.

⁶¹ Yatindra Singh Sisodia, Ashish Bhatt, and Tapas Kumar Dalapati, *Two Decades of Panchayat Raj in India: Experiences, Issues, Challenges and Opportunities* (Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2018), at p. 230.

⁶² T. R. Raghunandan, *Decentralisation and Local Governments: The Indian Experience* (Orient Blackswan, India, 2018).

⁶³ Tosib Alam et al., "Efficiency and Challenges of Women Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of Kashmir Valley," 8 *Sexuality, Gender & Policy* e70007 (2025), at p. 9.

⁶⁴ Yatindra Singh Sisodia, Ashish Bhatt, and Tapas Kumar Dalapati, *Two Decades of Panchayat Raj in India: Experiences, Issues, Challenges and Opportunities* (Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2018), at p. 212.

Component	Focus Area	Core Objectives & Content	Addressing Proxyism/Intimidation
I. Foundational Governance & Legal Literacy	Rule of Law and Mandates	Understand Panchayat functions, structure, rules, and the legal framework of decentralisation. Clarify roles and responsibilities (Activity Mapping).	Teaches EWRs their formal powers, reducing dependence on officials and male relatives to interpret rules. Provides the knowledge to challenge bureaucratic delays or misdirection.
II. Financial Autonomy and Budgeting	Financial Literacy and Control	Training in budget jargon, formulation, execution, and revenue analysis. How to identify funding sources and manage accounts to prevent misuse.	Direct protection against fraud (e.g., signing blank cheques). Empowers EWRs to take initiative on financial matters. Financial management staff training should be mandatory.
III. Political and Assertiveness Training (Agency Building)	Challenging Patriarchy and Proxyism	Focus on attitudinal and behaviour modification , assertiveness, and effective communication skills. Techniques for compulsory participation, speaking, and expressing views. Development of personality and capability to act in new ways.	Explicitly addresses <i>Sarpanch Pati</i> syndrome. Training should include content that discourages husbands from escorting their wives to meetings. Builds self-confidence and challenges the assumption of women's passivity.
IV. Strategic and Problem-Solving Skills	Performance and Collective Action	Capacity to provide solutions to ongoing problems and capability to act in new ways to accomplish panchayat	Shifts focus from being a mere implementation agent to being a problem solver/leader. Encourages the formation and use of

		goals. Training on project formulation and implementation. Encouraging the leveraging of Women's Component Plans (WCPs) for strategic needs.	women's networks for collective mobilisation and advocacy.
V. Experiential Learning and Support	Exposure and Mentorship	Organise exposure trips (e.g., visits to state legislature) to build confidence and political capital. Provide post-training support, follow-up services, and mentorship from senior colleagues.	The empowering experience of seeing the locus of state power helps women assert independence. Helps overcome initial fear and lack of interest.

- **Alternative Training Methods:** Use a multi-media model (audio-video language) to train elected members and staff, especially representatives of weaker sections and women.
- **Educational Support:** Provide educational support, such as scholarships, skill development courses, and adult education programs, to improve qualifications (particularly addressing high illiteracy among EWRs). Tribal women, who are often handicapped by illiteracy, require training developed from scratch, incorporating local knowledge and cultural context.⁶⁵

3. Recommendations for Addressing Socio-Cultural and Political Barriers

Socio-cultural constraints, particularly patriarchy and the masculine model of politics, remain major hurdles, leading to phenomena like "proxy women" and exclusion from decision-making.

- **Eliminate Proxyism and Male Domination:** The "proxy rule" (e.g., *Sarpanch Pati* or *Pradhan Pati*) defeats the purpose of empowerment.

⁶⁵ D. Rajasekhar, R. Manjula and M. Devendra Babu, *Decentralisation in Contemporary India: Status, Issues and the Way Forward*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at p. 216.

- Conduct awareness campaigns to combat the *Pati-Representative* problem.
- A law can prohibit husbands of female representatives from being present in the same room when official PRI meetings are held.
- **Shift Patriarchal Attitudes:** Attitudinal change in both men and women is essential. The existing feudal patriarchal structure must be dismantled. Males should be encouraged to be congenial to females in all development work, helping each other instead of confronting ego issues.⁶⁶
- **Create Women-Only Forums:** Provision may be made that meetings of the Gram Sabha be preceded by meetings of the **Mahila Sabha**, comprising all adult women voters of the village panchayat, to ensure that gender concerns and preferences are fully reflected in the Gram Sabha proceedings.⁶⁷
- **Promote an Inclusive Environment:** Meetings should be held at times and places convenient for women members (e.g., moving meetings from GP offices to Anganwadi centres or schools). Political parties and officials must be sensitized to gender issues and accept the power of the new women representatives.⁶⁸

4. Recommendations for Administrative and Financial Autonomy

The effectiveness of EWRs is limited by structural constraints, including inadequate devolution of power and lack of financial resources.

- **Ensure Full Devolution:** States must accelerate the devolution and decentralization of the 29 functions (subjects) under the Eleventh Schedule to PRIs, along with the necessary finances and functionaries.
- **Increase Financial Autonomy:** Greater financial autonomy must be provided to panchayats, tackling the reality that many local bodies are short of funds.
- **Improve Gender Budgeting:** The design of gender-sensitive budgeting should be improved to meet the **strategic needs** (addressing underlying power imbalances) rather than focusing solely on **practical needs** (e.g., routine welfare) of women.⁶⁹ WCP (Women Component Plan) programmes should directly benefit women to

⁶⁶ Srivastava K, *Decentralized Governance and Panchayati Raj* (Kalpaz Publications, Delhi, 2011), at p. 238.

⁶⁷ Dr. Ritesh Dwivedi and Krishna Mohan Poddar, "Functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India: A Status Paper," 3 *Adhyayan: A Journal of Management Sciences* (2013), at p. 16.

⁶⁸ B. S. Baviskar and George Mathew, *Inclusion and Exclusion in Local Governance: Field Studies from Rural India* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2009), at p. 203.

⁶⁹ Manoranjan Mohanty et al., *Grass-Roots Democracy in India and China: The Right to Participate* (SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, B-42, Panchsheel Enclave, New Delhi 110 017 India, 2007), at p. 303.

ensure strategic empowerment. A survey among women should be conducted to identify real development hindrances.⁷⁰

- **Reduce Bureaucratic Dominance:** The power of state line departments must be reduced. Local bodies must develop their own gender-sensitive expertise so they can chart their own path and reduce reliance on often gender-insensitive officials.⁷¹

5. Recommendations for Collective Action and Advocacy

Sustained empowerment requires moving from individual agency to collective political action.

- **Support Women's Networks:** Proactively support the formation and strengthening of networks and associations of elected women representatives (EWRs). Networks promote solidarity, experience sharing (peer learning), capacity building, and provide a platform for advocacy and political bargaining.⁷²
- **Engage with Feminist Discourse:** Initiatives promoting EWR networks must build ties and maintain dialogue with the feminist movement. Anchoring this work in feminist discourse can qualitatively improve the efficacy of the strategy and ensure that advocacy moves beyond "apolitical" governance issues toward effective political action.⁷³
- **Leverage Local Movements:** Support local associations, neighborhood groups, and community-led initiatives (like Self-Help Groups (SHGs) or the Meira Paibi movement) which have strong links at the grassroots, utilizing them to promote the voice and engagement of socially excluded citizens.⁷⁴

E. Conclusion

Bringing women into local politics in Jammu and Kashmir was a revolutionary idea. For the first time, a law guaranteed them a place in the halls of local power. And on paper, it worked—thousands of women took office. But as we've seen, the story doesn't end there.

The reality for many of these elected women is a daily struggle against a system that wasn't

⁷⁰ D. Rajasekhar, R. Manjula and M. Devendra Babu, *Decentralisation in Contemporary India: Status, Issues and the Way Forward*, 1st ed. (Routledge India, London, 2021), at p. 62.

⁷¹ T. R. Raghunandan, *Decentralisation and Local Governments: The Indian Experience* (Orient Blackswan, India, 2018).

⁷² Bhaskar Kumar Kakati, "Gaon Panchayat, Tribal Women and Their Participation: A Case of Tiwas of Assam," *68 Indian Journal of Public Administration* 285–98 (2022), at p. 53.

⁷³ T. R. Raghunandan, *Decentralisation and Local Governments: The Indian Experience* (Orient Blackswan, India, 2018).

⁷⁴ Manoranjan Mohanty et al., *Grass-Roots Democracy in India and China: The Right to Participate* (SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, B-42, Panchsheel Enclave, New Delhi 110 017 India, 2007), at p. 24.

built for them. They often face the unofficial "Sarpanch-pati" system, where husbands run the show from behind the scenes. They navigate bureaucracies that can be dismissive and wrestle with budgets they have little real control over. The inspiring progress in places like Anantnag shows what's possible when women are empowered to lead independently, but the challenges seen in Ganderbal reveal how far there is still to go.

This isn't just a policy issue; it's about the future of democracy in the region. If these local governments are to be truly effective, they must be powered by all their members, not just half. The solutions we've discussed—like **better, more practical training, laws to stop the 'proxy' system, and giving women longer terms to grow into their roles**—are crucial next steps. The goal is simple but profound: to make sure that a woman's seat at the table comes with a voice that is heard, respected, and empowered to make a real difference for her community.

