



Political Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of Jorhat District, Assam

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Abstract—The decentralization of governance through the Panchayati Raj system has opened new avenues for women’s political participation in India. This article examines the extent and nature of women’s participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Jorhat district of Assam. It argues that although constitutional provisions have ensured increased representation, effective participation remains constrained by socio-economic and cultural barriers. Based on quantitative and secondary data, the study highlights both the achievements and limitations of women’s engagement in grassroots democracy.

Keywords: Women, Political Participation, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Jorhat, Assam, Empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others” (Mahatma Gandhi, as cited in Brown, 1991).

Political participation is a fundamental component of democratic governance, enabling citizens to influence decision-making processes and public policy. In India, the establishment of the Panchayati Raj system marked a significant step toward decentralization and grassroots democracy. The enactment of the 73rd constitutional amendment act (1992) institutionalized local self-government and mandated the reservation of seats for women, thereby promoting gender inclusivity in political institutions.

The inclusion of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represents a critical shift toward participatory democracy and social equity. Beyond numerical representation, women’s political participation is closely linked to empowerment, autonomy, and the transformation of traditional gender roles. By engaging in governance, women contribute to more inclusive policy outcomes, particularly in areas such as health, education, and social welfare.

In Assam, particularly in Jorhat district, women’s representation in PRIs has increased substantially following the implementation of reservation policies. However the extent to which this representation translates into meaningful participation and leadership remains an important area of inquiry. This study seeks to examine the nature and dynamics of women’s political participation in PRIs in Jorhat district, with a focus on identifying both the opportunities for empowerment and the persistent barriers within the framework of decentralized governance.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to:

- Analyze the level of political participation of women in PRIs in Jorhat district.
- Examine their role in decision-making processes.
- Identify socio-economic and institutional barriers.
- Assess the implications for women’s empowerment.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a quantitative and descriptive approach. Data is derived from Interviews, observation of Panchayat meetings, Secondary sources such as government reports, academic journals, and policy documents.

III.I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in theories of participatory democracy and gender empowerment. Political participation is understood not merely as representation but as active involvement in governance, decision-making, and policy implementation.

III.II. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS: AN OVERVIEW

The introduction of the Panchayati Raj system through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 marked a transformative phase in India's democratic decentralization by ensuring the inclusion of marginalized groups, particularly women, in local governance. The provision of reservation for women, initially one-third and later extended to 50% in several states has significantly increased their numerical representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This policy intervention has enabled millions of women, especially from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds, to enter the political sphere for the first time.

One of the most notable outcomes of this reform has been the feminization of grassroots politics, where women now constitute a substantial proportion of elected representatives in PRIs across India. Their presence has contributed to a shift in governance priorities, with greater emphasis on issues such as public health, sanitation, drinking water, education, and welfare programs targeting women and children. Studies suggest that women representatives often demonstrate higher levels of responsiveness to community needs and adopt more inclusive approaches to development (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

However, despite this progress, effective participation remains uneven due to persistent socio-cultural and economic barriers, including patriarchal norms, limited access to education, and the prevalence of proxy representation, where male family members influence or control decisions. Consequently, while the reservation policy has facilitated entry into political spaces, the transformation of this representation into meaningful and autonomous participation continues to depend on factors such as capacity building, awareness, and institutional support, making women's empowerment in PRIs an ongoing and evolving process.

III.III. SOCIO- POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN JORHAT DISTRICT

In Jorhat district of Assam, women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) reflects a complex interplay of socio-economic conditions, educational levels, and local political practices, shaping both the scope and effectiveness of their engagement in grassroots governance. Field-based observations from Gaon Panchayats such as Titabor and Mariyani areas indicate that women representatives actively participate in meetings and local development initiatives, particularly in sectors like sanitation drives, drinking water management, and the implementation of welfare schemes such as PMAY-G and ICDS services. In several cases, women ward members have taken leadership roles in mobilizing self-help groups (SHGs) and promoting community awareness on health and education, demonstrating their growing confidence and agency in public affairs. However, the depth of their participation varies significantly; women with higher education and prior exposure to social or political activities tend to contribute more effectively to discussions and decision-making, while others rely on support from family members or local officials due to limited administrative knowledge. Instances of proxy participation are still observed, especially among first-time representatives, where male relatives informally influence governance. These developments suggest a gradual but meaningful transition from symbolic representation to active participation, although continued efforts in capacity building, training, and institutional support remain essential to strengthen women's autonomy and effectiveness in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

IV. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study are based on field-level observations and a sample survey conducted among elected women representatives in selected Gaon panchayats of Jorhat district. The analysis focuses on their socio-economic background and level of participation on their socio-economic background and level of participation in PRIs.

IV.I. SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The socio-economic characteristics of women representatives play a crucial role in determining their level of participation and effectiveness in governance. As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents belong to the age group of 31-40 years(40%) indicating that relatively young and middle-aged women are more actively involved in local governance. In terms of education, most respondents have secondary level education (40%), while only a small proportion (20%) possess higher education. This variation in educational attainment significantly influences their confidence and administrative capabilities.

Table 1
Socio-Economic Profile of Women Representatives in Jorhat District (N=15)

Variables	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4
Age Group	21-30: 3 (20%)	31-40: 6 (40%)	41-50: 4(27%)	50+: 2 (13%)
Education	Primary: 3 (20%)	Secondary: 6(40%)	HS: 3 (20%)	Graduate+: 3(20%)
Occupation	Homemaker: 8(53%)	Agriculture: 4 (27%)	Business: 2(13%)	Others: 1 (7%)

IV.II. LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYAT ACTIVITIES

Women’s participation in Panchayat activities varies across different dimensions such as meeting attendance, involvement in decision-making, and involvement in decision-making, and implementation of development schemes. The data collected from 15 respondents indicate varying degrees of engagement in institutional processes.

Table 2
Level of Participation of Women Representatives in Panchayat Activities (N=15)

Type of Participation	Highly Active	Moderately Active	Low Participation
Attendance in meetings	9 (60%)	4 (27%)	2 (13%)
Involvement in decision-making	5 (33%)	6 (40%)	4 (27%)
Implementation of schemes	7 (47%)	5 (33%)	3 (20%)

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that women’s political participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Jorhat district represents a transitional phase between symbolic inclusion and substantive empowerment, where increased numerical representation has not uniformly translated into effective decision-making authority. While the reservation policy under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act,1992 has successfully facilitated women’s entry into local governance, their actual influence remains shaped by intersecting factors such as education, economic independence, social norms, and institutional

support. The study reveals that women representatives who possess higher levels of education and prior exposure to community activities are more likely to participate actively in deliberations and assert leadership, whereas others often face constraints due to limited awareness and reliance on male family members, reflecting the persistence of proxy representation. At the same time, the involvement of women in welfare-oriented sectors such as health, sanitation, and education demonstrates their potential to make governance more inclusive and responsive to community needs. Importantly, the gradual emergence of confident women leaders in Jorhat suggests that political participation is contributing to shifts in traditional gender roles and enhancing women's agency over time. However, the uneven nature of this progress highlights the need for sustained capacity-building initiatives, institutional training, and socio-economic empowerment measures to bridge the gap between formal representation and meaningful participation, thereby strengthening the overall effectiveness of decentralized democratic governance.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study of women's political participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Jorhat district highlights a significant transformation in grassroots democracy, where constitutional provisions such as the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 have successfully ensured increased representation of women in local governance. This inclusion has provided rural women with opportunities to engage in public decision-making, enhance their leadership capabilities and contribute to community development, particularly in areas related to health, education, and social welfare. However, the findings also reveal that representation alone does not guarantee effective participation, as socio-cultural constraints, economic dependency, limited education, and the persistence of proxy representation continue to hinder women's autonomy and influence within institutional frameworks.

Despite these challenges, the gradual emergence of confident and active women leaders in Jorhat indicates a positive shift toward substantive participation and empowerment. Women's involvement in PRIs is not only reshaping local governance but also contributing to broader social change by challenging traditional gender norms and increasing awareness of rights and responsibilities. In conclusion, while the journey from political inclusion to genuine empowerment is still evolving, the growing participation of women in PRIs represents a crucial step toward achieving inclusive, participatory, and gender-sensitive democratic governance in rural India.

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