

Women's participation through Panchayati Raj Institution: a case study of proxy and panchayat in Kashmir

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Abstract:

The political involvement of women in India has risen considerably following the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which required reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Nevertheless, in various areas, such as the Kashmir Valley, the occurrence of proxy representation—where male relatives wield authority on behalf of chosen women—still restricts true empowerment. This study investigates women's involvement in PRIs in Kashmir, exploring structural constraints, socio-cultural obstacles, and the continued existence of proxy leadership. The research also emphasizes new instances of active involvement where women confront patriarchal standards and claim their decision-making autonomy.

Keywords: women empowerment, proxy, Panchayati Raj Institution, women participation.

Introduction

In India, local self-governance is essential to democratic decentralization. In an attempt to increase women's political representation and strengthen grassroots government, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) established reservations for women and established a three-tier Panchayati Raj system. A crucial component of India's democratic decentralization is the involvement of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). In an attempt to improve grassroots administration, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) increased women's representation through mandated reservations (Government of India, 1992). However, because of the region's distinct political history and the inconsistent application of the Jammu & Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989, the development of PRIs in Jammu & Kashmir took a different course (Government of Jammu & Kashmir, 1989).

According to various studies, women in J&K continue to confront obstacles like sexism, low awareness, security concerns, and a lack of institutional support despite their increased numerical representation (Begum & Bukhari, 2018; Kumar, 2015). Although PRIs in Kashmir were technically aligned with national frameworks following the 2019 reorganization, women's actual participation is still restricted by the pervasive practice of proxy leadership (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2019; Lone, Ganie, & Shukla, 2016). Assessing the real empowerment of women in the area at the grassroots level requires an understanding of these obstacles.

The dynamics of women's involvement in PRIs in Kashmir are examined in this research, with a particular emphasis on the practice of proxy leadership and how it influences governance outcomes. This paper explores the dynamics of women's participation in PRIs in Kashmir with a special focus on the practice of *proxy leadership*, examining why it persists and how it shapes governance outcomes.

Panchayati Raj Institutions: Historical Development and Composition

The development of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kashmir is a reflection of the intricate interactions between administrative reforms, political shifts, and sociocultural factors that set the area apart from the rest of India. Due to its unique constitutional status before 2019, Jammu & Kashmir took a different path even though the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) established the groundwork for decentralized governance throughout India. Because of this, PRIs' growth, operations, and level of democracy in Kashmir have traditionally deviated from national trends, which has an impact on women's political engagement as well as institutional performance.

The Jammu & Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 established the Panchayati Raj system in the region. However, because of erratic elections, scant administrative assistance, and ongoing political unrest, the institutions remained weak for decades. The development of grassroots democracy was further postponed during times of conflict and security concerns. Low voter turnout, insufficient training for elected officials, and ongoing law-and-order issues limited the results of the Panchayat elections in 2001 and 2011, which were important attempts to resurrect local governance after protracted periods. Following the repeal of Article 370 in August 2019, J&K underwent a significant change, becoming a Union Territory instead of a state. Stronger administrative alignment with central policies was made possible by the merger of the region's local governance framework with the national PRI organization as a result of this political shift. It also marked a significant turning point for local-level government in the area by facilitating increased financial devolution through nationally funded programs and improved oversight by central authorities. The number of women in local government in Kashmir expanded dramatically with the implementation of a **33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions**. Even in distant and conflict-sensitive districts, the number of women running for and winning Panch and Sarpanch positions increased significantly during the 2018 Panchayat elections. In an area where men had historically dominated political activity, this increase in women's representation was a historic development. Increased representation did not, however, always result in productive involvement. Due to pressure from their families or to fill reserved seats with no opposition, many women entered PRIs with little administrative or political experience and frequently ran for office. The frequency of proxy representation can be attributed to the influence of male family members or community leaders in a number of circumstances. One of the biggest obstacles to women's active participation in Kashmir's PRIs is still the disconnect between formal inclusion and real empowerment.

Kashmir now functions under the three-tier Panchayati Raj system consistent with the national model:

- **Halqa Panchayat (Village Level)**
- **Block Development Council – BDC (Block Level)**
- **District Development Council – DDC (District Level)**

PRIs in Kashmir continue to operate unevenly despite this organized framework. The effective implementation of development initiatives is frequently hampered by frequent security limitations, administrative coordination delays, inadequate training for elected officials, and political unpredictability. Mobility limitations and safety concerns make it more difficult for female delegates in particular to attend meetings, enter government buildings, or communicate with bureaucrats.

Women's Participation: Status and Challenges

Women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kashmir is shaped by a complex intersection of socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, political instability, and institutional limitations. Although reservation policies have increased women's numerical presence in local governance, substantive and autonomous participation remains limited.

- **Social and Cultural Barriers:** Women's participation in Kashmir rural government systems is still largely determined by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. In many societies, women are expected to perform household duties, while public decision-making is still culturally defined as a male realm. Because of this, families frequently forbid or discourage women from participating in Gram Sabha meetings or having candid conversations with male leaders and community members. Women are further deterred from taking on conspicuous leadership responsibilities by social scrutiny, fear of gossip, and pressure to uphold traditional feminine duties. As a result, a large number of elected women hold symbolic positions in which their names are listed in official documents, but their real involvement in governing processes is quite low.
- **Educational and Economic Barriers:** In rural Kashmir, women face barriers to genuine political involvement due to educational and economic disparities. Their limited education limits their capacity to comprehend technical parts of government, such as budgeting processes, creating Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDs), and using digital platforms for administrative communication and welfare programs. Because many women lack the personal financial resources necessary for communication, transportation, or interaction with district-level institutions, economic dependency further erodes their autonomy. The propensity for proxy leadership, in which male family members take on de facto authority over elected offices, is strengthened by reliance on male relatives for logistical support.
- **Political, Institutional, and Structural Barriers:** Kashmir's conflict-driven political environment significantly restricts women's participation in local governance. Families often discourage women from attending meetings or engaging with political actors due to safety concerns and social pressure. Political parties may nominate women mainly to meet reservation requirements, expecting male relatives to handle responsibilities. As a result, many women gain only symbolic, not substantive, involvement in political processes. Training programs for elected representatives are often irregular, insufficient, or inaccessible, leaving women without essential knowledge of administrative processes, financial management, and leadership skills. The absence of targeted, gender-sensitive capacity-building initiatives reinforces low confidence and dependence on male relatives.

The Dynamics of Proxy Representation in the region and reasons behind it

Proxy representation—or the practice of male relatives exercising authority on behalf of elected women—is one of the major challenges in Kashmir's PRIs. It reflects the mixture of patriarchal norms, limited institutional support, security pressures, and constrained mobility. It is seen that in many Panchayats, proxy leadership manifests in several routine practices. Male relatives frequently attend Gram Sabha meetings, negotiate with contractors, supervise development works, and communicate with government officials. They handle documentation, sign official papers, and manage funds, and on the other hand, the elected woman remains absent or plays only a ceremonial role. The main reasons behind proxy representation are:

- **Patriarchal Norms:** Families often believe that women lack the authority to handle public responsibilities or duties, treating their election as symbolic rather than substantive.
- **Security issues:** In conflicted areas like this region, families are reluctant to allow women to travel frequently or engage with political stakeholders due to fear of threats or harassment.
- **Lack of Confidence and Limited Training:** Without systematic training, women often feel unprepared to speak in public or deal with administrative complexities. Women in conflict areas obviously face a lack of confidence in public.
- **Domestic Responsibilities:** Women in joint families carry heavy domestic workloads; they often get less time for field visits, office interactions, or participation in meetings.
- **Political Control:** Local political leaders may deliberately push women into electoral seats to retain informal control over resources and decision-making.

The Phenomenon of Proxy Representation in Kashmir and consequences

Proxy leadership refers to a situation in which a woman holds a public office in name, but the **real or actual power is practiced by men**, commonly husbands, fathers, brothers, or sons. This phenomenon transforms women into symbolic representatives rather than active political actors.

Proxy leadership weakens the transformative capacity of the reservation policy and undermines democratic accountability. When unelected individuals make decisions, transparency decreases, and governance becomes personalised rather than institutional. Women lose valuable opportunities to gain political experience, resulting in slow progress toward gender equality in leadership. Moreover, proxy representation reinforces patriarchal dominance, discourages future generations of women from political participation, and reduces citizens' trust in local governance systems.

Proxy representation has emerged as one of the most persistent challenges in strengthening women's political participation in Jammu & Kashmir. Although the constitutional reservation system has successfully increased the numerical presence of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), their **substantive participation** often remains limited. In several regions of Kashmir, elected women representatives do not exercise real authority, and instead, **male family members perform the core functions of governance on their behalf**.

Thus, although women hold the official seat, governing power remains concentrated in the hands of men, decreasing women's political agency. Proxy leadership significantly impacts the democratic functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Kashmir:

1. **Weakens women's autonomy:** Women are excluded from participating in decision-making, which leads to little growth in their political self-assurance, leadership abilities, or administrative proficiency.
2. **Reinforces patriarchal control over politics:** The reservation system is used to maintain male dominance in public areas rather than upending gender hierarchy.
3. **Limits the actual benefit of reservation policies:** The constitutional reservation sought to empower women becomes ineffective because representation does not translate into real participation.
4. **Creates a democratic deficit:** The democratic principle of accountability is weakened by this, as decisions are made by individuals who are not formally elected by the community.
5. **Reduces transparency and trust:** When unofficial leaders and actors handle public funds and decisions, it increases the risk of mismanagement and reduces citizens' confidence in the system.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the nature and extent of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Kashmir
2. To examine the socio-cultural, institutional factors affecting the proxy leadership.
3. To explore the impact of proxy representation on governance, service delivery, and the autonomy of elected women.
4. To identify genuine participation and strategies that have empowered women representatives.

Methodology

The present study has adopted a qualitative, case-study approach focusing on selected Panchayats in Budgam, Pulwama, Anantnag, and Baramulla. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with elected women. Secondary information was collected from the Ministry of Rural Development, the J&K Rural Development Department, and local NGOs supported the analysis. Suitable and important academic literature on gender, governance, and decentralisation was also reviewed to contextualise the findings of the study.

Review of Literature

- **Begum and Bukhari** (2018) examine the contradiction between women's limited substantive participation in Panchayats in Jammu & Kashmir and their official political admittance through reservation. According to their research, women are nonetheless relegated to symbolic or passive positions due to sociocultural systems entrenched in patriarchy, poor political exposure, limited mobility, and conflict-driven fears, even though reservation policies have boosted the number of women. The authors contend that because male family members or community elders continue to dominate decision-making, many elected women find it difficult to engage in meaningful participation. They come to the conclusion that the tendency of proxy representation is reinforced by institutional processes, training deficits, and local power structures that cumulatively prevent women from exercising actual authority.
- **Bhagat and Begum** (2024) examine the more general governance issues in J&K's Panchayati Raj system and place women's involvement in this administrative framework. According to their report, the main factors undermining grassroots democracy are enduring problems such as corruption, bureaucratic domination, delayed elections, financial reliance, and restricted functional autonomy. The study highlights the historical differences between the J&K Panchayati Raj framework and the 73rd Amendment model with regard to women, which had an impact on the scope and consistency of women's representation. The authors contend that sociocultural limitations and structural inadequacies in the governance system limit women's ability to lead, resulting in the persistence of proxy representation and ineffective participation.

Case Studies: Insights from Kashmir

To explore the lived experiences of women in PRIs, the following case studies highlight different forms of proxy leadership as well as examples of women who successfully resisted male interference.

Case 1: The Symbolic Sarpanch – Budgam District: In one village of Budgam, a woman was elected as Sarpanch under the reserved category, but she remained occupied with domestic responsibilities and rarely attended official meetings, and visited the field work. Her husband took complete charge of the administrative works, including the Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings, and signed official documents, negotiated with contractors and development officers, **and** interacted with district officials on behalf of the Panchayat. The woman herself did not know about the functioning of the Panchayat. She remained a **symbolic figurehead**, fulfilling the legal requirement of reservation, but she was not performing leadership roles. This case clearly shows how patriarchal norms convert elected women into passive participants.

Case 2: Transition from Proxy to Active Leadership – Anantnag District: This case represents the positive transformation of a woman who initially served merely as a nominal representative. After winning the election, her brother-in-law performed all official duties on her behalf because the woman lacked confidence. However, after attending a **women's leadership training program** organized by a local NGO, she began understanding Panchayat finances, schemes, and procedures, and gradually started signing documents herself. She began leading Gram Sabha meetings and engaged in village official work, and took charge of monitoring the development works in the region. As community members observed her effective leadership—especially in implementing welfare schemes—her respect increased. Over time, she transformed herself from a proxy representative to a **genuinely empowered elected leader**, showcasing the transformative impact of capacity-building interventions.

Case 3: Resistance Against Proxy Politics – Pulwama District: A woman, Sarpanch from Pulwama, openly resisted attempts by male representatives to control her political position. Unlike many others, she refused to allow her father or husband to represent her in official work. Her leadership includes many things, like personally attending all Panchayat and block meetings, direct communication with government officials, supervising developmental works, and monitoring fund utilization, confronting local pressures that attempted to restrict her mobility, and encouraging other women to speak in village

meetings. Her active involvement challenged local patriarchal norms. She earned respect from the community. She became a **role model for many women**, proving that reservations can produce genuine empowerment when women exercise independent authority.

Conclusion

Women's representation and participation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions of Kashmir show that while reservation policies have increased their numerical presence in politics, meaningful participation remains limited. The unique political history of J&K, irregular elections, and post-2019 administrative changes have created both new opportunities and persistent challenges for women leaders. Major social norms, low education, economic dependency, security issues, and weak institutional support often prevent women from practicing their powers, leading to the widespread emergence of proxy leadership. This practice underscores democratic decentralization and restricts women's political learning. Case studies from Budgam, Anantnag, and Pulwama demonstrate that change is possible. With training, community support, and determination, some women have begun taking active leadership roles, challenging patriarchal control. Ultimately, improving women's participation in Kashmir's PRIs requires stronger capacity-building, gender-sensitive governance, and social acceptance. Only then can representation translate into real empowerment and inclusive grassroots democracy.

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