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## Women Empowerment in Panchayati Raj Institutions of Himachal Pradesh

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### Abstract

Panchayats have been the spines of Indian villages since the birth of set down history. Gandhiji's dream of every village being a republic has been translated into reality with the introduction of three tiers Panchayati Raj System to enlist people's participation in rural reconstruction. 24<sup>th</sup> April 1994 is a landmark day in the history of Panchayati Raj in India as on this day the Constitution 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, 1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The women's participation in the Panchayati Raj System in Himachal Pradesh is an important discussion. In India's post-independence women have achieved an unprecedented political breakthrough with the reservation of seats in the Panchayats and other public bodies. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act 1993 mandating at least 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the seat reservation for women is an important landmark in the history of Indian women's participation in the formation of democratic institutions at the grass root level; it also provides political space to the society like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women. In this context, in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, the Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2011 giving 50% reservation for women in Panchayats has been a landmark achievement. The furthermore it is observed that the existence of women in Panchayat bodies is entirely impressive as contrast to the state Legislature. This paper examines the participation of women particularly the women of Himachal Pradesh.

**Keywords:** Women participation, electoral system, women in Indian electoral system

### Introduction

'A woman is the builder of a nation's destiny. Though graceful and soft as a lily, she has a heart, far stronger and bolder than of man. She is the foremost inspiration of man's onward march.

Rabindranath Tagore

In traditional society when the process of modernization and political development begins, the problem of empowerment of women also arises because women constitute almost half of the society's segment but are still kept deprived, destitute, and out of the sphere of developmental activities. This is the irony of the reservation policy which has included specific segments of society. In Indian politics, this attempt has been made through PRIs which has enabled the election of Schedule Caste, Schedule Tribes, and women on at least one-third of the total seats of Panchayats. The degrees and nature of exclusion and inclusion within PRIs vary within various states and according to the policies and programs being implemented by the government. The factor that certain groups – mainly women and tribal people – who had very limited participation and for whom caste, gender, wealth, and other social practices were acting as determinants of exclusion can see a new world because of reservation policy. So has emerged the concept of empowerment which mainly focuses on political empowerment and that too on targeted sections like SCs, STs, and women. Political participation has been considered a direct form of empowerment to excluded groups and further women's participation implies progressive elimination of gender disparities at the grassroots level. Women empowerment is a much-talked-about subject these days. It involves many things – economic opportunities, political representation, social equality, educational benefits, and so on. The process of empowerment is taking place at so many levels that it is quite difficult to gauge the actual nature and extent of empowerment in improving the status of women.

The term 'women's empowerment' carries different meanings for different people, depending upon their ideological position and their preconceived notions about women's role and place in society. Empowerment means 'becoming powerful.' [1] The Himachal Pradesh meaning 'land of snowy mountains' is a state in the north-west of India bordered by the states of Jammu and Kashmir on the north, Panjab on the west and south-west, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh on the south, Uttarakhand on the south-east and by China on the east. In 1950, Himachal was declared a union territory but after the State of Himachal Pradesh Act, of 1971, Himachal emerged as the 18<sup>th</sup> state of the Indian Union with a total area of 55,673 square kilometers. According to the 2011 census, the total population of the state is 68,56,509 which is 0.57 percent of the total national population with a density of 123 persons per square kilometer.

The highest density 406 persons per square kilometer is in district Hamirpur and the lowest is 2 persons per square kilometer in district Lahaul-Spiti. Himachal Pradesh ranks 21<sup>st</sup> population-wise with a growth rate of 12.81% which is less than the growth rate of 2001 (17.54%). The sex ratio in the census of 2011 in Himachal Pradesh is 974/1000 males which is slightly higher than in 2001(970) [2]. Himachal was one of the few states that had remained largely untouched by external influences, largely due to its difficult terrain. From a cultural point of view, Himachal Pradesh can broadly be classified into two distinct zones. One is inhabited by tribes who are semi-nomadic, semi-agricultural, and semi-pastoral, living in the great Himalayas in the district of Lahaul-Spiti, Kinnaur, Upper Shimla, Upper Kullu, interior Sirmour, Pangi subdivision of Chamba and remote parts of district Kangra. The people of these areas are an admixture of Indo-Aryan or Mongolian races [3]. The Constitution of India 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, 1992 accorded constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions and established a structure of self-governing institutions at the rural level, with regular elections and flow of funds through Finance Commissions. The Act move closer into force in April 1993.

To implement the provisions of the Government of Himachal Pradesh enacted the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 and framed the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj (General) Rules, 1997 and the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act (Finance, Budget, Accounts, Audit, Works, Taxation and Allowances) Rules, 2002 to sanction these institutions to effort as the third tier of Government. States were expected to devolve funds, functions, and functionaries to these bodies to enable them to function as institutions of Local self-government. Twenty-nine functions listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution were to be devolved to PRIs, along with funds and functionaries.

The PRIs were required to prepare plans and implement schemes for socio-economic development, particularly for those functions listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution [4]. The 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of elections on the other two tiers was held under the 1993 Act but with an amendment relating to the backward classes. These were supervise by the State Election Commission, set up under the 1994 Act. There was a high voter turnout for the polls [5]. After the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment due to the decentralization of power a great wave of change is being felt. Almost nearly eighty-five percent of people live in the villages of Himachal Pradesh.

### **Before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Panchayats**

Here PR bodies have enjoyed special status since the beginning. GPs and PSs occupy the special status of prime importance. The offices of the Panch and Pradhans are coveted and people attach more importance to Panchayats and the Chairman because governmental agencies and officers on their visits to the village and block contact Pradhans and the chairman of PSs, whenever needed. The official recognition raises their social status and power. Other factors which affect PR membership are the economic status of the individual and family. It appears that since the beginning (after independence) a person with having strong economic background is acceptable to political parties and can become Pradhans and Chairman easily. The either caste group leaders, rich individuals, or popular social workers are favored in Panchayat elections. Politics is the central factor that provides a prestigious, honorable, and independent status to PRIs in the state. But almost every political party considered males only eligible for PRIs, females were by and largely missing from the scene [6]. The change in a social scenario and educational background factor has emerged. People hold power to elect rural leadership at the grassroots level through elections. Educational background plays an important role besides economic, political, and social factors now. But earlier, due to the centralization of power within state authorities and bureaucracy, Panchayats were standing at a deprived edge. Even petty 'political feuds' were not able to understand their status and responsibility. They had vested interests which they used to fulfill with the nexus of bureaucracy. Due to the autocratic attitude of the government regarding the decentralization of power to Panchayats initially, the basic purpose of democracy was defeated. Rural self-government was not in the vision or action at that time. This fact cannot be denied that it is only the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act that has created a 'silent revolution' at the grassroots level. Before this Act, some baseline flaws were there at both ends; Panchayats as well as the government. Panchayat elections were conducted by the Deputy Collector, but they were not regular. Funds/Grants were not made available to Panchayats. There was also a fear among elected Members of the Assembly (MLA) about the potential loss of political power, prestige, and influence in case Chairman Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti got themselves entrenched in local politics. Even bureaucratic apathy was there for Panchayats and their members. PRIs, in Himachal Pradesh before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, were mere agencies of the center and state governments to implement developmental programs and schemes. So PRIs did not benefit from any actual power. Under the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1968, the real powers were vested by the Act in the District Collector, Sub-Divisional Magistrate, and the Director Panchayati Raj Department. The democratic decentralization concept was out of the question now. In the field of financial matters, the position of GP was insignificant. All the powers were with the bureaucracy. Thus Himachal Pradesh government up to the early nineties had kept Panchayati Raj virtually at the mercy of DC and SDM. In a democratic set-up, it was ironic that democratically elected members of PR could be removed by a civil servant. In the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1968 such other provisions were also retaining by which bureaucracy interfered and made inroads into the working of PRIs. Thus PRIs had no role to play in governance.

Virtually under the Act, the state was governed by the bureaucrats from bottom to top. The Gram Panchayats were poorly equipped to perform even small civic functions. Before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, Panchayats had very limited sources of income. They had very limited powers of taxation and were more or less dependent upon the center and state grants.

### Provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act

73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act which was passed by the Parliament in December 1992 and became operative in May 1993, created a wave of change with its provisions which states that:

- Uniformly a three-tier system of Panchayat Raj institutions to be there
- Direct elections at the village levels of Gram Panchayats and indirect elections at the block and district level
- Seats for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are to be reserved separately
- Total one-third of the seats are to be reserved for SC/ST and women
- Panchayati Raj Institutions to have a duration of five years
- Depending upon the population of SC/ST, the seat of chairpersons is to be reserved for them. Also, reservations are to be made for women to chair the Panchayats.
- The minimum age for a person who intends to hold an office in the Panchayati Raj Institutions is to be fixed at 21 years.
- Elections in the Panchayati Raj Institutions are to be held under the direction of the chief electoral officer of the state and the chief election commissioner.

The state has to constitute a finance committee to review the position of the panchayats <sup>[7]</sup>. Basically, these recommendations were based on the L.M. Singhvi Committee. The Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, of 1994 came into force on 23 April 1994. This Act consists of XIV chapters. The Act contains elaborated provisions for the establishment of Panchayati Raj bodies <sup>[8]</sup>.

### Strength of Panchayat Members

The Act provides for the constitution of a Gram Panchayat as an executive body of the Gram Sabha. The strength of Panchayat members shall be between 5 to 13. There is a special provision for the reservation of seats for SC/ST and women in Gram panchayats <sup>[9]</sup>. Distribution of members according to the population can be observed in Table 1 as given below:

**Table 1:** Distribution of members according to population

Sr. No.	Population	No. of members overpopulation
1.	Up to 1500	5
2.	1500 – 2500	7
3.	2500 – 3500	9
4.	3500 – 4500	11
5.	Above 4500	13

Source: H.P. Panchayati Raj Act 1994.

The exceeding 1500 a Gram Panchayat has five members, between 1500 to 2500 it will have seven members, between 2500 to 3500 nine members, between 3500 to 4500 eleven

members and above 4500 thirteen members <sup>[10]</sup>. Under this Act, the intermediate tier of Panchayati Raj bodies is Panchayat Samiti which is to be constituted for each block and shall have jurisdiction over the entire block.

### Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad

The Panchayat Samiti should have a utmost of 15 members. The members of Panchayat Samiti shall include directly elected members from territorial constituencies, members of the House of the People, MLAs, and members of the same area, and one-fifth of the Pradhans (by rotation) from the Samiti area. A Panchayat Samiti elects its chairperson and vice-chairperson according to the prescribed manner. Panchayat Samiti shall hold four meetings in a year. The Zila Parishad is the top tier of Panchayati Raj at the distinct level. It comprised of the members directly elected from territorial constituencies in the district, the members of the Lok Sabha, and the members of the state legislative assembly representing a part of the whole of the district whose constituencies lie within the district <sup>[11]</sup>. It provides that every gram sabha shall hold four general meetings each year and every assemble shall be clench on the first Sunday of January, April, July, and October. It also provides that one-third of that total number of seats shall be filled by direct election at each level being reserved for women <sup>[12]</sup>.

### Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 2001

Further, Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 2001 provides that the member of the Panchayat Samiti representing a part or whole of Gram-Sabha shall also be the member of the concerned gram Panchayat and shall perform the functions specified in schedule-I. The Gram Sabha is the first modern political institution that seeks to place direct power in the hands of the people. The under section 3 of the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1994, a Gram Sabha is constituted for a village or a group of contiguous villages with a population of slighter than one thousand and not exceeding five thousand. The government can relax these limits in a particular case. The Gram Sabha once established, can be reorganized by the government by including or excluding any area from its jurisdiction. Every person who has attained the age of eighteen years within the Gram Sabha is entitled to be a voter of the Gram Sabha <sup>[13]</sup>. Decisions are taken by the majority of members present and voting <sup>[14]</sup>. The HPPR Second Amendment Act, 2000 made provision for the setting up of Up-Gram Sabha for each ward of the Gram Sabha. The person representing the ward as a member of gram Panchayat is enjoined upon the convener and presides over two general meetings of Up-Gram Sabha every year. The Up-Gram Sabha nominates its representative. The general meeting of Gram Sabha third of the women have to be present. It is empowered to take cognizance of disputes in its area and make a recommendation to Gram Sabha. Convener and presides over two general meetings of Up-Gram Sabha every year. The Up-Gram Sabha nominates its representative. For the general meeting of Gram Sabha, one-third of the women have to be present. It is empowered to take cognizance of disputes in its area and make a recommendation to Gram Sabha <sup>[15]</sup>. Gram Sabha works as the legislature of the village. It also provides for the elections of the members of all PRI levels and also for the office of Pradhan and Up-Pradhan of Gram Panchayat whereas the chairperson of Panchayat Samiti (PS) and Zila Parishad is to be indirectly



elected from amongst their members [16]. It is also provided further that the number of members of a gram Panchayat, excluding Pradhan and Up-Pradhan, shall be determined in such a way that the ratios between the population of Gram Sabha and the number of seats of members in such a Panchayat to be filled by the election shall, so far as practicable, be the same throughout the Sabha areas [17]. Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1994, provides that seats shall be reserved in a gram Panchayat for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The number of seats so reserved shall bear, as almost as may be, the same proportion to the total number of seats in the gram Panchayat as the population of the scheduled castes of the Gram Sabha area is at slightest five percent of the total population of the Gram Sabha area [18]. Not less than one-third of seats in each category for persons belonging to the SCs/STs and of the rest of the non-reserved seats in the Gram Panchayat, 33% shall be reserved for women. Before assuming their duties as members of PRIs, the concerned are required to take an oath. The election has been held six times for the PRIs after the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment; in December 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020 [19]. The table shows the tenure and number of gram Panchayats in the last nine elections.

**Table 2:** Elections of Total Gram Panchayats in Himachal Pradesh (1954-2020)

Sr. No.	Elections Held	Year	Total Gram Panchayats
1.	I	1954	466
2.	II	1962	638
3.	III	1972	2035
4.	IV	1978	2357
5.	V	1985	2597
6.	VI	1991	2757
7.	VII	1995	2922
8.	VIII	2000	2922
9.	IX	2005	3243
10	X	2010	3243
11	XI	2015	3226
12	XII	2020	3615

During the year 2005-2006, the Government created 206 new Gram Sabha circles, thereby raising the number to 3243. In Himachal Pradesh the new Gram Sabha has been constituted during the year 2010. In the year, 2015 due to the inclusion of 17 Gram Panchayats in the Municipalities the number of Gram Panchayats was 3226, and due to the creation of a new Panchayat Samiti namely Shri Naina Devi, District Bilaspur the number of Panchayat Samitis are 78 in this State. In the year, 2020, before the general elections of Panchayati Raj Institutions; 412 recently developed Gram Panchayats have been design by the government and 23 Gram Panchayats have been merged into the Municipality. Therefore, the total number of Panchayats has increased to 3615.

### Empowerment of Gram Panchayat

The meetings of the Gram Panchayat (GP) are public and are held at least once a month at the office of the GP and at such a time as Pradhan may fix. Provided that when required in writing by a majority of the members to call a meeting, the Pradhan has to do so within three days, failing which they said members are, with the previous approval of prescribed authority, entitled to call a meeting after giving notice of one week to the Pradhan and other members [20].

The Secretary belongs to the administrative side (executive and helps the deliberative wing to carry out its functions properly). At the village, a level secretary is the most important administrative functionary who helps the Panchayats to perform their multi-dimensional functions.

**Table 3:** The details of District total Gram Panchayats in Himachal Pradesh 2022

Sr. No	Name of District	Total no of Gram Panchayats
1	Shimla	412
2	Chamba	309
3	Bilaspur	176
4	Kangra	814
5	Kinnaur	73
6	Lahaul Spiti	45
7	Hamirpur	248
8	Kullu	235
9	Sirmaur	259
10	Una	245
11	Solan	240
12	Mandi	559
	Total	3615

According to the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1994, it shall be the duty of a Gram Panchayat to allot funds for the functions being, performed within its area.

### After the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment provision of the 29<sup>th</sup> Subjects

The following functions have been specified in Schedule 1 of the Act:

- Sanitation, conservancy, and prevention and abatement of the nuisance;
- Construction, maintenance, and repair of public wells, ponds, and tanks and supply of water for domestic use;
- Construction and maintenance of resources of water for bathing, washing, and supply of water for domestic animals;
- Establishment and maintenance of village roads, bridges, ponds, and other works and buildings of public utility etc..
- To erection, maintenance, clearing of public streets, latrines, drains, tanks, wells, and other public places;
- Filling in disused wells, unsanitary ponds, pools and ditches, and pits and conversion of step wells into sanitary wells;
- The lighting of village streets and public places;
- Removing obstructions and projection in public streets or places and in sites not being its property or which are open to the use of the public, whether such area are grant to the Panchayats or belong to the state government;
- regulating and controlling entertainment shows, shops, eating houses, and vendors of drinks, sweets, meats, fruits, and milk, and of other similar articles;
- Regulating the construction of houses, latrines, urinals, drains, and water resources;
- Supervision of public land, management, extension and development of village area
  - Regulating places for disposal of dead bodies, and other offensive matters;
  - Disposal of unclaimed corpses and carcasses;
- Earmarking places for dumping refuse;
- Regulation of sale of land preservation of meat;
- Maintenance of Gram Panchayat property;

15. Establishment and management of cattle ponds and maintenance of records relating to cattle.
16. Maintenance of ancient and historical monuments other than those declared by or under law made by Parliament to be of national importance, grazing land, and other lands vesting in or under the control of gram Panchayat;
17. Establishment, management, and regulation of markets and meals other than public markets and public meals;
18. Maintenance of records of births, deaths, and marriages;
19. Rendering assistance in the prevention of contagious diseases;
20. Rendering assistance for inoculation and smallpox vaccination and enforcement of other preventive measures for the safety of human beings and cattle prescribed by the government department concerned;
21. Establishment of Raksha Samiti for:
  - a) Safety of life and property
  - b) Prevention of fire and extinguishing fire. Safety of property during an outbreak of such fires;
22. Plantation, and preservation of Panchayat forests;
23. Removal of social evils such as dowry;
24. Granting loans for:
  - a) Providing medical assistance to indigent persons in serious and emergency cases;
  - b) Any other proposal for the benefit of an indigent person or any member of his family;
25. (a) carrying out the directions or orders given or issued by the state government, the collector, or any other officer concerning the measure for the amelioration of the conditions of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and other backward classes and in particular regarding the removal of untouchability;
26. Perform such functions as may be entrusted to it by the state government, Zila Parishad, or Panchayat Samiti by general or special orders;
27. The welfare of the weaker sections and in particular of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes.
28. Public Distribution System
29. Maintenance of Community assets falling under the jurisdiction of Gram Panchayats.

The provided that where any such functions are entrusted of Gram Panchayat it shall act as an agent of the state government, Zila Parishad or Panchayat Samiti, as the case may be and necessary funds and other assistance for the purpose shall be provided to it by the state government, Zila Parishad or Panchayats <sup>[21]</sup>.

#### **Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Rules (General) 1998**

Further, in the Panchayati Raj rules (General) 1998, it is provided that after the constitution of standing committees, each standing committee shall convene its meeting to be headed by its chairman, to co-opt one member each from amongst the office's bearers of the farmers club, Mahila Mandals, Yuvak Mandals, and other similar bodies <sup>[22]</sup>. Chapter IV of the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 is related to the judicial functions and powers of the Gram Panchayat. In this chapter judicial functions and powers have been given to the Gram Panchayat under Articles 36 to 76. These judicial powers and functions are regarding land, revenue, property, damage of crops by cattle trespass, compromise to improve fine, recovery of find,

maintenance allowance, return and dismissal of a complaint, inquiry in cases forwarded by the magistrate, etc <sup>[23]</sup>. Above all the Gram Panchayats are also entitled to raise loans from public or under the government-sponsored revenue earning scheme. Article 99 of the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 provides for the establishment of Panchayat funds. The sums received by the Panchayat shall form a part of the said fund. The Panchayat fund shall be kept in the nearest government treasury, post office, cooperative bank, or scheduled bank. The Act further provides that the funds shall be utilized for such work or purpose as the state government may either generally or specially approve. The amount from the funds shall be withdrawn under the joint signature of the secretary of the gram Panchayat and of the Pradhan. The major sources of finance for Panchayat shall continue to be the grant-in-aid to the Panchayats by the state government as may be decided based on the recommendations of the State Finance Commission (SFC). The Panchayats under the Act 1994 are empowered to levy taxes, subject to maximum rates as the government may fix, and the provisions of the rules made under this Act or any order made by the government on this behalf. Thus the essence of Panchayati Raj institutions lies in the freedom to select their course of development and planning for it independently. For this, they must have their sources which should be assured sources and not donations like grant-in-aid. Nevertheless, the amendment has brought in an element of participation of the Panchayati Raj Institutions and at least a beginning could be made by leaving a certain percentage of funds free from the existing centralized planning <sup>[24]</sup>. According to section 117 of the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1994, every Panchayat shall prepare annually in such form and such a manner and by such date, as prescribed, the budget estimates of its receipts and expenditure for the next finance year. There shall be a separate and independent audit agency under the control of the Director to perform audits of Panchayats. In the hierarchical set-up of the Panchayati Raj, Panchayat Samiti forms the intermediate organization coming next to the gram panchayats. In a Panchayat Samiti area, having a population not exceeding forty-five thousand there shall be a minimum of 15 elected members. The maximum number of elected members shall not exceed forty. This clause of section 78 of the HPPR Act, 1994 provides reservation of seats for SCs/STs in proportion to their population in the total population by rotation. Not less than one-third of seats reserved in each category, for persons belonging to the SCs/STs and of the non-reserved seats in the Panchayat Samiti area shall be reserved for women. The elections of Panchayat Samiti are held by secret ballot and direct vote. Before the statehood (1971), elections for block-level bodies were not held regularly. Afterward, the first election of Panchayat Samiti was held in 1972 and second in the year 1991. At present, there are 78 blocks in Himachal Pradesh <sup>[25]</sup>. The elected members of the Panchayat Samiti elect one member as the chairman and another member as the vice-chairman of the Panchayat Samiti. The chairman or vice-chairman of Panchayat Samiti is required to convene at least four meetings a year at its headquarters to regulate its business. On the written request of its 1/3 members, or when required by Zila Parishad or DC, may convene a special meeting within two weeks. Decisions in Panchayat Samiti shall be taken by majority vote, in case of equality of vote, the authority presiding the meeting shall have a casting vote.

### Functions of Panchayat Samiti

Under section 81 of the HPPR Act, 1994, the Panchayat Samiti performs a variety of functions such as:

- i) Integrated rural development, agriculture, social forestry, animal husbandry and fisheries, health and sanitation, adult education, communication, and public works, cooperation, cottage industries, the welfare of women, youth, and children, the welfare of disabled and the destitute and welfare of backward classes, family welfare and sports, and rural employment program;
- ii) Provision of emergency relief in cases of distress caused by fires, floods droughts, earthquakes, scarcity, epidemics, and other natural calamities;
- iii) Arrangement in connection with local pilgrimage and festivals;
- iv) Management of public ferries
- v) Management of public markets, public *melas*, and exhibitions; and
- vi) Any other functions with the approval of or entrusted by the state government or Zila Parishad under section 84 of the PR Act 1994, each Panchayat Samiti has the following committees
  1. General Standing Committee.
  2. Social Audit Committee <sup>[26]</sup>.

Like Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti, Zila Parishad also consists of directly elected members from territorial constituencies of the district, ex-officio members: MLA and MP of the area where they are registered as electors. If the number of the ex-officio members will exceed the number of elected members, in such cases the 1/5 members of the Panchayat Samitis by rotation will become chairman of Zila Parishad <sup>[27]</sup>. In proportion to the SCs/STs population, seats will be reserved for their candidates, and 1/3 of the total seats will be reserved for the women candidates. In the case of the backward classes, from time to time state government by notification may reserve seats. The elected members of a Zila Parishad elect from amongst themselves the chairman and vice-chairman of the Zila Parishad. Meetings of Zila Parishad are convened by the chairman or in his absence by the Vice Chairman. Ordinarily, a Zila Parishad meets quarterly and the gap between two meetings should not be more than three months. Chairman or in his absence, Vice-Chairman may convene special meetings on the written request of 1/3 of its members or requisition of the DC it shall be the duty of Zila Parishad to:

- i) Control, coordinate, and guide the Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayat within the district;
- ii) Co-ordinate and consolidate Panchayat Samitis plans in the district;
- iii) Co-ordinate the demands for a grant for a special purpose, received from the Panchayat Samiti and forward them to the state government;
- iv) Secure the execution of plans, projects, schemes or other works common to two or more Panchayat Samitis in the district;
- v) Advise the state government in developmental activities, social forestry, family
- vi) welfare, the welfare of the disabled, destitute, women, youth, children, and sports <sup>[28]</sup>.

Exercise and perform such other power and functions as the

state government may confer on or entrust to it. Article 40 of the Constitution which cherishes one of the Directive Principles of State Policy lays down that the State shall take steps to put in order of village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be mandatory to enable them to function as part of self-government.

### Conclusion

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 is the foundation of Women's empowerment in the system of Panchayati Raj Institution. The government has taken several initiatives to empower women to participate in the decision-making process. The empowerment concept talks about power and about changing the balance of power toward equality. Empowerment through the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment is an attempt to create political awareness with a feeling of gender equality and social justice. It aims at changing the balance of power between the two sexes to create a more equitable status for women in society. Today, women are actively participating in rural development platforms as per their competence right for policymakers. The essential participation of women as elected as well as non-elected members is expanding due to enactment in the reservation for women at all grass-root levels. Although Indian democracy and its concept of decentralization are making a good contribution to empowering women 73<sup>rd</sup> amendments have provided a major boost to the empowerment issue at the grassroots level.

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27. The social justice committee shall perform functions relating to the promotion of the welfare of the SCs/STs, women, and weaker sections of society.
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