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Barriers and breakthroughs: women participation in Panchayati Raj in Punjab

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Abstract

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a pivotal shift in India's democratic landscape by transforming representative democracy into participatory democracy through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Mandating reservations for women, it aimed to empower them as decision-makers at the grassroots level. While Punjab has made strides with increased women's participation in local governance, deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers, patriarchal mindsets, proxy representation, and limited institutional support continue to hinder true empowerment. Insights from the 2024 Punjab Panchayat elections reveal women's growing focus on development and welfare, contrasting with men's caste and community-driven choices. Despite challenges, modernization, education, and social media are gradually shifting attitudes, allowing women to assert themselves as leaders and community change agents. The journey underscores that while constitutional provisions laid the foundation, sustained efforts are needed to overcome structural and societal constraints and ensure women's meaningful political agency within local governance.

Keywords: Women's political participation, panchayati raj institutions, 73rd constitutional amendment, local governance, Punjab

Introduction

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment infused new life into local governance across India. It became a watershed moment that transformed representative democracy in the country into a participatory democracy. By mandating reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), it aimed to make them equal partners in decision-making. However, the outcomes have been mixed. In Punjab, despite these structural provisions, there were continuous hurdles in the way of women's participation due to entrenched socio-cultural norms, predominance of patriarchal attitude, proxy leadership by male relatives, limited education, and inadequate institutional support. Nevertheless, there are visible signs of progress. Increasingly, women are contesting elections, taking on leadership roles, and actively shaping developmental priorities in rural areas. Insights from the 2024 Punjab Panchayat elections reveal notable gendered differences in voting behavior and political concerns, with women prioritizing development, healthcare, and sanitation. Although challenges persist, the gradual influence of modernization, education, and social media is leading to changes in societal mindsets as well as allowing women to become important agency in local governance.

Local governance may be defined as a system of administration at the grassroots level. It allows local communities to manage their own affairs through decentralized institutions. The aim is to bring decision-making closer to the people. It ensures better participation and accountability at the local level. In India, the local governance has been arranged through the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in rural areas and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in cities and towns. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992 marked a transformative moment by giving constitutional status to local bodies, mandating regular elections, and reserving seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women. This system promotes participatory democracy, accountability and inclusive development by bringing decision-making closer to the people. Though Punjab has faced persistent challenges since the Green Revolution, its political mandates have remained both dynamic and inspiring. The state's unique socio-economic and politico-cultural fabric—shaped by deep-rooted historical experiences—makes the political participation of its people

particularly distinct and impactful. For instance, in recent times, Punjab was the first state after Delhi to give a sweeping mandate to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), signaling a strong desire for change and reform. However, the enthusiasm that marked the AAP's rise to power in Punjab has gradually given way to growing concerns among the people about its failure to deliver on many accounts. Earlier the farmers' protest at the Delhi borders had powerfully illustrated the enduring spirit, unity, and resilience of the Punjabi people [5]. Meanwhile, at the grassroots level, the intense competition witnessed in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) highlights deep faith of the people in local self-governance as a key solution to various systemic challenges. While Punjab fares relatively better than many other states in terms of social discrimination, issues related to caste, religion and gender still surface at times. As far as women's political participation at the grassroots is concerned, undoubtedly, it has grown despite various challenges, but many believe that real decision-making often remains with their husbands indicating that true political empowerment for women still has a long way to go.

India is a country that has deep and historical association with democracy. Much before the arrival and emergence of democracy as a formal concept in Western societies, democratic principles were closely embedded in the fabric of governance in India. The journey of Indian republic in post-independence period bears the testimony of India's endurance as a democratic country, though internal and external vulnerabilities continued to haunt the country. The constitutional status of Panchayati Raj System (PRI) is an epoch-making event in the history of Indian democracy. Here it needs to be mentioned that India is an old civilization, where the institutions like PRIs had intermittent but long presence. Article 40 of Indian Constitution under Directive Principles of State Policy clearly emphasized to organise village panchayats. In post-independence period, successive Union Governments intervened for ensuring rural development and democratic decentralization. Rajasthan was the first state in India that implemented the PRI in 1959. However, various states across the country adopted PRIs but implemented in its own ways. The lack of uniformity in its structures and constitutional backing, however, marred the growth of PRIs. Initially, PRIs had two tier structures. Meanwhile, the scarcity of funds, irregular elections, weak administration and powerful elites further curtailed the performance of local governance.

In this context, the 73rd amendment in 1992 was watershed in the development of PRIs, as it not only provided constitutional status to PRIs but the Union Government streamlined its working and brought uniformity in its structures also. Throughout the country, three tier structure of PRIs were made mandatory. Eleventh Schedule was added to the constitution that listed 29 functions of PRIs. Now periodic elections were made mandatory, along with other provisions that had constitutional sanction. One of the special focuses in this historic amendment was the reservation for scheduled castes/tribes and women, that left a deep mark over the electoral politics in the country. This legislation envisaged devolution of power besides enhancing capacity building, financial independence and digital governance. April 24, 1993 was the day when 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was enforced, hence this day has been celebrated as Panchayat Raj Day in the country.

Women constitutes an important part of Indian populace; though their actual potential is underutilized. This apartheid attitude towards women in India is an age-old restraint that continues to characterize socio-economic and political discourse in the country till date. There are a variety of reasons that restrict their due role. Even within the family, gender equality is not fully upheld. The 73rd amendment that enacted in 1992, however, paved the way for women's participation in world's largest democracy. The new legislation ensured their entry into politics and provided them a leadership role. They contested elections and held offices in local governance. They got chance to participate in planning, budgeting and implementing welfare schemes. This in turn enabled them to raise women centric issues like postpartum health, sanitation, education and domestic violence. What is more, women received training to handle administrative responsibilities. This in-turn boosted their confidence, skills and self-worth. These moves broke traditional gender roles that is now gradually changing in the wake of women's growing say in decision-making. Women indeed emerged as role models in their communities by challenging gender stereotypes. Their participation also provided information with regard to legal rights. What is more, women through PRIs succeeded in the allocation of requisite funds towards self-help groups, women centric schemes and entrepreneurship. All this resulted into their greater financial independence and improved household decision-making. Coupled with it, women's expertise to run households proved very beneficial in efficient working of local governance. However, women's empowerment as envisaged in policy programmes is found wanting on various grounds. A lot more efforts are required for ensuring their due role in political domain. Say for instance, it is accused that though PRIs provided a chance to women for leadership role but their husbands or male members decide on their behalf, popularly it is known as proxy representation. Meanwhile, lack of education is another hurdle that make them dependent upon the male family members. Besides social barriers like regressive societal norms, lack of family support etc. also circumvent women's role. Apart from this, bureaucratic hurdles and lack of funds impact women's effective participation.

The State of Punjab is located in the northwestern part of India. It comprises 23 districts, 154 blocks, 13,014 villages and gram 13,236 panchayats. As mentioned earlier, 73rd amendment act which was implemented on 24 April 1993, ushered the country, including Punjab into an era of PRIs. This amendment granted constitutional status to PRIs. Moreover, it established a uniform three-tier structure comprising the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad. Punjab, in accordance to the guidelines of 73rd amendment enacted the Punjab Panchayati Raj Act in 1994. This legislation mandated the conduct of elections every five years. It also provided reservation of seats for the Schedule Castes and women (33% initially, later 50%), along with the devolution of financial powers. This gave a fresh impetus to the rural development, with initiatives like MNREGA, sanitation drives, empowerment of Gram Sabha and focused attention on vulnerable sections such as Schedule Castes and women. One of the most significant outcomes was entry of women into the political arena, which had been dominated by men. Such affirmative actions altered the political discourse by initiating a shift in power dynamics in rural Punjab. These actions directly confront

age-old norms questioning deep rooted patriarchal and caste-driven hierarchies. As women got elected as sarpanches in large numbers, this helped in asserting their voices in the governance, decision-making and allocation of development funds. Initially, women were reluctant to contest elections due to social pressures. Even when elected, it was often the men in their families—especially their husbands—who exercised political power on their behalf which can be termed as proxy rule [6]. However, with the gradual spread of modernization, these traditional norms began to shift. Women started to challenge their exclusion from political spaces and began asserting themselves more actively in public life. The insights from the Punjab Panchayat Elections held in October 2024 clearly highlight the growing impact of women in politics. Their entry as both leaders and voters shows great potential to transform the state. In rural areas, women voted with a focus on development, healthcare, drugs eradication, reduced social spending, and better sanitation in their respective villages. In contrast, men's voting choices were largely influenced by caste, community ties, and political affiliations [7]. These observations are based on the Panchayat elections in Punjab which were held on October 15, 2024. The state has a total of 13,327 panchayats and in order to conduct elections, 19,110 polling booths were set up across the state [8]. Despite constitutional provisions and progressive legislation, the socio-economic and political realities in Punjab continue to present a disturbing picture regarding the status of women. It is evident from the statement of Tript Rajinder Singh Bajwa, former Rural Development and Panchayat Minister, and a Congress leader. He stated that his government had reserved 50% of the seats for women at the grassroots level. However, the results fell far short of expectations, as many women still lacked independence [5]. In fact, a look at the ground realities reveals complex challenges hindering women's political empowerment in Punjab. Say for instance, the state's low sex ratio underscores the deeply entrenched gender bias and reflects the gravity of gender discrimination. Patriarchal values dominate much of Punjabi society, severely restricting women's freedom to think and act independently. Their participation in overall workforce in the state remains low and largely confined to informal, low-paying and labor-intensive sectors such as farm labour, domestic workers or contractual jobs involving menial tasks. Though sporadic, but incidents like honour killings persistently, point towards the regressive mindsets that intend to control women's choices. A telling example of societal reluctance is the hesitation shown by the families in sending their daughters to join Punjab Police. This hesitation, though slowly fading now, signals the deep-seated fear and resistance towards women stepping into roles traditionally held by men. Moreover, there is a noticeable trend among Punjabi families—regardless of their parochial identities—to discourage women from working outside the home. These cultural and societal trends thus, clearly reflect discriminative attitude towards women in Punjab. This becomes even more evident while examining their political participation. Deep-rooted social norms, limited awareness about governance structures and absence of institutional support often prevent women from engaging actively in politics. These structural and attitudinal barriers continue to keep many women away from meaningful involvement in political decision-making, despite constitutional guarantees

and reservation policies aimed at promoting their inclusion. What may be concluded from the above is the fact that the enactment of 73rd amendment in 1992 has really transformed representative democracy to participatory one. Above all, women's empowerment really got impetus in this act, though the pace of their growth is slow and uneven. Yet this visionary decision started a debate publicly and in households for rendering dignity to the women. It has largely been found that women's political journey through PRIs has brought many social, political and cultural changes. The PRIs added a new chapter in India's electoral history and women has plethora reasons to cheer about it. Though various barriers snubbed women's inclusive political journey but even then, women have been successful in crafting a dignified space for themselves.

Conclusion

The above analysis shows that the 73rd Amendment, enacted in 1992, transformed representative democracy into a participatory one. Most importantly, it gave a strong push to women's empowerment. However, the pace of progress has been slow and uneven. Still, this visionary step sparked important debates—both in public and within households—about giving dignity to women. Over the time, women's political journey through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has brought notable social, political and cultural changes. The PRIs added a new chapter to India's electoral history. Women now have many reasons to feel encouraged. Despite facing several barriers, women have successfully carved a dignified space for themselves in local governance. Punjab, being a part of the Indian Union, shares the same need for women's political empowerment. It is considered a progressive state. A large section of its population lives abroad. Yet, status of women's independence and choices presents a mixed matrix. The 73rd Amendment was implemented in Punjab with much celebration. It opened up political space for women to shape their futures. Women in Punjab stepped forward in contesting elections at the grassroots level, as never before. There are many stories where women not only outperformed men but also showed strong leadership qualities. Society is slowly beginning to accept women as equal partners in the state. But this journey is far from over. Socio-economic and cultural barriers still stand in the way. Many women remain under the influence of male family members, especially their husbands. As a result, some are still seen as proxy or "dummy" representatives. However, the rise of social media and other social changes are making a difference. These changes are leaving lasting impressions on the way of women's empowerment. There is growing hope. Thus, the political space offered by PRIs is slowly—but surely—transforming mindsets in Punjab. Women are beginning to have a greater say in public life.

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