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Political participation and empowerment of women: A study on Panchayat Raj Institutions in India from 1993 to 2024

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Abstract
Political participation and empowerment of women are imperative for fostering gender equality and democratic governance. This paper examines the trajectory of women's engagement in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India from 1993 to 2024 through a review of select papers. The study investigates the legal, structural, and societal obstacles that hinder women's involvement in politics, emphasising the role of gender quotas, education, and advocacy in overcoming these challenges. The 73rd Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution, mandating one-third reservation for women in PRIs, emerges as a pivotal catalyst for enhancing women's representation and influence at the grassroots level. Despite significant strides, persistent barriers such as patriarchal norms and resource disparities persist, necessitating sustained efforts to foster the meaningful participation and empowerment of women in PRIs. The paper highlights the importance of long-term impact assessments, intersectional analyses, and innovative approaches to address these challenges, advocating for a more inclusive and gender-sensitive governance framework aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Keywords: Political participation, women empowerment, Panchayat Raj institutions, SDG

Introduction
Women's political participation in India may be traced back to ancient times. Multiple historical sources, including literary texts, archaeological findings, and travel accounts, offer unique insights into the considerable impact of certain women who held positions of responsibility as rulers, soldiers, and active participants in political associations. Despite the existence of opportunities for political participation, the prevailing patriarchal system often discourages women's involvement, leading to a general lack of interest on their part (Bhagat, 2005) [3]. However, the British, with their merciless approach to revenue collection and the implementation of the Zamindari land tenure system, effectively dismantled these historic republics and suppressed women's participation in politics. The British believed that granting women the right to vote would be premature in Indian society. As a result, they enforced strict practices of purdah and prohibited women from receiving education (Bhagat 2005) [3]. These measures further entrenched gender disparities and limited the scope of women's political engagement during this period. Despite these challenges, Indian women continued to strive for political participation and played crucial roles in the struggle for independence. Their persistent efforts eventually led to significant advancements in women's political rights in the post-independence era (Nanda, 2006) [20]. Additionally, the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992, which came into force on April 24, 1993, marked a significant milestone in the political empowerment of women in India. This amendment recognised that development in any society would be slow if women, who constitute about 50 percent of the population, were not facilitated to participate in developmental activities. For the first time in Indian history, the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution mandated the reservation of a minimum number of seats for women in panchayats (village councils) (Aggarwal, 2021) [1]. The 73rd Amendment addressed this disparity by reserving not less than one-third of the total number of seats and chairperson positions in panchayats for women. This provision was a significant landmark in the process of political empowerment, ensuring that women could play a more active and influential role in local governance and development. The amendment's goal was to give women more power in making decisions and help Indian

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society move forward by making it official for women to be involved in local politics (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013) [13].

Women's Empowerment and Political Participation

Political participation and empowerment of women are essential for ensuring gender equality and democratic governance. This involves addressing legal and structural barriers, such as discriminatory laws, social norms, lack of access to education, and gender-based violence (Chaban *et al.*, 2017) [8]. Countries often implement gender quotas or affirmative action measures to increase women's representation in political institutions. Investing in women's political education and leadership training is crucial for overcoming these barriers (Rosen, 2017) [25]. However, Civil society organizations play a vital role in advocating for women's rights and promoting gender equality in politics. Recognizing the intersectionality of gender with other aspects of identity is essential for addressing diverse experiences and needs. Media and technology can amplify women's voices, but they can also perpetuate gender stereotypes and amplify harassment. International cooperation is crucial for advancing women's political participation and empowerment globally (Boadu, 2019) [6].

Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs)

The 73rd Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution, passed in 1992, mandated the reservation of seats for women in PRIs, which has been a key driver of this progress. This Act mandated that one-third of the seats in PRIs be reserved for women. This has led to a substantial increase in the number of women participating in local governance. The reservation policy has significantly increased the participation of women in PRIs (Aggarwal, 2021) [1]. Women have contested and won elections in large numbers, leading to a more gender-inclusive governance structure. Women elected to PRIs have taken on leadership roles, serving as Sarpanches (village council heads), members of Gram Panchayats, and in other capacities. This has empowered them to make decisions that impact their communities directly (Nazneen & Mahmud, 2012) [21]. However, women's representatives in PRIs have been instrumental in influencing policies and programmes that address issues such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and women's rights at the grassroots level. Over the years, there has been a concerted effort to raise awareness about the importance of women's participation in PRIs. This has been accompanied by educational initiatives to build the capacity of women to participate in local governance effectively. Despite progress, challenges such as patriarchy, limited access to resources, and social barriers persist. Women in many parts of India still face resistance when trying to assert their rights within PRIs. Continued efforts are needed to ensure the meaningful participation and empowerment of women in PRIs. This includes addressing structural barriers, providing support mechanisms, and promoting a more inclusive and gender-sensitive governance framework (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013) [13].

Review of Literature

Sharma (2023) [28] emphasizes the limited knowledge and comprehension of the constitution among women, suggesting that a significant number of them are uninformed about the functioning of Gram Panchayats and often make voting choices based on the influence of their families. The lack of autonomous political participation is demonstrated by studies such as Parvin and Sarkar (2021) [22], which emphasise the obstacles that women face in India, including poverty, unemployment, and low literacy rates. Goyal (2020) [15] advocates for the implementation of education programmes that emphasise grassroots political engagement and decision-making as a strategy for achieving gender equity. The author emphasises the importance of addressing both inherent and cultural inequities to prevent the exclusion of women from the political sphere. Nevertheless, Chaturvedi and Chaturvedi (2024) [9] employ machine-learning techniques to determine the religious affiliation of individuals by analysing their names. The potential global application of similar methods to identify various identity groups is suggested by the decrease in Muslim participation in Indian elections, as indicated by their research. Schotte *et al.* (2023) [26] compares caste-based affirmative action (AA) in India and race-based AA in the United States to analyse the concept of representation. Despite discrepancies in performance outcomes, Indian reservation regulations offer increased opportunities and representation. Gulzar *et al.* (2023) [16] provides additional evidence that political affirmative action in India's Scheduled Areas effectively bolsters specific minority populations while concurrently promoting development. This approach ensures that benefits are distributed more equitably by aligning them with population proportions and bolstering initiatives that support the impoverished. Additionally, Borah (2022) [7] underscores the significant influence of education on both social development and political empowerment, demonstrating that education enables women to become more involved in politics and more empowered. Chaturvedi *et al.* (2022) [10] examines the significance of female voter demand in determining the efficacy of gender quotas in Uttar Pradesh. They emphasise the necessity of empowering female electors in order to effectively implement these quotas. Mohammadifar (2023) [18] establishes a direct correlation between the level of political influence of women worldwide and their participation in high-ranking positions in both the executive and legislative branches. This research emphasises the important role of women's political leaders in inspiring others to engage in political activities.

Methodology

This study focused on a thematic review of women's political participation and empowerment, collecting secondary data from a diverse array of published resources. Over twenty papers were studied, all of which were published in prestigious academic journals. The selected papers provide a comprehensive overview of various factors influencing women's political engagement, representation, and empowerment across different regions and contexts.

Discussion and Findings

The study of women's political participation and empowerment in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India over the past three decades is a significant area of research. However, several gaps persist, including a need for a long-term impact assessment, addressing the intersectionality of women's identities, understanding the quality of participation, and addressing barriers to entry and retention. The role of political parties in promoting or hindering women's political participation in PRIs is also underexplored. Capacity-building and training programmes

for women in PRIs are still unclear, and the effectiveness of policy and legal frameworks is underexplored. The digital divide and ways to leverage technology for women's empowerment are also underexplored. Comparative analysis across states can provide insights into factors facilitating or hindering women's political participation and empowerment. Linking research on women's political participation and empowerment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is also needed.

Conclusion
Women's political participation and empowerment within Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India from 1993 to 2023 underscores the transformative impact of the 73rd Amendment Act on gender-inclusive governance. The reservation of one-third of PRI seats for women has been a pivotal driver in enhancing women's representation and influence at the grassroots level. As a result, there has been a notable surge in women contesting and winning elections, leading to a more diverse and inclusive governance structure. Women elected to PRIs have assumed leadership roles, advocating for policies and programmes that address crucial community issues like healthcare, education, sanitation, and women's rights. This increased participation has empowered women to make decisions directly impacting their communities, challenging traditional power dynamics, and fostering greater gender equality within local governance. However, despite significant progress, persistent challenges such as patriarchal attitudes, limited access to resources, and entrenched social barriers continue to impede the meaningful participation of women in PRIs. Efforts to address these challenges must be sustained, including structural reforms, support mechanisms, and the promotion of a more inclusive and gender-sensitive governance framework. Moving forward, there is a need for comprehensive long-term impact assessments, a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of women's identities, and efforts to enhance the quality of women's participation in PRIs. Additionally, exploring the role of political parties, improving capacity-building initiatives, leveraging technology for empowerment, and conducting comparative analyses across states can further enrich strategies for advancing women's political participation and empowerment in PRIs. Aligning research in this area with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can provide a holistic framework for guiding future interventions and ensuring the sustained progress of gender equality in local governance.

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