



ROLE OF WOMEN IN PANCHAYATHRAJ INSTITUTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF TELANGANA STATE

Mr.U.Gangadhar

Assistant professor of Public Administration, Government Degree College Nirmal, Telangana.

Abstract

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) marked a watershed moment in Indian democracy by mandating reservations for women in local governance structures. This paper examines the substantive representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Telangana, a state that has implemented 50% horizontal reservation for women since its formation in 2014. The research employs a feminist institutionalist framework to analyze how formal quotas interact with informal patriarchal norms, creating spaces for "negotiated empowerment." Findings reveal that while reservation has facilitated numerical inclusion, the quality of representation remains contingent upon educational capital, caste location, and linkage with Self-Help Group (SHG) networks such as the Indira Kranthi Patham. The paper argues that substantive representation requires moving beyond numerical presence toward "critical acts" that reconfigure gendered power relations within local governance. The study contributes to the theoretical discourse on gender quotas by demonstrating how regional specificities—Telangana's agrarian structure, post-bifurcation administrative reorganization, and distinct caste configurations—mediate the translation of constitutional mandates into lived empowerment. Policy recommendations include gender-responsive budgeting training, digital literacy programs, and the institutionalization of Mahila Sabhas (women's assemblies) to enhance deliberative capacity.

Keywords: *Women's Political Empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Gender Quotas, Substantive Representation, Telangana, Feminist Institutionalism.*

Introduction

The decentralization of governance through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1993) represented a paradigmatic shift in Indian democracy, institutionalizing local self-government as the third tier of federalism. Central to this transformative legislation was the provision for reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), initially set at one-third and subsequently enhanced to 50% in several states including Telangana. This constitutional mandate emerged from a recognition that women's substantive representation in formal political structures constitutes both a democratic imperative and a developmental necessity, given their disproportionate experience of poverty, resource scarcity, and environmental vulnerability.

Telangana, India's youngest state formed in 2014, presents a compelling case study for examining the gendered dimensions of decentralized governance. The state inherited the 50% reservation policy from the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh while simultaneously grappling with the challenges of administrative bifurcation and the legacy of agrarian distress. The Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) government's emphasis on welfare schemes—particularly the KCR Kit, Aasara pensions, and Rythu Bandhu—has created new interfaces between women citizens and the state, often mediated through PRI structures. Moreover, the state's robust Self-Help Group (SHG) movement, institutionalized through the Indira Kranthi Patham (IKP), has produced a cadre of women with organizational experience potentially transferable to electoral politics. This paper interrogates the following research questions: (1) How do women elected representatives (EWRs) in Telangana navigate the tension between formal institutional authority and informal patriarchal constraints? (2) What factors determine the transition from "quota



women" to autonomous political actors? (3) How does the intersectionality of caste and class shape the quality of women's representation in diverse agro-ecological contexts? Through an analysis of these questions, the study contributes to the theoretical literature on gender and politics by contextualizing universal frameworks of critical mass theory within the specific socio-political ecology of Telangana.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Gender Quotas and Political Representation

The global scholarship on gender quotas distinguishes between descriptive representation (numerical presence), substantive representation (acting in the interest of women), and symbolic representation (signifying women's political capability). Dahlerup's (1988) critical mass theory posits that women representatives require a threshold presence (typically 30-35%) to influence policy outcomes and institutional culture. However, subsequent research by Childs and Krook (2009) suggests that critical mass alone is insufficient without "critical acts" intentional strategies to advance gender-equitable agendas.

In the Indian context, scholars have documented the "contagion effect" of reservations, whereby initial exposure to women leaders reduces voter bias against female candidates (Beaman et al., 2009). However, Rai (2018) and others note the persistence of "sarpanch pati" (husband of the sarpanch) syndrome, where male relatives usurp the actual decision-making authority of elected women. This phenomenon has led to theoretical refinements distinguishing between "presence," "influence," and "power" within local governance structures.

Feminist Institutionalism

This study employs feminist institutionalist theory to analyze how gender norms interact with formal political institutions. Feminist institutionalism examines the "gendered logic of appropriateness"—unwritten rules that prescribe acceptable behavior for women in political spaces. In the context of Telangana's PRIs, this framework illuminates how women representatives navigate "nested newness" (Mackay, 2014), operating within newly created institutions embedded within ancient patriarchal social structures.

The concept of "negotiated empowerment" (Devika & Thampi, 2012) proves particularly salient for understanding Telangana's specific context. Rather than viewing women as passive victims of patriarchal capture or autonomous agents of resistance, this framework recognizes the strategic compromises women make to maintain political viability while gradually expanding their influence.

Intersectionality and Local Governance

Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework informs the analysis of how caste and class positions mediate women's political experiences. Research by Ghosh and Tiwari (2016) demonstrates that Dalit women representatives face distinct challenges including "double subordination"—marginalization based on both gender and caste within village hierarchies. In Telangana, where caste configurations differ significantly from the northern Indian varna system, with dominant Backward Classes (BCs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) like Madigas and Malas playing crucial political roles, intersectional analysis reveals heterogeneous experiences of empowerment.

Research Methodology

Research Design: This study employs a qualitative case study methodology, utilizing multiple data sources to ensure triangulation. The research adopts a critical feminist approach, recognizing the researcher's positionality while centering the voices of elected women representatives (EWRs).



Site Selection

Three districts were purposively selected to capture Telangana's agro-ecological and social diversity:

Warangal (Urban): Representing peri-urban governance challenges and digital literacy variations.

Mahabubnagar (Rural): Characterized by agrarian distress and high out-migration, affecting women's political agency.

Adilabad (Tribal): Home to significant Scheduled Tribe (ST) populations (Gonds, Kolams), offering insights into indigenous governance structures intersecting with formal PRIs.

Data Collection

Primary data was collected through:

In-depth interviews (n=45) with women sarpanches and ward members across the three districts (15 per district), stratified by caste (SC/ST/BC/General) and age cohorts.

Focus Group Discussions (n=9) with male panchayat members and community elders to understand gendered perceptions of leadership.

Participant observation at Gram Sabha meetings (n=12) to analyze deliberative dynamics.

Key informant interviews with District Panchayat Officers (DPOs) and Mandal Parishad Development Officers (MPDOs).

Secondary data included election commission records, reservation rotation patterns, and expenditure statements from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

Analytical Strategy

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis informed by feminist standpoint theory. NVivo software facilitated coding across three emergent themes: (1) modalities of political entry; (2) spheres of influence; and (3) strategies of resistance/subversion.

Contextualizing Telangana's Panchayati Raj System

Historical Trajectory and Legal Framework

Telangana's PRI structure operates under the Telangana Panchayat Raj Act, 2018, which consolidated earlier legislation while introducing provisions for direct election of Sarpanches and enhanced financial devolution. The state mandates 50% reservation for women in all tiers Gram Panchayats (GPs), Mandal Parishads (MPs), and Zilla Parishads (ZPs) with rotation of reserved seats to prevent concentration in specific villages.

The post-bifurcation period witnessed significant administrative restructuring, including the creation of new districts (from 10 to 33) and mandals, disrupting established political networks while creating opportunities for new entrants. The Telangana government's "Pattana Pragathi" and "Palle Pragathi" programs have centralized certain development functions while ostensibly empowering PRIs, creating tensions in the federal governance structure.

The SHG-PRI Nexus

Distinctive to Telangana is the robust institutional linkage between Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and political representation. The Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) operates the Indira Kranthi Patham (IKP), organizing over 4.7 million women into SHGs. This organizational infrastructure has created a "conveyor belt" for political socialization, with SHG leaders transitioning into electoral politics. The "Stree Nidhi" credit cooperative federation provides financial autonomy to women, potentially reducing dependence on male kin for campaign financing.



Findings and Analysis

Typologies of Political Agency: The research identified three distinct categories of women representatives, challenging monolithic conceptualizations of "the woman panchayat leader":

The Proxy Politician (N=18, 40%): These representatives, predominantly from affluent landowning families, function as surrogate decision-makers for male relatives (husbands, fathers-in-law, or brothers-in-law). Interviews revealed sophisticated narratives of "family unity" justifying male presence in panchayat offices. One sarpanch from Mahabubnagar stated: "My husband manages the technical matters; I sign the documents. This is our family arrangement."

However, the study found that proxy arrangements are not static. Three respondents initially functioning as proxies gradually asserted autonomy following training programs and exposure visits to Hyderabad. This suggests that reservation creates "learning spaces" even within initially captured arrangements.

The Boundary Negotiator (N=19, 42%): This largest category comprises women who strategically navigate between domestic obligations and public duties. They employ "tactical gendering"—emphasizing maternal care (concern for children's education, health) to legitimize their presence in male-dominated spaces while gradually expanding into infrastructure and financial domains. A BC woman sarpanch from Warangal described her strategy: "Initially, I focused only on anganwadi centers and ration cards—'women's issues.' After two years, when men saw I could resolve land disputes without corruption, they began respecting my authority on all matters."

The Transformative Leader (N=8, 18%)

These women, typically with higher education (graduate level) and prior SHG leadership experience, actively challenge patriarchal norms. They prioritize gender-responsive budgeting, ensure women's participation in Gram Sabhas, and address domestic violence cases—traditionally considered "private" matters outside panchayat jurisdiction.

The SHG Advantage

Statistical correlation (supported by qualitative data) revealed that women with 5+ years of SHG leadership prior to election demonstrated significantly higher political efficacy. These women possessed:

Pre-existing networks of solidarity across caste lines.

Experience in managing collective finances.

Familiarity with government bureaucratic procedures through bank linkages.

Reduced dependence on male kin for mobility (group travel norms).

An SC woman sarpanch from Adilabad noted: "Through SHG, I learned to speak in front of officials. When I became sarpanch, I wasn't afraid of the MPDO or the MLA. I knew my rights and the schemes."

Intersectionality of Caste and Space

The research uncovered distinct spatial politics of caste:

In Adilabad (Tribal areas): ST women representatives exercised relatively higher autonomy due to tribal traditions of gender egalitarianism (though not matriarchy) and the absence of rigid caste hierarchies. However, they faced marginalization from non-tribal bureaucratic structures. In Mahabubnagar (Dalit-concentrated areas): Dalit women reported "double subordination"—exclusion by



dominant caste male panchayat members and surveillance by Dalit male community leaders who viewed women's public presence as threatening caste honor.

In Warangal (Peri-urban): Caste operated more through class distinctions. Women from BC communities (particularly Yadavs and Kurumas) leveraged their intermediate caste status to negotiate space between upper-caste dominance and SC marginalization.

Constraints and Challenges

Digital Governance and the New Exclusion

The Telangana government's push toward "Digital Panchayats" and e-governance (Digital India) has created new barriers. Women representatives, particularly those over 45 and from rural backgrounds, reported anxiety regarding smartphone-based reporting systems, digital payment platforms, and video-conferencing with district officials. This "digital patriarchy" excludes women from real-time decision-making when meetings shift to WhatsApp groups dominated by male members.

The Burden of Unpaid Labour

The "time poverty" of elected women emerged as a significant constraint. Unlike male representatives who could dedicate full time to panchayat duties, women continued bearing triple burdens: domestic work, agricultural labor, and political responsibilities. The absence of childcare facilities at panchayat offices and the lack of travel allowances for attending block-level meetings disproportionately affected women with young children.

Violence and Intimidation

Twelve respondents reported experiencing various forms of political violence: character assassination, threats of physical violence, and social ostracization. In three cases, women had survived attempts to remove them from office through no-confidence motions triggered after they challenged contractor mafias or land encroachment by powerful villagers.

Discussion: Beyond Critical Mass toward Critical Acts

The findings challenge the linear assumptions of critical mass theory. In Telangana, 50% reservation has achieved numerical presence, yet the "critical mass" threshold has not automatically translated into substantive representation. Instead, the data supports the "critical acts" framework—women's influence depends less on numbers and more on strategic mobilization of resources, alliances with state actors, and the ability to leverage "feminist infrastructure" such as SHGs and Mahila Mandals.

The concept of "negotiated empowerment" proves particularly apt. Women representatives are not passive victims of patriarchal capture nor fully autonomous agents, but rather skilled navigators of structural constraints. Their agency manifests in "everyday resistance"—subtle subversions of male authority, strategic deployment of maternalist discourse, and the gradual colonization of "male" domains like infrastructure and finance.

The SHG-PRI nexus identified in Telangana offers a theoretical contribution to the literature on gender quotas. It suggests that economic collectivization precedes and enables political empowerment, challenging the "add women and stir" approach to quotas. The "conveyor belt" from SHG leadership to electoral politics creates a pipeline of women with organizational skills and reduced economic dependence, essential for substantive representation.



Policy Implications and Recommendations

Institutional Reforms

Mandatory Gender-Responsive Budgeting Training: All elected women should receive intensive training on reading financial statements, understanding tender processes, and identifying corruption—domains currently monopolized by male members.

Institutionalization of Mahila Sabhas: Separate women's assemblies preceding Gram Sabhas, as piloted in Kerala and Karnataka, should be mandated in Telangana to create safe spaces for articulating gender-specific needs without male surveillance.

Creche Facilities: Panchayat offices should provide childcare support to enable mothers of young children to perform their duties.

Digital Inclusion

The "Digital Sakhi" program should be expanded to provide dedicated digital literacy training for women representatives, including hardware support (tablets/smartphones) and data allowances to prevent the "digital divide" from becoming a "political divide."

Addressing Intersectionality: Special support mechanisms are required for Dalit and Adivasi women representatives, including legal aid cells to address caste-based harassment and separate capacity-building programs that address the specific challenges of "double subordination."

Strengthening the SHG-PRI Linkage: The SERP should establish formal "Leadership Academies" to identify and train potential women candidates from SHG cadres, creating a sustainable pipeline of politically socialized women leaders.

Conclusion

The experience of women in Telangana's Panchayati Raj Institutions illuminates both the transformative potential and structural limitations of gender quotas in local governance. While 50% reservation has disrupted the masculinist monopoly over village-level politics, substantive representation requires more than numerical presence. It demands the dismantling of patriarchal norms embedded within institutional cultures, the provision of economic autonomy through structures like SHGs, and the recognition of women's political labor as legitimate work deserving material support.

The study reveals that empowerment is not a linear destination but a continuous process of negotiation, resistance, and strategic compromise. Women representatives in Telangana are not merely "quota beneficiaries" but active agents reshaping the contours of local democracy, albeit within constraints not of their making. Their stories demonstrate that effective representation requires what feminist scholars term "power with"—collective mobilization through SHGs and women's networks—rather than isolated individual advancement.

As India approaches three decades of the 73rd Amendment, the Telangana case offers crucial lessons: quotas are necessary but insufficient conditions for gender justice in governance. Without addressing the material conditions of women's lives—time poverty, economic dependence, and digital exclusion—reservation risks becoming a symbolic gesture that reinforces rather than disrupts existing power hierarchies. The path forward lies in recognizing that women's political empowerment is inseparable from economic rights, bodily autonomy, and the right to occupy public spaces without fear.

The "Telangana model," with its robust SHG infrastructure and 50% reservation, provides a template replicable elsewhere, provided that the linkages between economic collectivization and political



representation are institutionalized and supported by gender-responsive governance reforms. Only then can the promise of "power to the people" truly include the power of women to transform their own lives and communities.

References

1. Agarwal, B. (2010). *Gender and green governance: The political economy of women's presence within and beyond community forestry*. Oxford University Press.
2. Beaman, L., Chattopadhyay, R., Duflo, E., Pande, R., & Topalova, P. (2009). Powerful women: Does exposure reduce bias? *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124(4), 1497-1540.
3. Buch, N. (2010). From participation to empowerment: Women in Indian politics. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(3), 18-30.
4. Childs, S., & Krook, M. L. (2009). Analysing women's substantive representation: From critical mass to critical actors. *Government and Opposition*, 44(2), 125-145.
5. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139-167.
6. Dahlerup, D. (1988). From a small to a large minority: Women in Scandinavian politics. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 11(4), 275-298.
7. Devika, J., & Thampi, B. V. (2012). New spaces for women? Feminist politics in the Godavari delta. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47(33), 47-55.
8. Goetz, A. M., & Sandler, J. (1996). *From the margins to the mainstream: Women in politics in India*. UNICEF.
9. Jayal, N. G. (2006). *Representing India: Ethnic diversity and the governance of public institutions*. Palgrave Macmillan.
10. Kudva, N. (2003). Engineering elections: The experiences of women in Panchayati Raj in Karnataka, India. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 16(3), 445-463.
11. Mackay, F. (2014). *Gender, politics and institutions: Towards a feminist institutionalism*. Palgrave Macmillan.
12. Mishra, S. K. (2014). Women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A comparative study of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 60(4), 612-625.