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## **A Brief Case Study on Women's Participation and Activism in Local Politics (Gram Panchayat)**

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### **Abstract:**

In India, the village is the most basic unit of social organization and administration. Approximately 70 percent of the country's total population resides in rural areas. In this respect, it would not be inaccurate to say that "the real India lives in its villages. This article sheds light on the role of women, their leadership, empowerment, contributions, and the challenges they face in the Panchayati Raj elections held under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. The article specifically discusses the political journeys of three women village heads (Pradhan). Two of these women leaders are from Himachal Pradesh and come from upper-caste backgrounds, while the third is from Haryana and represents a Dalit social background. Thus, this article also highlights the pervasive gender inequality in India, as well as the role of social networks and caste structures, as the social background and caste-based reservations have played a significant role in the process of these women becoming village heads. A stark difference is evident in the social status and opportunities available to urban and rural women. In rural society, patriarchal thinking, violence against women, and gender inequality are far more deeply entrenched. In such an environment, women have limited opportunities to break free from traditional roles, assume social leadership, and challenge patriarchal norms. In this context, the reservation provided to women in Panchayati Raj institutions has proven to be a historic and revolutionary step, particularly in ensuring their participation in grassroots politics. This article attempts to understand, through the political journeys of three women village heads, how the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has played a decisive role in the empowerment of women in rural India.

**Keywords:** *Gender ,Rural , Dalit ,inequalities ,empowerment.*

### **Introduction:**

The world is currently witnessing a new era of democratic decentralization and women's empowerment. Many developed and developing countries are adopting diverse models of power transfer through democratic structures at the local level. Simultaneously, the participation of women in local decision-making bodies is steadily increasing. India, with its vast socio-economic diversity and visionary policy framework, presents a particularly important and interesting example in this context. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution can be described in many ways as a "silent revolution." Following these

amendments, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are no longer merely subject to state governments and their laws, but have become an integral part of the Constitution. Thus, they have acquired the constitutional status of autonomous institutions, similar to Parliament at the federal level and State Legislative Assemblies at the state level. These amendments mandate regular elections every five years and explicitly provide for new elections within six months in case of the dissolution of any Panchayati Raj Institution. The establishment of State Election Commissions has also been provided for to ensure free, fair, and timely elections. The most revolutionary and far-reaching provision of these amendments is the reservation of one-third of the seats in local bodies for women. In addition, seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population, thereby strengthening the concept of social justice and inclusive democracy. This paper presents a brief yet analytical review of the role of women in local governance at the Panchayat level in rural India in recent years. The study discusses the achievements made by women in leadership and critically analyzes the social, political, and familial challenges they face.

### **Sources and methods:**

A variety of sources were used to collect information on women Panchayat representatives, including internet-based content, YouTube interviews, documentaries, telephonic interviews, and available primary and secondary literature. This article primarily focuses on the role of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and women's reservations in rural Panchayati Raj institutions. The scope of the study is limited to two states in North India—Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. The present study covers the experiences of three women Panchayat Pradhan, two from upper caste backgrounds and one from the Dalit community. Due to this social diversity, their path to leadership, tenure experiences, and challenges faced differ from one another. This article chronicles the life journeys of the women Pradhan, chronologically based on their journey to becoming Pradhan and the key stages of their leadership experience. First, a brief introduction to each woman Pradhan is provided, as they come from different geographical regions and social backgrounds. This is followed by an analysis of their political entry or motivation for contesting elections. The next step discusses their election campaign strategies and processes. Following this, a detailed account of the most significant challenge they faced—balancing domestic responsibilities and Panchayat leadership—is presented. The final analytical phase encompasses their experiences, struggles, and challenges during their tenure, reflecting their journey from struggle to empowered leadership. Finally, the conclusion section evaluates the role of women's leadership at the grassroots level in the context of the contribution of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and offers a comparative analysis of the experiences of the three women Panchayat leaders, helping to understand the actual state of women's empowerment in the rural Panchayati Raj system.

## **1. First Case Study.**

### **Introduction of the Woman Gram Pradhan:**

**Usha Birla** is a resident of Paruhi village in Hamirpur district of Himachal Pradesh. She holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science and, after her marriage, completed her Master's degree in Political Science with the support of her in-laws. Usha Birla has been elected as the Gram Panchayat Pradhan (village head) for three consecutive terms. Her current term as Pradhan is from 2021 to 2025. Her winning the election three times in a row not only demonstrates her strong local leadership and effective public relations skills but also reflects the trust the rural

community places in her. During her tenure, she has played an active role in various aspects of rural development. Furthermore, her leadership serves as an inspiring example of women's empowerment at the local level.

### **Inspiration to contest elections / Political beginnings:**

During the interview, Mrs. Usha Birla expressed her views with great confidence and clarity. Recounting her inspiring journey in politics, she explained that when she came to her in-laws' village after her marriage, the village council was headed by a woman. The vision, leadership qualities, and commitment to social welfare of that woman leader deeply impressed Mrs. Birla. As a result, she was inspired to actively participate in public life. She further explained that in the 2011 Panchayati Raj elections, the position of village head was reserved for women candidates under the provisions of women's reservation. Taking advantage of this opportunity, she participated in the electoral process and won successfully. Since then, with the trust and blessings of the villagers, she has been continuously elected as the village head for three consecutive terms.

### **Election campaign style and key issues:**

Instead of limiting her election campaign to ostentatious processions or crowded rallies, Usha ji gave it a meaningful and innovative direction. She believed that the best way to connect with the public was through direct and heartfelt communication. With this approach, she formed small groups with the help of women she knew and established close contact with voters by going door-to-door. Usha ji not only introduced herself but also familiarized the public with her working style, development plans, and future welfare initiatives. Her campaign was deeply rooted in public sentiment and real needs. The key issues she emphasized were: creation of basic infrastructure such as paved roads and drainage systems; strengthening of sanitation and cleanliness; concrete initiatives for human development; measures for women's rights, empowerment, and welfare; and plans for children's education, nutrition, and overall development. Usha ji firmly assured the public that her goal was not merely electoral victory, but to connect every citizen of the region with the mainstream of development. The most prominent feature of her campaign was that it was a true reflection of public sentiment and real needs.

### **Managing the home and the responsibility of the gram Pradhan : A challenge-**

Usha Birla explains that balancing household responsibilities with the duties of being a village head was indeed challenging. However, she received complete support from her family throughout this journey. Her husband, Mr. Balbir Birla, and other family members—her father-in-law, mother-in-law, and brother-in-law—all supported her in her panchayat work. She never faced any restrictions on going out or carrying out her duties related to the panchayat. On the contrary, her husband encouraged her at every step. Usha ji recounts that on several occasions, when she was late due to panchayat work, her husband would cook dinner himself and wait for her return. It was this support and understanding from her family that enabled Usha ji to strike a balance between her household responsibilities and her duties as a village head.

### **Experiences and Challenges: From Struggle to Respect:**

Usha Birla, sharing her experiences, says that Indian society has long been rooted in patriarchy. This is why, when she took on the responsibility of village head, she faced numerous challenges

in the initial stages. The dominance of men was clearly visible in the panchayat meetings, and they were the focus of most discussions. In such an environment, it was not easy for a woman head to effectively express her views and maintain balance. However, Usha was not one to give up in the face of challenges. Through patience, confidence, and a transparent work style, she gradually earned everyone's trust. Over time, people's attitudes changed, and the atmosphere that was once uncomfortable and challenging has now become one of cooperation, respect, and participation. Recounting her struggles, Usha also mentions that initially, her husband faced some social discomfort. He found the identity of "husband of the village head" uncomfortable. But when he saw his wife's dedication, honesty, and her growing reputation among the villagers, a sense of pride arose within him. Today, he clearly states that the respect he receives is not because he is the "husband of the village head," but because he is the life partner of a strong, capable, and respected woman leader. This experience underscores the fact that when women move forward with confidence, determination, and leadership abilities, societal attitudes also change, and the path of struggle ultimately transforms into one of respect and acceptance.

## **2.Second Case Study.**

### **Female Gram Pradhan introduction :**

**Pradhan Kalpana Garg**, age between 30 and 35 years, is a resident of Jabli village (Solan district, Himachal Pradesh). She has been active in student politics since her college days, where she gained valuable experience in leadership, organizational skills, and social participation, which played a significant role in shaping her public life. She served as the village head (Gram Pradhan) with distinction from 2021 to 2025.

### **Inspiration and beginning of contesting elections:**

Kalpana Garg, while sharing her journey to becoming a Panchayat head, recounts that a community meeting was held in her village. The purpose of this meeting was to decide on a suitable candidate for the Gram Panchayat head position, which was reserved for a woman this time under the provisions of the women's reservation policy. The meeting was attended mostly by male members, who were looking for a "suitable" female candidate. When Kalpana arrived at the meeting, she overheard the male members making prejudiced remarks about women's capabilities—such as, "Women cannot manage large and important development projects," or "Women are not capable of effectively running the Panchayat." From these discussions, it became clear to her that the male members were only reluctantly putting forward a female candidate due to the reservation requirement, while harboring deep doubts about women's leadership abilities. Following this experience, Kalpana expressed her desire to her family to participate in the Panchayat elections. She explained that she had been active in politics since her college days and possessed considerable leadership experience. Understanding her confidence and capabilities, her family not only supported her decision but also wholeheartedly encouraged her to contest the elections. In this way, Kalpana Garg not only established herself in a challenging socio-political environment but also challenged the deeply ingrained prejudices and doubts that had long hindered women's political participation at the local level.

**Election campaign strategy and key issues:** Kalpana set a new precedent by effectively utilizing social media in her election campaign. She powerfully presented her election symbol,

"lock and key," to the public through video advertisements. In this promotional video, Kalpana introduced herself briefly, explained her reasons for contesting the election, and elaborated on her views on key issues such as rural development and women's empowerment. This video quickly went viral on social media platforms, especially among the youth. As a result, Kalpana garnered widespread support from young people and was able to connect with young voters effectively. Alongside this, she also gave equal importance to traditional election campaigning. With the help of her mother-in-law, she went door-to-door, interacting personally with women and seeking their support for the election. Thus, by combining digital media and traditional campaigning methods, Kalpana conducted a comprehensive, effective, and successful election campaign, which significantly increased both her popularity and public support.

### **Managing the house and responsibilities of the Pradhan:**

In her interview, Kalpana Garg explains that her life became extremely busy and challenging after becoming the village head. In the initial stages, balancing her responsibilities in the panchayat and her family obligations was not easy for her. However, her husband and in-laws understood this challenge and provided her with their full support at every step. Even when there were delays in panchayat-related work on several occasions, her family took on the household responsibilities themselves and continuously encouraged her. Because of this family support, Kalpana was able to carry out her duties in the panchayat more effectively, with dedication and confidence.

### **Experience and suggestions:**

Kalpana Garg ji believes that Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women's Reservation in Panchayat elections is a revolutionary step towards empowerment of women. This not only gives women opportunities for leadership, but it is also a strong initiative towards social change and equality. She clearly says that the government should develop more effective platforms for women through which they can play an active, decisive and influential role in the overall development of their region and society.

## **3. Third Case Study – Haryana.**

### **Introduction of the Woman Gram Pradhan:**

**Suman**, who belongs to a Dalit social background, is a resident of Amarkhedhi village in Jind district of Haryana state. She is approximately 35 to 40 years old. She completed her initial education up to the 11th grade in her native village. After her marriage, she completed her 12th-grade education while living with her in-laws. From 2016 to 2022, Suman served as the head of her village's Gram Panchayat (village council). During this time, she played an active role in local governance and gained administrative experience at the panchayat level.

### **Inspiration to contest elections / Political beginnings :**

The practice of observing purdah (veiling) is still widely prevalent, but Suman Ji never allowed it to become an obstacle in her public life. Her journey to becoming the village head is truly inspiring. Before being elected as the village head, Suman Ji worked as an ASHA worker (Accredited Social Health Activist), which required her to visit every household in the village. During this time, she established a positive and trustworthy image among the villagers through her dedication to service, honesty, and approachable demeanor. Therefore, when the election

for the village head was held under the women's reservation quota, even though there were eight other female candidates in the fray, the villagers elected Suman Ji as their village head based on her strong leadership and experience in public service.

### **Election campaign style and key issues :**

The strong and trustworthy reputation that Suman Ji built through her continuous service in her village as an ASHA (Asha Bahu) worker became the most powerful foundation for her election campaign and victory. The villagers had witnessed her dedication, hard work, and spirit of service firsthand, which resulted in deep trust and widespread support for her. During the election campaign, this spirit of service proved crucial in connecting with people and effectively conveying her ideas and messages. This is why she was ahead of other candidates and succeeded in establishing herself as a strong leader of the Gram Panchayat.

### **Managing the home and the responsibility of the gram Pradhan :**

While the experiences of the first two women panchayat heads paint a positive picture of family support, Suman's story reveals a contrasting, complex, and challenging family experience. Suman recounts that when she became actively involved in panchayat work and started spending more time outside the home, her husband began to doubt her character. This led to tension in their marriage and increased friction with other family members. According to Suman, some family members—particularly her brother-in-law, father-in-law, and other male relatives—considered themselves the rightful holders of the village head position and therefore constantly created conflict and opposition to her leadership. Moreover, whenever someone in the village greeted her respectfully, this behavior displeased her brother-in-law and sister-in-law, making Suman's domestic life even more difficult. However, circumstances gradually changed. Her husband slowly understood the situation, acknowledged his misconceptions, and began to support Suman's work. In a video interview, Suman's husband acknowledges this, saying:

*“She never listened to me, but she has done excellent work for the village. I am proud of her today.”*

*“यह मेरी कभी नहीं सुनती थी, लेकिन इसने गांव के लिए बहुत अच्छा काम किया है। मुझे आज इस पर गर्व है।”*

This experience underscores the fact that family conflicts and social obstacles are not uncommon on the path of women's leadership, but with understanding, communication, and time, these differences can be overcome. Suman's life story presents a powerful and inspiring example of women's resilience, self-respect, and leadership capabilities.

### **Experiences and Challenges: From Struggle to Respect:**

Suman faced patriarchal thinking and the associated social challenges far more intensely than other women panchayat heads in Himachal Pradesh. In her interview, she recounts a dispute that arose on January 26th regarding the flag hoisting ceremony at the school. She explains that male members of her family had gone to the school for the flag hoisting, but the school administration sent them back, saying that it was the responsibility of the village head. Following this incident, strong opposition arose against Suman. Ultimately, she went to the school herself and hoisted the flag. After this, she began to be invited to perform this duty at other schools as well, which was a sign of acceptance of her constitutional position and

authority. In the rural social environment of Haryana, Suman faced the harsh and inhumane aspects of the patriarchal system. Male members of her family not only continuously obstructed her work but also threw her out of the house when the opposition intensified. Attempts were also made to tarnish her character. The statement by the male family members— “हमने तो इसे ब्याह कर लाया था, अब यह हमारे ही घर की चौधर बन गई है”—

*“We brought her here after marriage, and now she has become the head of our household”—*

clearly illustrates the extent to which female leadership is perceived as a challenge to traditional power structures. This experience demonstrates that Dalit women leaders have to contend not only with gender-based discrimination but also with caste and family power dynamics. Suman's struggle emerges as a powerful social document of the roots of patriarchy in rural India and the resistance against it.

### **Comparative description of case study:**

So far, we have discussed the experiences of three women Panchayat heads who have made significant contributions to women's empowerment at the rural level. However, it is also essential to understand that India is a country full of inequalities and diversities. Here, women's and gender issues need to be viewed within the broader context of social, economic, caste, religious, and political inequalities, as all these factors are directly linked to women's lives and experiences. Gram Pradhan Suman, who comes from an economically weaker and Dalit social background, faced several structural challenges in addition to patriarchal social attitudes. Thus, discrimination at both the caste and gender levels presented a double barrier for her. Despite this, the reservation of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj system, especially the provisions reserved for Scheduled Caste women, has proven to be a very positive and decisive initiative towards women's empowerment. This system not only challenges patriarchy but also presents a powerful intervention against traditional structures of caste dominance. In this respect, women's reservation in Panchayati Raj has emerged as a significant paradigm of inclusive democracy and women's empowerment in rural India. Women leaders in the Panchayati Raj system face numerous social and cultural obstacles. On the one hand, they have to fulfill their responsibilities related to family and children, while on the other hand, balancing these with the demands of public life becomes challenging for them. In addition, deep-seated cultural biases prevalent in society and social restrictions placed on women venturing outside the home hinder their political participation. The lack of inspiring female role models and established women leaders in a male-dominated political environment is also a significant challenge for women. Furthermore, many women representatives experience hesitation in effectively expressing their views on public platforms due to limited knowledge of panchayat-related issues, processes, and administrative procedures. Despite all these obstacles, a remarkable increase in political awareness, knowledge, and confidence among women has been observed in recent years. A major reason for this is the strengthening of the decentralization process in the country and the granting of more powers and responsibilities to Panchayati Raj institutions. According to a survey, most elected women panchayat representatives are married. As a result, they are able to dedicate relatively less time to the panchayat office compared to their male counterparts due to domestic responsibilities. While male representatives spend more time on panchayat-related work, a large proportion of women representatives are engaged in household chores. In addition, most women representatives are elected for the first time and have limited prior experience in panchayat or political work. In contrast, male representatives are often

already involved in panchayat or local politics. This is why many women representatives are unable to get re-elected, especially when their reserved seats become unreserved in the next election. Many women also lack the confidence to contest elections from unreserved seats. It has also been observed that some women from affluent rural classes or upper castes enter politics through their family's political background. On the other hand, many women from poor, landless, or marginal farmer families are successfully fulfilling their responsibilities at the panchayat level even without any family political support, which highlights the emerging potential of women's leadership in rural India.

### **Conclusion.**

The provision for reserving seats for women at the panchayat level in India has proven to be an extremely impactful and far-reaching measure. Its most significant effect has been the political empowerment of women in villages across the country, enabling them to actively participate in local governance and community development processes. In this context, it is fair to say that India is among the leading countries in promoting women's political participation at the local level. However, many social, economic, and cultural barriers still need to be overcome to ensure effective and meaningful representation of women in panchayat institutions. Robust institutional and administrative reforms are necessary in this regard. Furthermore, it is essential to effectively implement training programs that promote skill development and capacity building for women representatives. In addition, the systematic collection of reliable data on the challenges and obstacles faced by women representatives is also crucial. This will not only strengthen the political position of women but also pave the way for ensuring their equal and just participation in India's democratic system. Thus, women's reservation in the Panchayati Raj system has brought about a revolutionary change in the field of women's empowerment. This system not only challenges patriarchy and caste-based injustice but has also emerged as a powerful symbol of the expansion and strengthening of democracy. This is not merely a social transformation but a clear reflection of the progressive journey of Indian democracy.

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