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From Ghonghat to Governance: Women's Political Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 mandated one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), creating an unprecedented opportunity for women's entry into grassroots political office in rural India. Three decades on, questions persist regarding whether formal reservation has translated into substantive political agency or has instead produced nominal representation mediated by male relatives, a phenomenon often described through the figure of the 'Sarpanch Pati.' This study examines the extent and quality of political participation among elected women representatives (EWRs) in Panchayati Raj institutions across rural Madhya Pradesh. Drawing on a survey of 220 elected women representatives, the study assesses decision-making autonomy, participation in gram sabha proceedings, exposure to gender-based obstruction, and perceived effectiveness. Findings indicate considerable heterogeneity: while a substantial proportion of EWRs report active, independent participation in panchayat decision-making, a significant minority report that decisions are substantially influenced or made by male family members. Regression analysis identifies education level, prior political exposure, and family support as significant predictors of decision-making autonomy. The paper argues that reservation policy has produced genuine but uneven empowerment, with structural and familial factors continuing to mediate the translation of formal political office into substantive political voice.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, women's political participation, gender and governance, reservation policy, rural Madhya Pradesh

1. Introduction

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, reserved one-third of seats and chairperson positions in Panchayati Raj Institutions for women, a provision subsequently extended to 50% reservation in several Indian states, including Madhya Pradesh (Government of India, 1992; Buch, 2010). This policy intervention was intended to institutionalise women's presence in grassroots governance and, through sustained exposure to public decision-making roles, to gradually transform gendered norms regarding women's capacity for political leadership.

However, sociological and political science scholarship has long debated whether formal reservation produces substantive political empowerment or merely descriptive representation. The colloquial term 'Sarpanch Pati' (literally, 'husband of the female sarpanch') captures a widely observed phenomenon in which elected women representatives' husbands or male



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relatives exercise de facto authority over panchayat decisions while the woman holds nominal office (Rai, 2017). This study empirically investigates the extent of this phenomenon and its correlates among elected women representatives in rural Madhya Pradesh, examining the conditions under which reservation translates into genuine decision-making autonomy.

2. Literature Review

Early evaluations of the 73rd Amendment were cautiously optimistic, with Chattopadhyay and Duflo's (2004) influential study of West Bengal panchayats demonstrating that women-led panchayats allocated public resources differently than male-led panchayats, particularly in relation to infrastructure of direct relevance to women's daily lives, such as drinking water. This finding was interpreted as evidence that women's descriptive representation could translate into substantive policy influence even in the presence of significant patriarchal constraints.

Subsequent scholarship has offered a more mixed assessment. Ban and Rao (2008), studying panchayats across four South Indian states, found that women leaders continued to face significant obstruction in gram sabha proceedings and that their policy influence varied considerably by state and local context. Buch (2010), examining Madhya Pradesh specifically, documented that while women's formal participation rates in gram sabha meetings had increased substantially following reservation, actual decision-making authority often remained concentrated with male family members or dominant-caste male panchayat members, particularly in the initial terms following a woman's election.

Rai (2017) and Kudva (2003) both emphasise that the translation of reserved political office into substantive empowerment is conditional on factors including the elected woman's education level, prior exposure to public or political activity, family support (particularly spousal attitudes), and the strength of local women's collectives such as self-help groups. This literature suggests that reservation policy should be understood as creating a structural opportunity for empowerment whose realisation depends heavily on individual, familial, and community-level mediating factors — a framework this study adopts and tests empirically.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the extent of decision-making autonomy among elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions in rural Madhya Pradesh.
2. To examine the prevalence and correlates of the 'Sarpanch Pati' phenomenon among sampled respondents.
3. To identify factors predicting decision-making autonomy among elected women representatives.

3.1 Hypotheses

H1: Education level is positively associated with decision-making autonomy among elected women representatives.

H2: Prior political or public exposure is positively associated with decision-making autonomy.



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H3: Family support significantly predicts decision-making autonomy independent of education and prior exposure.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design: A cross-sectional survey design was used to assess political participation and autonomy among elected women representatives.

Sample: 220 elected women representatives (sarpanch, up-sarpanch, and ward panch) were selected from rural panchayats across four districts of Madhya Pradesh (Gwalior, Morena, Bhind, and Shivpuri) using multi-stage random sampling.

Tools: A structured interview schedule included a 10-item Decision-Making Autonomy Scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80), items on gram sabha participation frequency, an obstruction/interference checklist, and a Family Support Scale.

Data Analysis: Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression were conducted using SPSS (v.26). All data presented are hypothetical, constructed for methodological demonstration.

5. Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Sample Profile of Elected Women Representatives (N = 220)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Position	Sarpanch	88	40.0
	Up-Sarpanch	52	23.6
	Ward Panch	80	36.4
Education	Below Secondary	76	34.5
	Secondary/Higher Secondary	94	42.7
	Graduate & above	50	22.7
Prior Political/Public Exposure	Yes	94	42.7
	No	126	57.3

Table 2: Level of Decision-Making Autonomy Among Elected Women Representatives

Autonomy Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High Autonomy (independent decision-making)	78	35.5



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Autonomy Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Moderate Autonomy (shared decision-making)	86	39.1
Low Autonomy (decisions made by male relatives)	56	25.4

Table 3: Decision-Making Autonomy by Education Level

Education Level	N	Mean Autonomy Score (out of 40)	SD
Below Secondary	76	22.4	5.8
Secondary/Higher Secondary	94	27.1	5.2
Graduate & above	50	31.6	4.9

ANOVA: $F(2, 217) = 41.28, p < 0.001$

Table 4: Multiple Regression Predicting Decision-Making Autonomy Score

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	9.84	1.92	-	5.13	0.000
Education Level (1–3 scale)	3.62	0.58	0.34	6.24	0.000*
Prior Political/Public Exposure (Yes=1)	4.15	0.91	0.28	4.56	0.000*
Family Support Score	0.71	0.14	0.31	5.07	0.000*

$R^2 = 0.41, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.40, F(3, 216) = 50.13, p < 0.001$

Table 2 shows that just over one-third of elected women representatives report high, independent decision-making autonomy, while approximately one-quarter report that decisions in their panchayats are substantially made by male relatives, indicating a meaningful prevalence of the 'Sarpanch Pati' pattern within the sample. Table 3 demonstrates a strong positive relationship between education level and decision-making autonomy, supporting H1. The regression model in Table 4 confirms that education level, prior political or public exposure, and family support are all significant independent predictors of decision-making autonomy, jointly explaining 41% of variance, thereby supporting H2 and H3.

6. Discussion

These findings offer partial support for both the optimistic and the more cautious strands of the reservation literature. Consistent with Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004), a substantial proportion of elected women representatives in this sample exercise genuine decision-making



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authority, suggesting that reservation has produced real, not merely nominal, entry points for women's political agency. At the same time, the sizeable minority reporting low autonomy corroborates Ban and Rao's (2008) and Buch's (2010) findings regarding persistent obstruction and the mediating role of male relatives in panchayat governance in this region.

The strong predictive role of education, prior exposure, and family support aligns closely with the conditional empowerment framework advanced by Rai (2017) and Kudva (2003): reservation creates the structural opportunity for political participation, but its translation into substantive autonomy depends on individual and familial resources that are themselves unevenly distributed. This suggests that reservation policy alone is insufficient to guarantee substantive empowerment and must be complemented by capacity-building and family-oriented sensitisation interventions.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that women's reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions in rural Madhya Pradesh has produced genuine but uneven political empowerment, with education, prior public exposure, and family support emerging as critical determinants of substantive decision-making autonomy. Recommendations include mandatory leadership and governance training for newly elected women representatives, targeted sensitisation programmes for spouses and family members, and strengthened linkages between elected women representatives and local women's self-help groups to build sustained political capacity beyond individual terms of office.

8. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

Self-reported measures of autonomy may be subject to social desirability bias, and the four-district sample may not fully represent the diversity of panchayat governance contexts across Madhya Pradesh. Future research combining survey data with direct observation of gram sabha proceedings would strengthen the validity of autonomy assessments.

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