

Political Empowerment of Women through Panchayat Raj Institutions: A Critical Study of Vijayapur Taluk

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Abstract—The political empowerment of women is a constitutional imperative in India's democratic framework. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 institutionalised Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) as instruments of decentralised governance and mandated reservation for women to ensure their participation in grassroots democracy. This study critically examines the role of PRIs in facilitating women's political empowerment, with special reference to Vijayapur Taluk in Karnataka, from a legal and institutional perspective. Adopting a doctrinal and empirical research methodology, the study analyses constitutional provisions, statutory frameworks under the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, relevant judicial interpretations, and field-level experiences of elected women representatives. The findings reveal that while constitutional and statutory provisions have significantly enhanced women's numerical representation in Panchayat bodies, substantive political empowerment remains limited. Structural constraints such as patriarchal dominance, proxy representation, inadequate legal awareness, and weak institutional support mechanisms continue to restrict women's effective participation in decision-making processes. The study highlights a critical gap between formal legal empowerment and actual political agency at the local level. It argues that mere reservation is insufficient to achieve the constitutional objective of gender-inclusive governance unless supported by enforceable legal safeguards, capacity-building measures, and accountability frameworks. The article contributes to legal scholarship by emphasising the need for a shift from symbolic representation to substantive empowerment through strengthened legal and institutional reforms within the Panchayat Raj system.

Index Terms—Panchayat Raj Institutions; Women's Political Empowerment; Constitutional Law; Decentralised Governance; Local Self-Government.

I. INTRODUCTION

Political empowerment of women constitutes a foundational principle of constitutional democracy and an essential component of inclusive governance. In India, the constitutional commitment to gender equality is reflected in the guarantees of equality before law, non-discrimination, and affirmative action under Articles 14, 15, and 15(3) of the Constitution of India. However, historical exclusion of women from political decision-making necessitated structural legal interventions to ensure their effective participation in governance processes. Decentralised governance through Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) emerged as a transformative constitutional mechanism to democratise power and promote grassroots participation, particularly among marginalised groups, including women.

The enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 marked a watershed moment in India's constitutional history by granting constitutional status to PRIs and mandating reservation of not less than one-third of seats and leadership positions for women under Article 243D. This amendment aimed not merely at numerical inclusion but at fostering substantive political empowerment by enabling women to participate in local planning, governance, and development decision-making. By constitutionally embedding women's representation in local self-government, the amendment sought to address systemic gender disparities and strengthen democratic decentralisation. Despite this robust constitutional and statutory framework, the practical realisation of women's political empowerment through PRIs

remains contested. Empirical evidence across states indicates that women's increased representation has not always translated into effective participation or autonomous leadership. Socio-cultural norms, patriarchal power structures, limited access to legal knowledge, and institutional weaknesses often constrain women representatives from exercising their constitutional authority. Consequently, women's participation in Panchayats frequently assumes a symbolic character, raising critical questions about the efficacy of reservation as a legal tool for empowerment.

Karnataka, one of the pioneering states in decentralised governance reforms, provides a significant context for examining these dynamics. The Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 operationalises the constitutional mandate by defining the powers, functions, and responsibilities of Panchayat bodies and their elected representatives. Vijayapur Taluk, characterised by socio-economic disparities and entrenched gender hierarchies, presents a pertinent micro-level setting to assess the extent to which constitutional and statutory provisions translate into meaningful political empowerment for women at the grassroots level.

This study adopts a critical legal perspective to examine the role of PRIs in promoting women's political empowerment in Vijayapur Taluk. It interrogates the gap between formal legal entitlements and substantive political agency by analysing constitutional provisions, statutory mechanisms, judicial interpretations, and field-level realities. By integrating doctrinal legal analysis with empirical insights, the study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on gender justice, decentralised governance, and constitutional implementation. Ultimately, the article argues that effective political empowerment of women requires moving beyond mere representation towards a legally enforced framework that ensures autonomy, accountability, and active participation in local governance institutions.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Existing legal and socio-political scholarship on Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) broadly agrees that constitutional reservation has played a decisive role in increasing women's political presence at the

grassroots level. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004), in their seminal empirical study, demonstrate that reservation for women in local governments has significantly enhanced women's numerical representation and influenced policy priorities, indicating that quotas can alter governance outcomes. Similarly, Duflo (2005) argues that political reservations act as an entry point for historically excluded groups, including women, into decision-making structures, thereby fulfilling an important constitutional objective of inclusive democracy.

However, increased representation has not automatically translated into substantive empowerment. Buch (1999) highlights that entrenched patriarchal norms often result in women representatives functioning as nominal heads, with real power exercised by male family members, a phenomenon commonly described as proxy or "sarpanch pati" leadership. This concern is echoed by Chaudhuri and Sud, who argue that reservation alone is insufficient to dismantle gender hierarchies embedded in rural political culture, thereby limiting women's autonomy in governance.

From an institutional perspective, studies by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2008) reveal that while women's participation in PRIs has increased beyond the mandated quota in many states, their effective participation is constrained by limited education, lack of legal awareness, and inadequate training opportunities. These findings suggest that constitutional empowerment remains largely formal without corresponding capacity-building mechanisms. Sasidhar (2024) further observes that existing training programmes for elected women representatives are sporadic and insufficient to address structural and legal challenges they face in Panchayat functioning.

International development agencies reinforce these conclusions. Reports by UNDP and UN Women emphasise that reservation must be accompanied by continuous institutional support, legal literacy, and gender-sensitive administrative practices to ensure meaningful participation. Beaman et al. (2012) add a long-term perspective, noting that repeated exposure to women's leadership can gradually transform social attitudes, though such outcomes are neither immediate nor guaranteed.

Overall, the literature establishes that while reservation has succeeded in enhancing women's

presence in PRIs, patriarchal control, limited legal literacy, and weak institutional training mechanisms continue to undermine substantive political empowerment. Most studies prioritise representation and participation outcomes, but pay limited attention to issues of legal accountability, enforcement of statutory duties, and institutional compliance. This gap underscores the need for a legal-centric analysis, which the present study seeks to address through an examination of Panchayat Raj Institutions in Vijayapur Taluk.

III. CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Constitutional Provisions

The constitutional framework for women's political empowerment in India is firmly grounded in the principles of equality, social justice, and democratic decentralisation. The Constitution of India envisages gender equality not merely as formal equality but as substantive equality, recognising the need for affirmative action to address historical and structural disadvantages faced by women. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws, forming the foundational basis for women's equal participation in political and public life. Complementing this, Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex, while Article 15(3) explicitly empowers the State to make special provisions for women, thereby constitutionally legitimising affirmative action measures such as political reservation. The political empowerment of women through Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) finds its most direct constitutional expression in Part IX of the Constitution, inserted by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. This amendment constitutionalised local self-government and sought to democratise governance by devolving powers to institutions closest to the people. Article 243D(3) mandates that not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women, including seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Further, Article 243D(4) extends reservation to offices of Chairpersons in Panchayats at all levels, ensuring women's leadership positions within local governance structures. These provisions represent a significant departure from earlier

discretionary approaches by making women's political inclusion a constitutional obligation.

In addition, Article 243G empowers State Legislatures to endow Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government. This provision is crucial for women's political empowerment, as meaningful participation depends not only on representation but also on the effective devolution of functions, finances, and administrative authority. The Eleventh Schedule, introduced alongside Part IX, further reinforces this by listing subjects related to rural development, social justice, and welfare, areas in which women representatives can play a transformative role. Together, these constitutional provisions reflect a deliberate attempt to bridge the gap between formal equality and substantive empowerment. However, the Constitution leaves significant discretion to States in implementing decentralisation and devolution, resulting in uneven outcomes across regions. Consequently, while the constitutional framework provides a strong normative foundation for women's political empowerment through PRIs, the extent to which these provisions translate into effective political agency depends largely on statutory enactments, institutional design, and enforcement mechanisms at the State and local levels.

IV. STATUTORY FRAMEWORK IN KARNATAKA

The constitutional mandate for decentralised governance and women's political empowerment is operationalised in Karnataka through the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, which provides the statutory foundation for the structure, powers, and functioning of Panchayat Raj Institutions within the State. Enacted in conformity with Part IX of the Constitution, the Act establishes a three-tier system of local self-government comprising Gram Panchayats, Taluk Panchayats, and Zilla Panchayats, and incorporates mandatory provisions for reservation of seats and offices for women, including women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. By statutorily embedding gender-based reservation, the Act seeks to translate constitutional principles into enforceable legal rights at the grassroots level. The Act delineates the powers and

functions of Panchayat bodies and their elected representatives, enabling women members to participate in local planning, budgeting, implementation of development schemes, and delivery of public services. It confers decision-making authority in areas such as rural infrastructure, social welfare, health, education, and poverty alleviation domains that directly impact women lived experiences. Importantly, the Act also provides for the election of Chairpersons and Vice-Chairpersons at different levels of Panchayats, with reservation rotating among constituencies, thereby creating opportunities for women to occupy leadership positions. These statutory provisions aim to foster not only representation but also leadership and administrative experience among women representatives.

However, the effectiveness of the statutory framework depends on complementary provisions relating to financial devolution, administrative autonomy, and capacity building. While the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act envisages the transfer of funds, functions, and functionaries to Panchayats, studies indicate that such devolution has often been partial and inconsistent. Limited control over financial resources and dependence on higher-level bureaucratic authorities constrain the autonomy of elected representatives, particularly women, who may already face social and institutional disadvantages. Further, although the Act empowers the State Government to prescribe training and capacity-building programmes for Panchayat members, these mechanisms are largely enabling rather than mandatory, resulting in uneven implementation. From a legal perspective, the Act provides formal authority to women representatives but lacks robust enforcement mechanisms to address challenges such as proxy representation, administrative interference, and non-compliance with statutory duties. Consequently, while the statutory framework in Karnataka aligns with constitutional objectives of gender-inclusive decentralised governance, gaps in implementation and enforcement continue to limit the realisation of substantive political empowerment for women within Panchayat Raj Institutions, particularly at the Taluk and Gram levels.

V. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse the constitutional and legal framework governing women's participation in PRIs.
2. To examine the extent of political empowerment of women representatives in Vijayapur Taluk.
3. To identify legal and institutional barriers affecting substantive empowerment.
4. To suggest legal and policy reforms for strengthening women's political agency.

VI. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a doctrinal and empirical methodology

- I. Doctrinal analysis of constitutional provisions, statutes, and judicial decisions
- II. Empirical data collected through structured interviews with elected women representatives of Gram and Taluk Panchayats in Vijayapur Taluk
- III. Use of secondary data from government reports and scholarly publications

VII. WOMEN'S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT IN VIJAYAPUR TALUK: AN ANALYSIS

Women's political empowerment in Vijayapur Taluk presents a complex interaction between constitutional guarantees, statutory provisions, and socio-legal realities. The introduction of reservation under the Panchayat Raj system has undoubtedly increased women's numerical representation in local self-government institutions. Women now occupy seats and leadership positions in Gram and Taluk Panchayats, which marks a significant departure from their historical exclusion from political processes. This increased presence reflects the formal success of constitutional and statutory mandates aimed at ensuring gender-inclusive decentralised governance. However, empirical evidence from Vijayapur Taluk indicates that political empowerment remains largely formal rather than substantive. While women representatives participate in Panchayat meetings and statutory functions, their role in agenda-setting, financial decision-making, and policy formulation is often limited. Many women continue to operate within patriarchal social structures that restrict their autonomy and confidence in public decision-making.

The persistence of proxy representation, where male family members exert influence over elected women representatives, further undermines the constitutional objective of empowering women as independent political actors. A critical factor affecting empowerment in Vijayapur Taluk is the limited level of legal awareness among women representatives. Although most women are aware of their reserved status, many lack adequate knowledge of their statutory powers, financial authority, and legal remedies available against administrative or familial interference. This gap between legal entitlement and legal understanding weakens women's capacity to assert their rights within Panchayat institutions and contributes to dependence on bureaucratic officials or male intermediaries. Institutional support mechanisms in Vijayapur Taluk also remain inadequate. Training programmes for elected women representatives are irregular and largely procedural, focusing on administrative formalities rather than leadership development, legal literacy, and financial management. The absence of mandatory and continuous capacity-building initiatives restricts women's ability to engage effectively with governance processes and limits the transformative potential of their political participation.

Overall, the experience of Vijayapur Taluk demonstrates that women's political empowerment through Panchayat Raj Institutions cannot be achieved through reservation alone. Substantive empowerment requires a supportive legal and institutional environment that ensures autonomy, accountability, and informed participation. Without addressing socio-legal barriers, strengthening legal literacy, and enforcing institutional safeguards, women's participation risks remaining symbolic, falling short of the constitutional promise of inclusive and participatory local self-governance.

VIII. LEGAL AWARENESS AND CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS

Legal awareness and institutional capacity are critical determinants of substantive political empowerment of women within Panchayat Raj Institutions. The empirical findings from Vijayapur Taluk reveal that although women representatives are constitutionally recognised as elected members of Panchayats, a significant gap exists between their formal legal

status and their practical ability to exercise statutory powers. Most respondents demonstrated awareness of their reserved position as women representatives; however, their understanding of the constitutional provisions, statutory functions, and legal responsibilities associated with Panchayat governance remained limited.

A substantial proportion of women representatives reported inadequate knowledge of key provisions of the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, particularly those relating to financial powers, administrative authority, and procedural rules. Limited familiarity with budget preparation, utilisation of development funds, and audit processes restricted their participation in financial decision-making. This lack of legal literacy often resulted in dependence on Panchayat officials or male family members, thereby undermining the autonomy envisaged under the constitutional framework of decentralised governance. Capacity constraints were further exacerbated by insufficient institutional support mechanisms. Training programmes for women representatives in Vijayapur Taluk were reported to be irregular, short-term, and largely procedural in nature. These programmes primarily focused on administrative formalities rather than enhancing legal understanding, leadership skills, and decision-making competence. The absence of continuous and mandatory capacity-building initiatives significantly constrained women's ability to engage effectively with Panchayat institutions and assert their statutory authority.

Moreover, socio-cultural factors compounded legal and capacity limitations. Many women representatives faced challenges in balancing domestic responsibilities with public roles, which restricted their ability to attend training sessions and Panchayat meetings consistently. Social norms discouraging women's public participation further diminished confidence and limited opportunities for experiential learning in governance processes.

Overall, the findings indicate that legal empowerment through reservation remains incomplete without corresponding investments in legal literacy and institutional capacity-building. The persistence of legal awareness deficits and capacity constraints in Vijayapur Taluk highlights the need for statutory mandates requiring regular training, simplified legal resources in local languages, and institutional

mechanisms to support women representatives. Addressing these constraints is essential for transforming formal representation into substantive political empowerment within Panchayat Raj Institutions.

IX. JUDICIAL PERSPECTIVE

The judiciary in India has played a significant role in shaping the constitutional understanding of women's political empowerment and the functioning of Panchayat Raj Institutions. Judicial interpretation has consistently recognised political reservation as a constitutionally valid and necessary form of affirmative action aimed at achieving substantive equality. The courts have viewed reservations in local self-government not as an exception to equality, but as an instrument to realise the constitutional vision of social justice, inclusiveness, and participatory democracy.

In *K. Krishna Murthy v. Union of India* (2010), the Supreme Court upheld the constitutional validity of reservations in Panchayats, including reservations for women, affirming that such measures are intrinsic to democratic decentralisation. The Court emphasised that political reservations at the local level are intended to ensure adequate representation of disadvantaged groups and to strengthen grassroots democracy. This judgment reinforced the principle that inclusion through reservation is a legitimate constitutional strategy to correct historical exclusion from political processes. The Supreme Court has also underscored the importance of effective devolution of powers to Panchayat Raj Institutions. In *Rajendra Singh Rana v. Swami Prasad Maurya* (2007) and related jurisprudence on local governance, the judiciary highlighted that constitutional recognition of PRIs would be rendered ineffective without meaningful transfer of powers, functions, and finances. Although not directly focused on gender, such interpretations have significant implications for women's empowerment, as inadequate devolution disproportionately affects women representatives who already face social and institutional barriers. High Courts have similarly addressed issues relating to the functioning of PRIs and the rights of elected representatives. Judicial interventions have sought to protect the autonomy of Panchayat members from arbitrary administrative interference and to ensure

compliance with statutory procedures. However, judicial scrutiny has largely remained confined to questions of constitutional validity, procedural compliance, and reservation policy, rather than addressing deeper issues such as proxy representation and substantive empowerment of women.

From a critical perspective, judicial discourse has tended to prioritise formal legality over functional empowerment. While courts have affirmed the legitimacy of women's reservation and safeguarded electoral rights, they have been relatively silent on enforcing accountability mechanisms to ensure that elected women exercise independent authority. This judicial restraint places greater responsibility on legislative and executive institutions to operationalise empowerment through statutory reforms, training mandates, and enforcement mechanisms. Thus, while judicial interpretation has provided strong constitutional legitimacy to women's political participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions, it has yet to fully engage with the qualitative dimensions of empowerment. The experience of Vijayapur Taluk highlights the need for a more nuanced legal approach that moves beyond validation of reservation towards ensuring effective, autonomous, and informed participation of women in local governance.

X. CONCLUSION

The political empowerment of women through Panchayat Raj Institutions represents a central constitutional commitment to equality, social justice, and participatory democracy. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 and the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 have together created a robust legal framework aimed at ensuring women's inclusion in local self-governance. The experience of Vijayapur Taluk demonstrates that these constitutional and statutory interventions have been successful in increasing women's numerical representation in Panchayat institutions, thereby addressing historical exclusion from political processes at the grassroots level. However, the findings of this study reveal a persistent gap between formal legal empowerment and substantive political agency. While women occupy elected positions within Gram and Taluk Panchayats, their effective participation in decision-making remains constrained by patriarchal social norms, proxy representation, limited legal awareness,

and inadequate institutional support mechanisms. Reservation has functioned primarily as an entry mechanism, but has not, by itself, ensured autonomy, leadership, or meaningful influence in governance processes. From a legal perspective, the study highlights that empowerment cannot be achieved through constitutional recognition and statutory authority alone. The absence of enforceable accountability mechanisms, mandatory capacity-building provisions, and safeguards against proxy interference weakens the transformative potential of Panchayat Raj Institutions. Judicial interpretations have largely validated the constitutional legitimacy of reservation, but have not substantially engaged with issues of qualitative empowerment and institutional enforcement.

The case of Vijayapur Taluk underscores the need for a shift from symbolic representation to substantive empowerment, grounded in legal literacy, institutional accountability, and effective devolution of powers. Strengthening Panchayat Raj Institutions through targeted legal reforms, continuous training of women representatives, and effective monitoring mechanisms is essential to realise the constitutional promise of gender-inclusive decentralised governance. Ultimately, the political empowerment of women at the grassroots level is not only a matter of representation but a prerequisite for strengthening democracy and advancing social justice in India.

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