

# Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions and its Impact on Tribal Empowerment: A Sociological Study of Banaskantha District, Gujarat

Chaudhary JJ<sup>1</sup>, Parmar MS<sup>2\*</sup>


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<sup>1</sup> Jaimin J Chaudhary, Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Madhav University, Sirohi, Rajasthan, India.

<sup>2\*</sup> Mahendra Singh Parmar, Professor and HOD, Department of Sociology, Madhav University, Sirohi, Rajasthan, India.

The constitutionalization of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 marked a significant milestone in democratic decentralization and women's political empowerment in India. The reservation of seats for women in local self-government institutions has enhanced their political visibility and participation, particularly among marginalized communities, including Scheduled Tribes. The present study examines the role of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions and its impact on tribal empowerment in Banaskantha district of Gujarat. The study is based on primary data collected from 400 respondents residing in tribal areas of the district. The findings reveal that 42.0 percent of respondents perceive Panchayati Raj Institutions as moderately active in promoting women's empowerment, while 37.25 percent consider them highly active. Collectively, 79.25 percent of respondents acknowledge the positive contribution of PRIs toward tribal women's empowerment. The study concludes that while political participation has expanded significantly, challenges related to capacity building, literacy, decision-making autonomy, and proxy representation continue to limit the transformative potential of women's leadership in local governance.

**Keywords:** panchayati raj institutions, tribal women, political participation, women empowerment, decentralization, banaskantha district, rural governance

Corresponding Author	How to Cite this Article	To Browse
Mahendra Singh Parmar, Professor and HOD, Department of Sociology, Madhav University, Sirohi, Rajasthan, India. Email: <a href="mailto:drmhen.02@gmail.com">drmhen.02@gmail.com</a>	Chaudhary JJ, Parmar MS, Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions and its Impact on Tribal Empowerment: A Sociological Study of Banaskantha District, Gujarat. Soc Sci J Adv Res. 2026;6(3):118-121. Available From <a href="https://ssjar.singhpublication.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/380">https://ssjar.singhpublication.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/380</a>	

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## 1. Introduction

The establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions represents one of the most significant efforts toward democratic decentralization in India. The enactment of the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 provided constitutional status to Panchayats and mandated reservation of not less than one-third of seats and chairperson positions for women, including women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This reform sought to strengthen grassroots democracy and promote inclusive governance by ensuring the participation of historically marginalized groups in decision-making processes.

Women's participation in local governance is particularly significant in tribal areas where socio-economic disadvantages, patriarchal norms, and limited access to education have traditionally restricted women's public engagement. Political participation through Panchayati Raj Institutions offers tribal women opportunities to influence local development priorities, access welfare schemes, advocate community concerns, and enhance their social status.

Banaskantha district of Gujarat provides an important context for examining these issues due to its substantial tribal population and active Panchayati Raj framework. The district offers an opportunity to explore the relationship between political representation and the broader process of social, economic, and political empowerment among tribal women.

## 2. Review of Literature

A substantial body of literature highlights the transformative role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in promoting women's political participation and empowerment. Studies have shown that reservation policies have significantly increased women's representation in local governance and created new avenues for leadership among rural and tribal women.

Kakati (2024), in a study of tribal women among the Tiwa community of Assam, observed that reservation has successfully increased women's representation in Gram Panchayats; however, meaningful participation continues to be constrained by patriarchal social structures and limited decision-making authority.

Billava and Nayak (2016) found that participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions contributes to increased awareness, confidence, leadership capacity, and decision-making ability among elected women representatives. Their review emphasized that political participation often leads to broader social empowerment and improved community engagement.

Kumar (2019), in his study A Significance of Youth Participation in Panchayati Raj: A Case Study on Bihar Naxal and Violent Groups Affected Districts, observed that active youth participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions strengthens grassroots democracy, promotes local development, and reduces social alienation. The study highlights that involving young people in local governance enhances community engagement, leadership development, and democratic decision-making in rural areas.

Research on gender reservation in local governance further suggests that women leaders tend to prioritize issues related to education, health, sanitation, drinking water, and welfare services, thereby contributing to inclusive rural development. However, studies also indicate persistent challenges such as low literacy levels, inadequate training, lack of financial autonomy, and the phenomenon of proxy leadership or "Sarpanch Pati," wherein male family members exercise authority on behalf of elected women representatives.

The literature therefore suggests that while reservation has enhanced descriptive representation, substantive empowerment depends upon institutional support, capacity building, and the autonomy of elected women representatives.

## 3. Objectives of the Study

The study was undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To examine the extent of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in tribal areas of Banaskantha district.
2. To assess the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in promoting tribal women's empowerment.
3. To analyze public perceptions regarding the effectiveness of PRIs in enhancing women's participation.
4. To identify challenges affecting meaningful participation and empowerment of tribal women.

5. To suggest policy measures for strengthening women's leadership in local governance.

## 4. Hypothesis

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Panchayati Raj Institutions play a significant role in promoting the empowerment of tribal women in Banaskantha district.

## 5. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. Primary data were collected from 400 respondents residing in selected tribal areas of Banaskantha district. A structured interview schedule was used to gather information regarding perceptions of the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in women's empowerment. The collected data were analyzed using frequency distribution and percentage analysis. Descriptive statistical techniques were employed to evaluate respondents' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

## 6. Data Analysis and Interpretation

**Table 1:** Perception of Respondents Regarding the Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Women's Empowerment

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Very Active	149	37.25
Moderately Active	168	42.00
Rarely Active	79	19.75
Not Active at All	4	1.00
Total	400	100.00

The findings indicate that a majority of respondents perceive Panchayati Raj Institutions as contributing positively to women's empowerment in tribal areas. The largest proportion of respondents (42.0%) identified PRIs as moderately active, while 37.25 percent regarded them as very active. Together, these categories constitute 79.25 percent of the total sample. Only 19.75 percent of respondents perceived PRIs as rarely active, and a negligible 1.0 percent believed that they play no role at all in women's empowerment. The results demonstrate widespread recognition of Panchayati Raj Institutions as an important mechanism for advancing the status of tribal women. A weighted assessment of responses produces an average score

of approximately 3.16 on a four-point scale, reflecting a generally positive evaluation of PRI effectiveness. However, the dominance of the "moderately active" category suggests that empowerment remains incremental rather than fully transformative.

## 7. Discussion

The findings support the broader scholarly argument that political participation serves as a critical pathway toward women's empowerment. The positive perception of Panchayati Raj Institutions among respondents reflects the growing influence of tribal women in local governance structures. Participation in Panchayats enhances women's visibility in public affairs, improves their access to governmental programs, and strengthens their capacity to articulate community concerns. Moreover, elected women representatives often act as intermediaries between tribal communities and development agencies, facilitating greater access to welfare benefits. Despite these achievements, challenges remain. Educational disadvantages, limited political awareness, inadequate administrative training, and patriarchal social norms continue to restrict women's effective participation. The persistence of proxy representation in some cases further undermines the objectives of political reservation. Therefore, empowerment must be understood not merely as representation but as the ability to exercise independent authority and influence public decision-making.

## 8. Major Findings

The findings of the study reveal that a substantial majority of respondents (79.25%) perceive Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as playing an active role in promoting the empowerment of tribal women. The dominant opinion indicates that PRIs are moderately effective in this regard, suggesting that while significant progress has been made, the process of empowerment is not yet fully transformative. More than one-third of the respondents (37.25%) believe that Panchayati Raj Institutions are highly active in advancing women's empowerment. In contrast, only 1.0 percent of respondents deny any significant contribution of PRIs to women's empowerment. The results strongly support the study's hypothesis that women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions

contributes positively to tribal empowerment in Banaskantha district. However, despite considerable improvements in political representation, the effectiveness of women's participation continues to be influenced by various structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers.

## 9. Suggestions

The study suggests several measures to strengthen the empowerment of tribal women through Panchayati Raj Institutions. Comprehensive leadership and governance training programmes should be organized for elected tribal women representatives to enhance their administrative and decision-making capabilities. Adult literacy and awareness campaigns need to be expanded in tribal villages to improve understanding of rights, responsibilities, and development schemes. Effective mechanisms should be established to prevent proxy representation and ensure that elected women exercise independent authority in governance processes. Panchayats should give greater priority to issues directly affecting tribal women, such as health, education, sanitation, nutrition, and livelihood opportunities. Furthermore, government agencies and civil society organizations should work collaboratively to build the institutional capacity of women representatives through continuous support and capacity-building initiatives. Regular monitoring and evaluation of women's participation should also be integrated into Panchayat governance systems to assess progress and ensure meaningful involvement in local decision-making.

## 10. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that Panchayati Raj Institutions have emerged as an important instrument of political and social empowerment for tribal women in Banaskantha district. The implementation of constitutional reservations has increased women's representation in local governance and created opportunities for greater participation in community decision-making. The empirical evidence indicates that most respondents recognize the positive contribution of Panchayati Raj Institutions toward tribal women's empowerment.

However, empowerment remains a gradual and ongoing process. While representation has improved considerably, meaningful participation requires greater educational support, institutional capacity building, and freedom from patriarchal constraints.

Strengthening these dimensions will enable Panchayati Raj Institutions to function more effectively as vehicles of inclusive development and tribal women's empowerment.

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