

# A Case Study of Rural Women's Political Empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions

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**Abstract—** This Research paper has attempted to investigate the efficacy of women's involvement in the process of their political empowerment. The involvement of women in Panchayati Raj institutions is a specific focus of the research paper. The Rajouri district of UT of Jammu and Kashmir is where the study was carried out. The purpose of the Panchayati Raj System was to formally include rural residents from all demographic groups in local government. The Panchayati Raj's designers intended for women to be involved in their own growth as well as men. Although it is a drawn-out and challenging process, the Panchayats' reservation for women has given them the chance to eliminate the traditional gender, caste, and class roles that women have had to play as well as the hierarchy prejudice that they have encountered. Notwithstanding the obstacles of gender division of labour, low literacy, mobility, seclusion, and a lack of knowledge and training, women must struggle for the right to be more than proxy members. This study adopts a case study research design to explore the empowerment of rural women through their participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). A case study approach is particularly suitable for in-depth examination of real-life social phenomena within their specific contexts (Yin, 2009). The Rajouri district of Jammu and Kashmir serves as the study area, with two blocks purposefully selected to represent diverse socio-economic and demographic characteristics. The research employs a mixed-methods strategy, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue. This approach enables triangulation of data, which enhances the validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The study sample consists of 86 women representatives elected to PRIs from two selected blocks of the Rajouri district. These respondents were selected using purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of women with relevant roles and experiences within Panchayati Raj governance. The diversity within the sample allows the study to capture a wide range of socio-political dynamics. A structured questionnaire was administered to all 86 respondents. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions, covering areas such as political participation, decision-making roles, family and community support, exposure to training programs, and challenges faced in office. The quantitative data was later statistically analyzed to identify trends and patterns. To complement the survey data, qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and field observation were used. This data was critical for capturing the subjective dimensions of empowerment. Data collection for this research relied on both structured and unstructured methods—oral interviews, questionnaires, and field observations. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the institutional framework and implementation of rural development and Panchayati Raj programs, field visits were conducted to several relevant government agencies. These included the Directorate of Panchayats and Rural Development, the Office of the State Election Commission, and Block Development Offices. These visits provided valuable first-hand insights into the functioning and coordination of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at various administrative levels. Further institutional consultations were held with departments such as the Department of Planning and Development, Decentralized Planning Division, and the Directorate of Economics and

Statistics in Rajouri District, as well as the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA). These interactions helped in gathering localized statistical and policy-related data pertinent to the region under study. In addition to primary sources, a wide range of secondary data was consulted. This included statistical records and reports from national and state-level institutions. Notable sources comprised Census of India reports, publications from the Election Commission of India, and documents issued by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. Other valuable references included Annual Administrative Reports from the Department of Panchayati Raj and Rural Development, performance evaluations and training materials from the State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD), and reports by international agencies such as UNDP and UNIFEM. The District Census Handbook (Rajouri) and official government portals also provided contextual demographic and development data critical for this research. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure frequencies and percentages. The qualitative data, including interview transcripts and field notes, was thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and issues related to women's empowerment and PRI functioning. This study was carried out in two blocks of District Rajouri—Block Budhal and Block Darhal—to explore and understand the different aspects of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Together, these two blocks encompass 34 Panchayats, with 11 located in Budhal and 23 in Darhal. These areas were purposefully chosen to reflect the district's social and political diversity, and to capture the lived realities of women involved in grassroots governance. In this chapter, the voices and experiences of women representatives—and those around them—come to the forefront. In the quiet valleys and vibrant villages of Rajouri, a silent yet powerful transformation is underway. Women who were once confined to the boundaries of their homes are now stepping into leadership roles, navigating the complexities of local governance, and shaping decisions that directly impact their communities. This study, grounded in the voices and experiences of 86 women representatives from two blocks of the district, explores what empowerment truly means when lived at the grassroots level. These women, many of whom had never imagined holding a public office, are now participating in Gram Sabha meetings, resolving village disputes, monitoring development work, and ensuring that the concerns of the marginalized are heard. For them, joining the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been more than a political opportunity it has been a personal journey of transformation. They are learning, growing, and leading, often despite considerable odds.

**Keywords— Women, Women Empowerment, Panchayati Raj, Decentralization, Rural Development**

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, various issues concerning women have gained scholarly interest, leading to the establishment of fields like Women's Studies and Gender Studies. Both men and women have played an equal role in shaping human society. Even yet, women have endured centuries of oppression and exploitation in addition to being denied their proper position in society. In a society where men continue to hold significant dominance, women's voices have often been suppressed. The fact that their concerns are being acknowledged today is a result of their persistent and long-standing struggle. The most significant influence in forming a society has been political power. It is undeniable that women have had to struggle greatly to secure political rights. It's interesting that women in many developed and progressive Western countries only gained the basic right to vote in the 20th century. For example, despite being among the oldest democracies, women in the U.S. and the U.K. got voting rights in 1920 and 1928, respectively, with some

restrictions in Britain. Women's active participation in politics took even longer. In contrast, Indian women were fortunate to receive voting rights soon after India became independent on August 15, 1947. The country adopted its constitution on January 26, 1950, officially becoming a democratic republic. The number of women voting in elections has been rising since the first general election in 1952. However, their portrayal falls short. In light of this, a modified approach was taken to enhance women's involvement in political decision-making through the implementation of a "quota system for women" in legislative bodies. Women's reservation in panchayats was highly demanded in order to formally establish the equality guaranteed by the Indian constitution. The seventy-third constitutional amendment, which gives women a third of the seats in all rural local self-government organizations, is regarded as a significant step toward women's political empowerment in India. The constitution's 73rd Amendment Act, 1992, which went into force on April 24,

1993, sought to eliminate bias and gender inequality in local self-government institutions while also decentralizing power. This clause essentially aims to increase women's awareness and achieve more gender parity in the decision-making process. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs) are to be reserved in each Panchayat in accordance with their population, according to Article 243(D). These seats will be distributed by rotation among various constituencies and filled through direct election. Women who belong to SCs and STs must be given at least one-third of the available seats. Additionally, at least one-third of the seats—including those designated for SC/ST women, who will be elected directly—must be reserved for women and distributed by rotation. The position of chairman in the village or other Panchayat level would be reserved for women and members of the SC and ST categories in accordance with any provisions made by the state legislature. However, women's involvement is formal or "de jure" in Indian democracy, as guaranteed by statutory regulations. The majority of rural women devote the most of their time to taking care of the family's fundamental needs. They don't have much time for any form of political activity. Their low level of engagement is explained by their low social standing, low literacy, and ignorance of their legal rights and obligations as well as the goals and workings of Panchayati Raj institutions. Rural women do not lack dynamism or leadership abilities, nor do they lack awareness of their own desire for personal growth. They are uninterested and reluctant to participate in public affairs because of their inferior status and culturally enforced limitations. They have been bullied, exploited and discouraged by conventional taboos. Therefore, a pivotal moment in the political history of independent India is the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. In addition to addressing the constitutional and legislative flaws that had prevented women from participating in grassroots politics, the Act gives women—especially the most marginalized ones—the chance to influence policy, planning, and program administration. To promote genuine and direct democracy, the Panchayati Raj System is a tool for decentralizing power at the local level. In literal terms, a Panchayati raj is a group of five esteemed elders who have been selected and approved by the rural community. In the past, these five elders—known as "Panchas"—were regarded as divine incarnations. It demonstrates the significance and worth ascribed to these Panchas. In India, panchayats have

existed for as long as Indian culture. In one way or another, gram panchayats have long been a component of the Indian social structure. It stood for a system that oversaw or managed countless village republics. The executive, administrative, judicial, and developmental wings were all covered by the diverse range of activities carried out by panchayats. They gave rural society vitality. The democratic decentralization of social, political, economic, and administrative authority at the local level is what makes the Panchayati Raj unique. It is anticipated that the PRIs will fulfil the goals and serve the interests of different segments of rural Indian society. Democratic decentralization requires not just the transfer of authority but also the transfer of responsibility. Empowering citizens within the framework of their interactions with the state is the ultimate goal.

### Empowerment

The idea of empowerment is political. Gaining power—the ability to make decisions, exert influence, and guide the world—is its goal. It is the ability to bargain. Empowerment must therefore be negotiated holistically as a process of interaction rather than being divided into social, political, and cultural categories. Empowerment is a multidimensional social process that enables individuals to take control of their lives. It involves strengthening people's ability to identify and address issues that matter to them at personal, community, and societal levels (Page & Czuba, 1999). O.P. Vaish (1998) asserts that the term "empowerment" is mostly used to describe the process of enhancing the general social standing of marginalized groups in society and eliminating their poverty and humiliation. In order to preserve and sustain an environment that encourages greater levels of sharing and participation in socio-political, economic, and administrative spheres by citizens, especially those from lower and weaker segments of society, which clearly includes women, empowerment goes hand in hand with institutional and psychosocial processes of development. It is a concept that describes helping people work toward reaching their own goals. It encompasses a range of actions, from individual self-assertion to mobilization that questions the status quo of authority (Rehman & Dhiman, 2022). By redistributing power at all levels—political, economic, social, etc.—it aims to rebuild power positions and reconfigure power relations. The idea of empowerment is gaining traction in today's welfare society at both governmental and economic levels. It is a strengthening

of capacities that will result from more individuals participating. Through planned projects, policy documents, and literature, third-world nations are now pursuing empowerment.

### WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Women become empowered when they are given more opportunities to take control of their lives and become leaders in their communities. The United Nations (2001) recognizes women as key contributors to sustainable development. Swami Vivekananda emphasized that women's empowerment involves social, psychological, literary, and philosophical aspects. It creates an environment where women can think and grow independently, making their own choices about personal and professional development. Since disempowerment often begins within the family, women's empowerment extends across different areas of life. Feminists have long argued that "the personal is political" (Harishmann, 2007), highlighting the need for change at both individual and societal levels. Improving women's status requires efforts such as literacy programs, education, training, and awareness campaigns (Alvarez & Lopez, 2013). Rani et al. (2017) define women's empowerment as the process of enabling women to make independent decisions about their lives and overall well-being within their families and communities.

### Panchayati Raj

The concept of the panchayat has deep roots in Sanskrit and Hindu mythology, reflecting both administrative and spiritual significance. The term itself is derived from the Sanskrit words 'Panchen' and 'Ayatanam.' The word "Panchen" signifies five members, indicating a group of wise individuals responsible for resolving disputes and making crucial decisions, while "Ayatanam" refers to an office or institution. Together, "panchayat" can be understood as the "office of the panchas," representing a structured assembly for governance and justice. Historically, the number five has held profound sacred meaning in Hindu tradition. According to Dey (1962), in Hindu mythology, the five members of a Panchayat were regarded as divine representatives, symbolizing the fundamental elements of Mother Earth. These five sacred deities—Ganapati, Vishnu, Shankar, Devi, and Surya—are collectively known as "panchayatani" in Sanskrit, embodying supreme authority and righteousness. The role of the panch was thus equated with that of the parameshwar, the ultimate and infallible divine judge whose decisions carried unquestionable

justice. The origins of the Panchayat, therefore, are not only administrative but also deeply intertwined with spiritual beliefs, reinforcing its legitimacy and moral authority in traditional Indian society. According to Chauhan (2009) the concept of Panchayati Raj has been an integral part of India's governance structure for centuries. The establishment of constitutional Panchayats has strengthened the connection between rural communities and administrative bodies at both the state and local levels through institutions such as Blocks, Nyaya Panchayats, and Judicial Committees. Villages have historically played a crucial role in governance, resource management, and maintaining law and order. According to Madan (2002) Sir Charles Metcalfe, who served as the Provincial Governor General of India from 1835 to 1836, characterized village communities as independent and self-sufficient entities that remained resilient despite political upheavals. He noted that these communities had withstood various transitions, including the rise and fall of dynasties and shifts in rulership—from Hindu and Pathan to Mughal, Maratha, Sikh, and British—without losing their fundamental structure. According to Metcalfe, this enduring strength of village communities contributed to the survival and stability of India's rural population (Nagpal et al., 2024). He particularly praised the organization of Jat villages surrounding Delhi, expressing admiration for their structured way of life.

### OBJECTIVES

1. To plot the socio-economic profile of women Panchayati Raj Institutions representatives.
2. To investigate the function of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the political empowerment of women.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Oxfam (1995:14), the degree of people's involvement in the choices and procedures that impact their lives is a sign of empowerment. Theoretically, participation and empowerment should be two sides of the same coin. The poorest and most disadvantaged members of society are not empowered in any way by a large portion of what passes for popular engagement in development and relief efforts, even though empowerment was defined in the same year as opposing oppression and inequality. It entails opposing the types of oppression that compel millions of individuals to



participate in their society on unfair terms or in ways that violate their human rights. According to Moser (1983), participation is a strategy that typically turns into a kind of mobilization to accomplish goals. According to Holcombe (1995), women's empowerment includes involvement, control sharing, entitlement, and decision-making influence. Empowerment, according to Sen and Batliwala (1997), is increased self-assurance and a mental shift that allows one to get over outside obstacles in order to access resources over shifting conventional beliefs (Batliwala, 1995; Malhotra, 2002). According to (Rehman et al., 2024) empowerment may be both a process and the outcome of a process. It is exemplified by a transfer of power that subverts patriarchal ideology by gaining control over informational resources. According to Mohanty (1995), "empowering a certain underprivileged segment of society" means giving them authority. They can take part in development as a democratic process when they are empowered. It is a process that frees women from their "unfreedoms" and subjugation and gives them the essential skills for making decisions and taking part in democratic processes.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The newly discovered political strength of Indian women at the grassroots level has sparked international interest. The reservation provision for women in elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions will undoubtedly give women representatives' political power, however limited. It will be fascinating to learn whether this empowerment will benefit all women, not just elected officials. Because the entire issue of women's empowerment is gender-related, it's critical to determine how gender-sensitive elected officials are.

#### STUDY AREA

The present study is an effort to analyze and access the problem of women empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions in District Rajouri of the UT of Jammu and Kashmir. The UT of Jammu and Kashmir comprises of two divisions: Jammu Division and Kashmir Division and is further divided into twenty Districts. Out of 20 districts, 10 districts are in Jammu and 10 in Kashmir. Rajouri is the one of the 10 districts of Jammu region. The latitude of Rajouri is 33.371288 and the longitude is 74.315506. According to the 2011 census, Rajouri district has a population of 642415 of which male and female were

345352 and 297064 respectively. Rajouri has a sex ratio of 863 females for every 1000 males. It has a literacy rate of 68.54%. According to 2011 census report, the female literacy rate is also less (56.57%) as compared to male literacy rate (78.13%).

#### Secondary Data Sources

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the institutional framework and implementation of rural development and Panchayati Raj programs, field visits were conducted to several relevant government agencies. These included the Directorate of Panchayats and Rural Development, the Office of the State Election Commission, and Block Development Offices. These visits provided valuable first-hand insights into the functioning and coordination of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at various administrative levels. Further institutional consultations were held with departments such as the Department of Planning and Development, Decentralized Planning Division, and the Directorate of Economics and Statistics in Rajouri District, as well as the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA). These interactions helped in gathering localized statistical and policy-related data pertinent to the region under study. In addition to primary sources, a wide range of secondary data was consulted. This included statistical records and reports from national and state-level institutions. Notable sources comprised Census of India reports, publications from the Election Commission of India, and documents issued by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. Other valuable references included Annual Administrative Reports from the Department of Panchayati Raj and Rural Development, performance evaluations and training materials from the State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD), and reports by international agencies such as UNDP and UNIFEM. The District Census Handbook (Rajouri) and official government portals also provided contextual demographic and development data critical for this research.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure frequencies and percentages. The qualitative data, including interview transcripts and field notes, was thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and issues related to women's empowerment and PRI functioning.

### Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained before conducting interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality of respondents were strictly maintained.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was carried out in two blocks of District Rajouri—Block Budhal and Block Darhal—to explore and understand the different aspects of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Together, these two blocks encompass 34 Panchayats, with 11 located in Budhal and 23 in Darhal. These areas were purposefully chosen to reflect the district's social and political diversity, and to capture the lived realities of women involved in grassroots governance. These areas were purposefully chosen to reflect the district's social and political diversity, and to capture the lived realities of women involved in grassroots governance. In this chapter, the voices and experiences of women representatives—and those around them—come to the forefront. The analysis is presented in a question-wise manner, focusing on important themes such as awareness of the Panchayati Raj system, the journey through elections, active involvement in decision-making, support from families and communities, and the changes (or challenges) they have experienced in their personal and public lives. Each section connects directly to the study's objectives and is enriched by a combination of numbers and narratives collected during field visits. Together, these insights paint a fuller picture of what it means for women to participate in local self-governance in this part of Jammu and Kashmir.

### Q.1 Do you have a comprehensive understanding of the current Panchayati Raj system?

The study began by asking women representatives whether they had a clear and comprehensive understanding of the Panchayati Raj system—its structure, processes, and their role within it. Out of the 86 respondents, 53 women (61.6%) said they were aware

of how the system functions, while 33 women (38.4%) admitted they did not fully understand it. These responses suggest that while a majority of women have some awareness of local governance, a considerable portion still lacks the depth of understanding necessary to fully participate in decision-making and leadership. “I try to understand my duties, but there are still many official terms and rules that confuse me.” Said one of the respondent. This reflects a broader need for ongoing education and capacity-building among elected representatives, particularly women who may not have had previous exposure to such systems.

These reflections highlight a common pattern many women enter PRIs with enthusiasm but limited prior knowledge. It emphasizes the importance of structured training and support to ensure that elected women not only hold positions but are also empowered to perform their roles effectively and independently.

Table-4 showing Responses of elected women regarding understanding of the current Panchayati Raj system

Category	Yes	No	Total
Number of Responses	53	33	86
Percentage	61.6	38.8	100

### Q.2 Are you acquainted with the policy of gender-based reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions?

To understand the level of awareness regarding affirmative action, respondents were asked whether they were acquainted with the policy of gender-based reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This policy, enshrined in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, mandates a certain percentage of seats to be reserved for women, aiming to promote their political participation and representation at the grassroots level. Out of the 86 women surveyed, a significant majority 70 respondents (81.4%) confirmed that they were aware of the reservation policy for women in Panchayats. However, 16 women (18.6%) stated that they had little or no knowledge of such provisions prior to or even after entering local governance structures. One respondent shared that “If the seat wasn't reserved, I don't think anyone would have considered a woman like me for the post.” Another respondent said that “Honestly, I didn't know there were seats reserved for women until a local leader encouraged me to apply.” This relatively high level of awareness reflects the growing visibility of gender-

based political reforms. Many women noted that it was the reservation policy itself that gave them the opportunity to step into public life. Yet, the fact that nearly one-fifth of the participants lacked this awareness also points to existing gaps in communication, particularly at the community level where information dissemination may be limited. These testimonies underscore how crucial reservation policies are in creating not only opportunities but also awareness and confidence among rural women. However, it also highlights the need for continuous sensitization and outreach so that women are not only represented numerically but are also fully aware of their rights and roles within PRIs.

Table-4.1 showing Responses of elected women regarding their acquaintance of gender based reservations in PRIs

Category	Yes	No	Total
Number of Responses	70	16	86
Percentage	81.4	18.6	100

### Q.3 Are you fully aware of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992?

To assess the depth of respondents' understanding of the institutional framework that governs Panchayati Raj in India, they were asked whether they were fully aware of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992—the landmark legislation that gave constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and provided for, among other things, the reservation of seats for women. Out of the 86 women representatives surveyed, 45 (52.3%) reported that they were aware of the 73rd Amendment and its significance. On the other hand, 41 respondents (47.7%) admitted they were not fully familiar with this critical piece of legislation. These figures reveal a near-even split, indicating that while some women have a strong foundational understanding of the legal framework supporting their roles, a substantial number still operate without full knowledge of the constitutional provisions that underpin their authority and participation. This partial awareness limits their ability to engage confidently in decision-making, assert their rights, or hold others accountable. During field interactions, respondents shared the following reflections: "I have heard about the Amendment in meetings, but I don't know all the details. I just focus on the work I've been assigned." said one of the respondents. One elected woman Sarpanch stated that

"I wish we had more sessions explaining these laws. We hear about them in passing, but never get full clarity."

These responses reflect a clear need for continuous education and legal literacy among PRI members. Understanding the constitutional basis of their roles not only empowers women to function more effectively but also strengthens democratic governance at the grassroots level.

Table-4.2 showing Responses of elected women regarding awareness of 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment act

Category	Yes	No	Total
Number of Responses	45	41	86
Percentage	52.3	47.7	100

### Q.4 Are you familiar with the provisions and significance of the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989?

Respondents were also asked whether they were familiar with the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989, the state-specific legislation that governed Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the region prior to the reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir. Understanding this Act is important for grasping the historical and legal foundations of grassroots governance in the area. Among the 86 respondents, only 30 women (34.9%) reported being aware of the provisions and significance of the 1989 Act. In contrast, a significant 56 women (65.1%) stated that they had little to no knowledge about this important legal framework. The findings point to a concerning knowledge gap, especially given that these women are themselves participants in the institutional structure governed by this Act. Many of those unfamiliar with the legislation expressed that they had never received any formal introduction to it, either during their induction or through community meetings. One respondent shared her views: she said "I have heard about the Act, but I don't know what it says or how it affects our work." This highlights a need for more inclusive legal literacy and orientation programs. While legislative awareness is not a requirement for nomination, it is essential for meaningful participation and accountability. When women are made aware of the very laws that enable their political roles, they are better positioned to assert their agency and navigate the complex administrative environment of local governance.

Table-4.3 showing Responses of elected women regarding provisions and significance of the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989

	Yes	No	Total
Responses	30	56	86
	34.9	65.1	100

#### Q.5 To what extent do male members of the community support the implementation of reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions?

Most of the male community members seem to support the idea of reserving seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Out of 86 men surveyed, 53 (around 61.6%) were in favour, while 33 (about 38.4%) were against it. This shows that while the majority recognize the value of women's involvement in local governance, there are still quite a few who remain hesitant, likely due to traditional beliefs or social norms. Many of those who supported the reservation felt that women can bring unique perspectives to leadership roles and that involving them in decision-making leads to more balanced and inclusive development. On the other hand, some of those who were against the reservation shared concerns about whether women would truly be independent leaders. One man said, "Usually it's the husbands or male relatives who make the decisions in their name." Another commented, "Leadership should come from ability, not because of reservation." These responses reflect a mix of progressive and conservative thinking.

Table-4.4 showing Responses of elected women regarding the extent do male members of the community support the implementation of reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions

	Yes	No	Total
Responses	53	33	86
	61.6	38.8	100

In the quiet valleys and vibrant villages of Rajouri, a silent yet powerful transformation is underway. Women who were once confined to the boundaries of their homes are now stepping into leadership roles, navigating the complexities of local governance, and shaping decisions that directly impact their communities. This study, grounded in the voices and experiences of 86 women representatives from two blocks of the district, explores what empowerment truly means when lived at the grassroots level.

These women, many of whom had never imagined holding a public office, are now participating in Gram Sabha meetings, resolving village disputes, monitoring development work, and ensuring that the concerns of the marginalized are heard. For them, joining the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been more than a political opportunity it has been a personal journey of transformation. They are learning, growing, and leading, often despite considerable odds.

#### From Silence to Speech: The Rise of Women's Voices

A significant number of these women shared how their election to the Panchayat changed their position within their homes and society. Over 80 respondents said their status had improved; they were no longer just daughters, wives, or mothers they were now *leaders*. Families that once hesitated to let them speak in public now accompany them to meetings with pride. Children look up to them, and other women are beginning to believe that they, too, can dream beyond tradition.

What makes their stories so inspiring is not just that they were elected but that they have *earned* their place through action. They are actively involved in sanitation drives, women's health campaigns, child education efforts, and development programs. And while many began their journey hesitantly some admitting they didn't even know what a Panchayat did when they stood for election today, they hold files, speak in meetings, question officials, and even challenge injustices.

#### Facing Hurdles, Finding Strength

Empowerment, however, hasn't been easy. The road has been full of challenges emotional, cultural, bureaucratic, and logistical. About 60% of the women admitted that they had faced difficulties during their election process, ranging from lack of family support to manipulation by male counterparts. More than half said they felt underprepared, especially when it came to managing official paperwork or dealing with higher authorities.

## V. CONCLUSION



Yet, despite these struggles, most women felt *capable* and *confident* in their roles. Their resilience, patience, and willingness to learn have been their greatest assets. And even though only a few expressed interest in pursuing a full-time political career, all of them emphasized how much they had grown personally. They spoke of how their confidence has improved, how they now understand governance better, and how much more aware they are of their rights.

### Community Backing: The Role of Families and Society

One of the most heartening revelations was the support many women received from their husbands and children. 68 of them said their families backed them in Panchayat-related duties, and 70 said their husbands helped with household responsibilities. These small shifts signal a deeper cultural change in rural Rajouri—where men are beginning to see value in empowering the women in their lives, not as a threat to tradition, but as a path to shared growth.

However, societal mindsets still hold back many women. Around 50 respondents admitted that community pressure, fear of judgment, or male dominance within the Panchayat made them hesitate to speak freely or make bold decisions. These are not just administrative issues; they reflect deeply rooted social norms that need consistent and sensitive addressing.

### The Power of Participation

This study shows that when women are given space to participate in decision-making, they bring a fresh perspective, one that is practical, empathetic, and inclusive. Women in Rajouri have taken leadership beyond symbolic presence. Whether it's improving water access, advocating for education, or pushing for better health services, they are focusing on issues that affect daily life, especially for the vulnerable.

Through their lived experiences, these women are redefining what leadership looks like in rural India. Their presence in PRIs has inspired younger girls to dream of education and independence, has encouraged other women to speak up, and has shown entire communities the power of balanced leadership.

### A Journey Still in Progress

While this study highlights significant gains, it also reveals the long road ahead. Training programs, legal awareness, support networks, and continued policy attention are essential to sustain and grow this wave of rural women's leadership. The government must ensure

that these women are not just elected but are *empowered* through education, mentorship, and recognition. What began as a constitutional mandate is now evolving into a grassroots revolution. The women of Rajouri are not just participants in local governance they are *change makers*, dreamers, and doers. Their stories serve as a beacon of hope for countless others in similar contexts.

In the end, this thesis does not just document the empowerment of rural women in Rajouri it celebrates their courage, honors their struggles, and echoes their voices, which are no longer waiting to be heard. They are here, and they are leading the way.

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