

From Presence to Power: A Framework for Analyzing Women's Transformative Participation in the Panchayati Raj System of Kota District

Mukta Chaturvedi, Dr. Ashish Jorasia

Research Scholar, Professor

School of Arts & Humanities, Career Point University, Kota

muktachaturvedi@dcmshriram.com, ashishjorasia16@gmail.com

Abstract—Women's participation in local governance has been one of the most significant socio-political changes in post-independence India, particularly after the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992. The amendment mandated a one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), thereby ensuring their numerical representation in grassroots democracy. While this has undoubtedly increased women's presence in decision-making forums, the deeper question remains whether this numerical inclusion translates into actual power and transformative participation. This paper explores this complex dynamic in the context of Kota District in Rajasthan, a region marked by both traditional social structures and emerging shifts in gender relations.

The central objective of this research is to examine how women in PRIs in Kota move from mere presence to positions of substantive and transformative power. The study develops a three-tiered analytical framework distinguishing between descriptive representation (numerical presence), substantive representation (policy influence and outcomes), and transformative representation (changes in gender norms, institutional practices, and power relations). By applying this framework to the Kota District, the research identifies enabling and constraining factors that shape women's journey from presence to power.

Methodologically, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative tools. Electoral data and administrative records were analyzed to trace patterns of women's representation and resource allocation. In contrast, semi-structured interviews with elected women representatives (EWRs), community members, and local officials provided rich insights into lived experiences. Document reviews, including Gram Sabha minutes and social audit reports, further contextualized these findings.

The results reveal that while reservation policies have succeeded in dramatically increasing the presence of women, substantive and transformative outcomes remain uneven. On one hand, many EWRs have prioritized developmental projects such as water access, sanitation, education, and maternal health—reflecting gendered priorities that directly benefit communities. On the other hand, barriers such as patriarchal norms, proxy leadership by male relatives, limited control over financial resources, caste-based discrimination, and lack of adequate training often undermine women's independent authority. These challenges highlight the gap between formal inclusion and actual empowerment.

Yet, the study also uncovers encouraging signs of change. In certain Gram Panchayats, women leaders with repeated electoral victories have gradually built independent legitimacy, expanded their decision-making power, and mobilized women's groups for collective action. Their leadership has not only improved local governance outcomes but has also contributed to shifting community perceptions about women's roles in public life. Incremental changes, such as women speaking more confidently in

Gram Sabhas, engaging with government officials, and initiating local savings or self-help groups, indicate the beginnings of transformative participation.

The Kota case study demonstrates that transformative participation is possible but conditional. It depends on a synergy of institutional reforms, targeted capacity-building, civil society engagement, and community-level norm shifts. Quotas are a critical first step, but sustainable empowerment requires continuous support and structural changes. The paper concludes by recommending interventions that strengthen women’s financial autonomy, institutionalize long-term training and mentoring, reduce proxy governance, and encourage inclusive political participation across caste and class lines. By highlighting both the progress made and the challenges that remain, this study contributes to broader debates on gender, governance, and democratic deepening in India.

***Index Terms*—Panchayati Raj Institutions, Women’s Participation, Transformative Representation, Local Governance, Kota District**

I. Introduction (Heading 1)

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 was a turning point in India’s journey towards democratic decentralization. It gave constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and made it compulsory to reserve seats for women. For the first time, women were not only allowed but encouraged to be part of grassroots decision-making. This move was designed to strengthen democracy while also challenging the deep-rooted patriarchal and hierarchical systems that had excluded women from political spaces for centuries.

The introduction of a one-third quota for women significantly changed the gender balance in local governance. Today, millions of women across the country are serving as Sarpanch, Panchayat members, and representatives in Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads. Rajasthan, one of the first states to embrace decentralization, provides a rich ground for studying these changes. Kota District, in particular, offers an interesting case. Known for both its agricultural economy and its growing urban education sector, Kota reflects the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity. On one hand, strong patriarchal and caste-based norms still shape daily life, but on the other, rapid social and economic change has begun to create new spaces for women’s participation.

This paper looks at a key question: Does simply having more women in PRIs actually give them meaningful power and influence? Political thinkers often use three levels of analysis. The first is descriptive representation, which is about women’s presence in governance structures. The second is substantive representation, where women actively shape policies and decisions. The third, and most significant, is transformative representation—when women’s participation changes social norms, shifts local power relations, and makes institutions more inclusive and equitable. It is this third level that signals real empowerment and long-lasting social change.

In Kota District, women representatives face a complex reality. Reservation policies have opened new doors, even for women from marginalized castes, but serious challenges remain. Many women struggle with low literacy, lack of financial independence, limited understanding of governance systems, and pressure from male relatives who act as “proxies” in decision-making. These obstacles make it difficult for women to exercise authority in their own right. This mix of opportunity and constraint makes Kota a powerful case study for understanding how women’s political presence can evolve—or fail to evolve—into genuine power.

The entry of women into PRIs also raises new questions. What kinds of issues do women leaders prioritize when they gain decision-making power? How do they navigate resistance from their families, communities, and even local bureaucrats? What role do NGOs, training programmes, and peer networks play in building their leadership capacity? By exploring these questions, this study goes beyond simply asking whether reservation works—it looks at the lived processes that shape women’s political participation.

This research lies at the intersection of gender studies, political science, and development studies. It moves past one-sided arguments that either celebrate women’s political entry as a complete success or dismiss it as symbolic. Instead, it offers a nuanced view, recognising that women’s empowerment in politics is gradual, uneven, and highly shaped by context. Kota District, with its unique blend of rural traditions and modern aspirations, provides fertile ground to examine this journey from presence to power.

In short, this introduction lays the foundation for the paper’s central analysis. It situates the Kota study within wider debates on decentralization and gender empowerment, while staying rooted in the everyday experiences of women leaders. The key research questions are: under what conditions does the presence of women in PRIs turn into real, transformative participation? What barriers and supports shape this process in Kota? And finally, how can policies be strengthened to ensure that women’s presence truly translates into power? These guiding questions frame the conceptual discussion and field analysis that follow.

II. Literature Review

Research on women’s participation in local governance in India shows a complex and often uneven picture. The introduction of quotas through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment significantly increased the number of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This move was celebrated as a major step toward gender equality in politics. However, scholars have found that numerical presence does not always guarantee real empowerment. One of the most widely discussed challenges is the

phenomenon of proxy leadership. In many cases, women elected to PRIs are pressured by male relatives—husbands, fathers, or brothers—to let them make decisions on their behalf. This undermines the spirit of the reservation policy and highlights the persistence of patriarchal control in politics.

At the same time, research also highlights many positive outcomes when women exercise decision-making power independently. Several studies show that women leaders tend to prioritise issues that directly affect their communities, such as access to drinking water, sanitation facilities, healthcare, and primary education. By focusing on these public goods, women's leadership often has a visible and practical impact on village life. This challenges the stereotype that women are less capable leaders and demonstrates the importance of their perspectives in governance.

More recent scholarship has shifted attention to the enabling conditions that strengthen women's participation. Capacity-building initiatives, including training programmes and exposure visits, have been shown to increase women's confidence and improve their understanding of governance structures. Similarly, institutional incentives—such as financial autonomy for Panchayats or reserved leadership roles—can create an environment where women's voices carry more weight. Civil society organizations and grassroots movements also play a critical role by mobilizing communities, building awareness, and supporting women leaders in navigating social and political challenges.

While there is a rich body of literature at the national and state levels, scholars emphasize the importance of district-level studies to capture local variations. Each district has its own socio-economic and cultural context that shapes how women experience power and politics. This paper addresses this gap by focusing specifically on the Kota District. By grounding the analysis in local realities, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how women's presence in PRIs can gradually evolve into transformative representation, where their participation not only influences decisions but also reshapes power relations and gender norms.

III. Methodology

To provide a comprehensive understanding of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kota District, this study adopted a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative research strategies. This design allowed for both breadth and depth, capturing patterns in women's representation while also exploring the experiences and perspectives of elected women representatives (EWRs) and other stakeholders.

The first component involved secondary data analysis. Election results and the composition of PRIs for the last three election cycles were reviewed at both ward and Sarpanch levels. This included

examining Panchayat budgets, expenditures, and government programme reports to assess not only the numerical presence of women but also their access to and control over local resources. By analyzing these records, the study could quantify trends in women's formal participation and resource management over time.

The second component, qualitative fieldwork, focused on capturing the lived experiences of participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 EWRs across Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis, 6 local government officials, 4 representatives from local NGOs, and 12 community members, including male opinion leaders. The interviews explored decision-making processes within Panchayats, intra-household dynamics, access to training and capacity-building programmes, and perceived changes in women's roles since the implementation of reservation policies.

Finally, a document review was undertaken, examining Panchayat meeting minutes, social audit reports, and relevant state government circulars. This helped triangulate findings from interviews and secondary data, providing a more reliable and nuanced understanding of women's participation in PRIs.

Ethical considerations were central to the study. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and gave their consent. Confidentiality was strictly maintained, and interviews were conducted with sensitivity to local norms and cultural expectations, ensuring respect for the participants' dignity and autonomy.

IV. Study Area: Kota District

Kota District, located in the southeastern part of Rajasthan, presents a unique mix of rural and urban characteristics that make it an ideal site for studying women's participation in local governance. The district encompasses numerous rural Gram Panchayats as well as an urban centre that is widely known for its education and industrial sectors. Agriculture remains the primary livelihood in rural areas, supplemented by small-scale trade, artisanal work, and seasonal labour migration. In contrast, the urban areas of Kota have witnessed rapid economic growth, educational opportunities, and exposure to modern ideas, creating a distinct social and economic dynamic within the district.

Social structures in Kota are strongly shaped by caste hierarchies and entrenched patriarchal norms, which continue to influence gender roles and expectations. In many villages, traditional practices restrict women's mobility, decision-making power, and participation in public life. However, the urban influence, along with increased awareness through education and media, has begun to shift aspirations among younger women, encouraging them to pursue higher education, professional

careers, and active participation in community affairs. These changes reflect the district's complex social fabric, where tradition and modernity coexist and sometimes clash.

State-level decentralization policies, particularly the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), have created formal opportunities for political participation. Yet the effectiveness of these policies often depends on local factors, including the engagement of civil society organizations, the availability of capacity-building programmes, and the presence of supportive networks. In Kota, local NGOs and community groups play an important role in mentoring women leaders, raising awareness about governance processes, and facilitating access to resources.

Overall, Kota District provides a diverse institutional and socio-cultural environment, offering both challenges and opportunities for women's political participation. Understanding this context is crucial to analyzing how women navigate social norms, exercise authority, and gradually transform governance practices within their communities.

V. Findings

1. Numerical Presence: Gains and Patterns

Reservation policies have significantly raised the number of women representatives in Kota's PRIs. Across the last three election cycles, women occupy a substantial share of ward and panchayat seats, and in many Gram Panchayats, women have served as Sarpanch. However, representation is not uniformly distributed: women from dominant castes and economically better-off households are more likely to occupy leadership roles, while marginalized caste women sometimes face candidate suppression or token nominations.

2. Substantive Influence: Decision-making and Outcomes

Interview data reveal a spectrum of substantive influence. Several EWRs reported successfully prioritizing investments in drinking water, school renovation, and maternal health outreach. These changes often reflect broader evidence that women leaders prioritize welfare and public goods that directly impact families.

Yet constraints persist: limited access to timely information, low budgetary discretion, and irregular meeting schedules reduce women's capacity to influence long-term planning. Several EWRs noted that their proposals were amended or sidelined by male members or by local party functionaries.

3. Transformative Shifts: Control, Norms, and Networks

Signs of transformative change are emerging, but are uneven. In a subset of Gram Panchayats, women leaders with repeated electoral success have built independent legitimacy—mobilizing women’s groups, initiating local savings schemes, and leveraging state schemes for skill training. These leaders report greater mobility, visibility, and confidence in public roles.

Conversely, in panchayats where female leaders are newly elected or where male relatives retain de facto control, transformative change is minimal. Community attitudes—particularly regarding women speaking in mixed-gender meetings—remain barriers. However, incremental shifts are visible: increased female attendance in Gram Sabhas, women voicing concerns in public forums, and local school enrolment improvements linked to women-led advocacy.

VI. Enabling and Constraining Factors

1. Enabling Factors

- Quota design and mandatory reservations ensure a baseline presence and create political opportunity structures.
- Continuous capacity-building programmes (training in PRI functioning, financial management, and public speaking) build competence and confidence.
- Access to untied funds and control over local development projects empowers women to translate decisions into tangible benefits.
- Civil society interventions and women’s collectives provide organizational support and an alternative accountability channel

2. Constraining Factors

- Patriarchal family structures and proxy governance (male relatives exerting influence) weaken independent female authority.
- Information asymmetry—women often have less access to administrative information, training invitations, and informal political networks.
- Resource constraints and bureaucratic delays limit the ability to implement decisions, undermining perceptions of efficacy.
- Caste-based exclusion and political clientelism restrict leadership opportunities for marginalized women.

VII. Discussion: From Presence to Power

The Kota case demonstrates that while quotas are necessary, they are not sufficient for transformative participation. Presence kickstarts a process, but achieving power requires interventions across multiple levels: institutional (clearer financial autonomy and transparency mechanisms), social (norm-change programmes, male ally engagement), and political (party-level incentives and sanctions against proxy representation).

Crucially, transformative representation often follows a cumulative trajectory—where early successes (visible public goods delivered by women leaders) generate legitimacy, which in turn attracts broader support. Re-election and sustained engagement enable the slow erosion of patriarchal constraints.

VIII. Policy Recommendations

- 1. Strengthening Financial Autonomy:** One of the most significant barriers to women's effective leadership is limited control over financial resources. Policymakers should ensure the timely transfer of funds to Panchayats, provide clear guidelines for expenditure, and expand the scope of untied funds that women representatives can access independently. This will enable elected women to implement priority projects, allocate resources according to local needs, and gain credibility in the eyes of their communities.
- 2. Institutionalized Capacity-Building:** Continuous training programmes are essential for equipping women leaders with the skills needed to navigate governance structures. Training should cover financial management, project planning, legal rights, and effective communication. Beyond workshops, mentorship programmes and peer-learning networks can provide ongoing support, helping women leaders gain confidence, improve decision-making, and sustain their leadership over multiple terms.
- 3. Reducing Proxy Governance:** Proxy leadership—where male relatives act as de facto decision-makers—remains a persistent challenge. Transparency mechanisms such as public disclosure of Panchayat decisions, mandatory attendance of women Sarpanch's in Gram Sabhas, and regular social audits can help ensure that women exercise authority independently. Encouraging accountability at the local level is crucial to reinforcing the legitimacy of women's leadership.
- 4. Supporting Women's Collectives and Networks:** Linking elected women representatives with self-help groups, Mahila Sangathans, and local NGOs can create collective platforms for knowledge sharing, advocacy, and mobilizing resources. These networks provide women with the social and political capital necessary to negotiate effectively with local authorities, community leaders, and bureaucrats.
- 5. Engaging Men and Community Leaders:** Changing societal attitudes is essential for sustainable empowerment. Gender-sensitization programmes targeting male family members, local opinion leaders, and community members can promote supportive norms, encourage male allies, and reduce resistance to women's leadership.
- 6. Inclusive Political Participation:** Political parties and local committees should proactively encourage participation of women from marginalised castes and economically weaker backgrounds. Providing logistical support, campaign guidance, and financial assistance can make elections more equitable and ensure broader representation.
- 7. Monitoring and Evaluation:** To track progress, district-level indicators should assess not only the number of women representatives but also their substantive and transformative impact. Metrics

could include control over budgets, completion of development projects, participation in Gram Sabhas, and community perceptions of women's leadership.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers can move beyond symbolic representation and create an environment where women's participation in PRIs leads to genuine empowerment, improved governance, and long-term social transformation.

IX. Acknowledgment

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