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## Strengthening The Rural Women Through Panchayati Raj Institutions In India

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**“Support rural women and aware them about social, health, literacy and economic opportunities”**

**-Writer**

Women constitute about half of the world's population. It is estimated that they have only 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the global income, own 1/100<sup>th</sup> of the means of production; nearly 70 percent of the women live below the poverty line; and about two third of them are illiterates. Women empowerment is the most used and discussed term today. The empowerment of women is becoming an increasingly popular term in human rights and developmental discourses. Women play significant role in all walks of life. Empowerment of women is a necessary basic condition for socio-economic development of any society. Although women constitute one half of the population, they continue to be subjugated, unequal in socio-economic and political status. Women have been struggling for self-respect and autonomy. Since mid 1980's owing to questioning by women themselves about their oppressed status and plight through varied women's movements, the issue of 'women empowerment' came into focus.

Panchayats have been the backbone of grass root democracy in the Indian villages since its beginning. Gandhi ji had aptly favoured the Panchayati Raj and his dream got translated with the passage of the Constitution (73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment) Act, 1992 (or simply the Panchayati Raj Act), which introduced the three-tier Panchayati Raj System to ensure people's participation in rural reconstruction in general and that of women in particular. It came into force with effect from April 24, 1993.

### Provisions for women in the Act

- The Act provides for the reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats for women (including the number of seats reserved for the SCs, STs and OBCs).
- Further not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairpersons and members in the Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women. This would be rotated among different Panchayats at each level.

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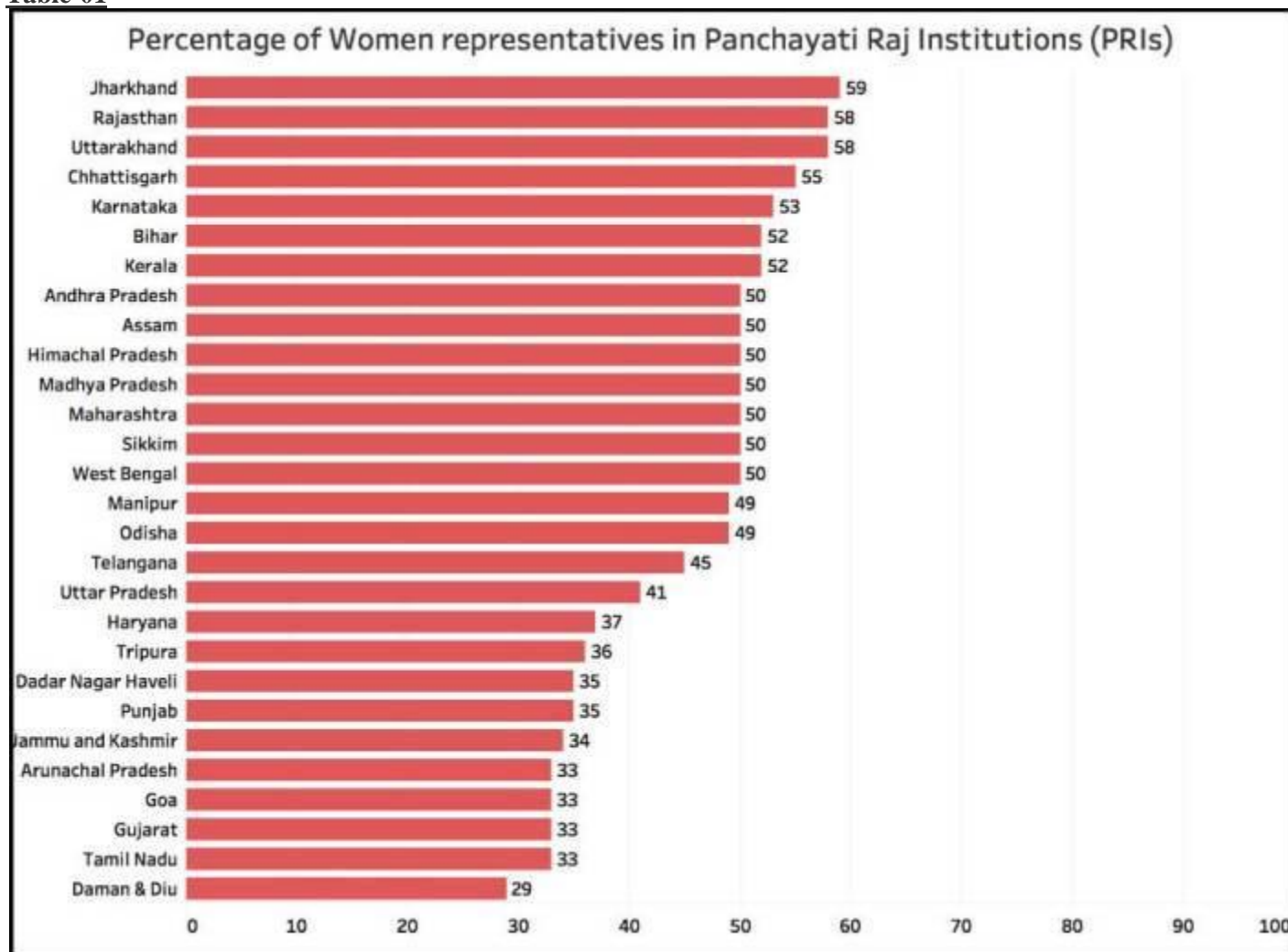
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### Participation of Women in Panchayats

- In 1992, when the [73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments](#) introduced local self-governance, it was an unparalleled step to consciously empower women as decision makers with 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the seats reserved for women. Today, 14 states have 50%-58% representation of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions. Jharkhand leads the way with 59%, closely followed by Rajasthan and Uttarakhand as Table-01 indicates.

Table-01



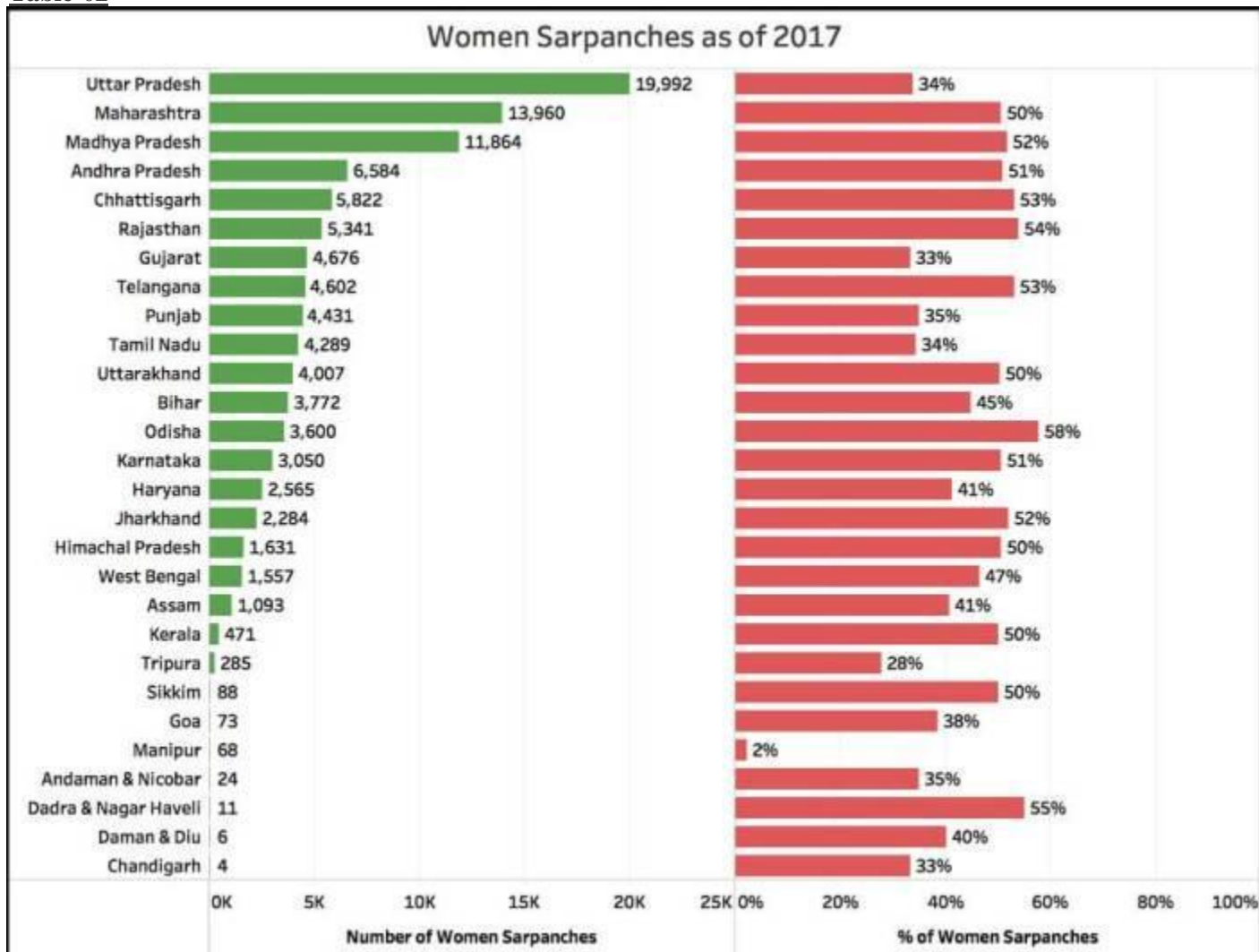
- The Act provides for the reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats for women. It is an attempt to ensure greater participation of women in election process directly and indirectly. **It (PRI) is the nursery of creating women politicians for**

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**national politics. After General Election of Panchayat in 2015**, women constitute more than 33 percent of the total Elected Representatives (E.Rs.) in India ie, out of 29,17,334 ERs, 13,41,773 ERs are women, ie, 46 percent are women.

- Uttar Pradesh has the highest number of women sarpanches (Pradhans) at 19,992 out of 59073 but only 34% of total sarpanches. The state of Odisha has 3600 woman sarpanches, an above average 58% of the total number. Manipur has the least percentage of women sarpanches with just 2% representation as Table-02 indicates.

Table-02



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- It reveals that Women are actively participating in rural development as per their capacity right from labourers to policy-makers.
- The participation of women as elected as well as non-elected members are rising due to reservation for women. It acts as pull factor for women to participate in meeting. They give their suggestions for various works and problems faced by them.
- Women are acting as an agent of change in the society and raising voice against injustice and atrocities.
- Due to women representatives nexus of officers and male elected representatives are breaking, which has a direct impact on reducing corruption. The role of local muscle power has substantially reduced due to active participation and awareness of women about their rights and power.
- Domestic violence has substantially declined due to women pradhan or sarpanch. These women representatives take pro-actively take up such violence. The victims also feel free to share their grievances to women representatives.
- The dominance of upper caste patriarchy are substantially declined, hence the shackles of caste is subsiding.
- Growing participation of marginalized section in general and women in particular, is transforming our democratic setup from representative democracy to participatory democracy.

It is, therefore, necessary to create proper social, economic and also political conditions to enable women to participate effectively in the local governmental institutions. After the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment, many 'household women' have become 'political women'. As Chairperson or ordinary members, these women are expected to play constitutionally mandated roles. The one-third reservation for women in

Panchayati Raj Institutions is really empowering the rural women in all spheres (like social, economic, political) by providing them opportunity to participate in the administration of local government. It is a bold step forward towards the empowerment of rural women in particular. Women's entry into panchayats both as members as well as head of panchayat after the implementation of 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, has pushed them into the decision-making process in a very big way. Whether, their husbands, fathers, brother or other relatives compelled them to take up these roles or whether they assumed these roles as dummy incumbents, one thing is

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certain, they have, once and for all crossed the rigid boundaries drawn through their households by the male relatives.

#### **Difficulties faced by women Elected Representatives in PRS**

- Political intervention in the functioning of Panchayats.
- Women act as proxies for men.
- Husband's intervention of elected woman in her functioning.
- Lack of political awareness among the women in rural areas.
- Negative public opinion regarding women's leadership capacity.
- Illiteracy or low standard of education among the women in rural areas is a stumbling bloc.
- Lack of training courses especially for women representatives at their district level.
- Dominance of elected male members of the Panchayat.
- Politically motivated violence against women have seen an increase.

#### **Suggestions for effective participation of women in Panchayati Raj System**

- Political parties intervene in the election and functioning of Panchayats creates hostile environment for the women contestants and women representatives. The government should take a strict action in such an intervention of political parties and elections should be conducted free and fair.
- In rural areas, due to illiteracy or low literacy level, political awareness among the women is negligible. It is the duty of the government and local administration to literate them and educate the women about the political issues and then create awareness among them.
- Special training and refresher courses for women representatives should be conducted from time-to-time at their Block and District level. It gives them confidence and creates political awareness, power and knowledge of various programmes/activities of development. Government should make special provisions for the women representatives and give them more powers as compared to male counterparts and educate them about their powers. It helps them to work efficiently and effectively.
- There should be a provision to give honour and more financial rewards schemes to the Best women members for their exemplary works.

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- The rotation term of reserved seats should be made after every atleast 10years. It would help women representatives to fix their feet in the panchayats.

#### **Conclusion**

- With the establishment of PRIs in our country a woman gets an opportunity to prove her worth as a good administrator, decision-maker or a good leader. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a milestone in this regard. It provides women a chance to come forward.
- This experiment is proving to be a big success particularly by providing opportunity to women to come out of their houses and participate in administrative and political field.
- However, in many areas of our country this system has been captured by some elite people. The government should provide extra financial, administrative or political assistance to women for the success of the provision of the Amendment.
- Government should encourage research and development in effective implementation of provisions of 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment.

Now it is a hard fact that through PRIs women can help in eradicating a number of evils like alcoholism, child marriages, dowry system, violence against women, untouchability, class-conflicts, etc. Further, it is noticed that after women's entry in PRIs, women in rural areas are also desiring to get engaged in certain economically

gainfull activities. Many Self-Help Groups have been formed by women in rural areas and various development schemes like MNREGA are empowering them economically by providing them some source of income. The views of the respondents are also ascertained on how women's entry in PRIs has empowered them socio-economically. The cent-percent respondents accepted that the social outlook towards women has changed after their participation in PRIs. Today, women are respected by their male counterparts are getting, and are also cooperated by them whenever the need be. All the respondents accepted that they have more respect in the society. They opined that after becoming the members of PRIs in the first five years, the attitude of general masses was not very positive towards women representatives of PRIs, but with the passage of time, our society is now accepting the participation of women at the grassroots level.

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