

## Reservation for Women in Panchayats: Impact on Scheduled Tribe Women

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**Abstract:** The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a watershed in Indian democracy by introducing reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This reform sought to democratize governance, empower marginalized groups, and promote inclusive decision-making. Among the primary beneficiaries have been women from Scheduled Tribes (STs), who historically faced multiple layers of disadvantage due to gender, caste, and socio-economic constraints. This article critically examines the impact of women's reservation in Panchayats on Scheduled Tribe women, analyzing changes in political participation, leadership, socio-economic empowerment, and challenges. It highlights achievements, structural impediments, and future directions for strengthening tribal women's representation.

**Keywords:** Panchayati Raj, Scheduled Tribe Women, Women's Reservation, Political Empowerment, Grassroots Democracy, Gender Equality, 73rd Amendment, Social Inclusion, Local Governance, Leadership.



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### Introduction

The Indian Constitution enshrines the principles of equality, social justice, and inclusive governance. However, women—particularly those belonging to Scheduled Tribes (STs)—have long been marginalized in the socio-political and economic domains. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) sought to transform this scenario by institutionalizing Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and mandating reservation for women. At least one-third of the total seats in Panchayats at every level, as well as the offices of chairpersons, were reserved for women, with further sub-reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

For Scheduled Tribe women, this measure was revolutionary. Tribal societies, though often described as relatively egalitarian compared to caste-based communities, still subjected women to

structural disadvantages, limited property rights, restricted access to education, and exclusion from decision-making. The introduction of political quotas opened unprecedented opportunities for ST women to engage in governance, voice their concerns, and influence policies affecting their communities.

This article explores the impact of women's reservation in Panchayats on Scheduled Tribe women. It covers historical background, constitutional framework, socio-political transformation, case studies, challenges, and future directions.

## **Historical Background**

### **Women in Traditional Tribal Governance**

Tribal communities traditionally maintained village councils or local assemblies, but these were overwhelmingly male-dominated.

Women's participation was often informal and limited to social or cultural domains.

Decisions about land, forest, and disputes rarely involved women.

### **Emergence of Panchayati Raj**

Post-Independence India sought to decentralize governance. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) emphasized democratic decentralization.

However, women's representation remained minimal until the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment.

Reservation provisions transformed rural politics by mandating female inclusion.

## **Constitutional and Legal Framework**

73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment (1992): Introduced a three-tier Panchayati Raj system, with reservation for women.

Article 243D: Reserved one-third of seats and chairperson positions for women, with sub-reservation for SCs and STs.

State-Level Variations: Several states (e.g., Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh) later increased women's reservation to 50%.

For ST women, this legal framework guaranteed access to political institutions previously dominated by men and elites.

## **Impact on Scheduled Tribe Women**

### **1. Political Empowerment**

ST women now actively participate in Gram Sabhas, village councils, and Panchayat elections.

Many women have contested and won elections beyond reserved categories, indicating growing political confidence.

Case studies from Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh reveal tribal women successfully leading Panchayats.

### **2. Leadership and Decision-Making**

Women leaders have influenced policies on drinking water, primary education, maternal health, and forest management.

ST women leaders often focus on community welfare, highlighting issues like malnutrition, access to healthcare, and tribal rights over natural resources.

### **3. Socio-Economic Empowerment**

Reservation has improved visibility and recognition of tribal women's voices.

Access to Panchayat funds and schemes has allowed women leaders to implement welfare programs.

Self-help groups (SHGs), often linked with Panchayats, have increased economic opportunities for tribal women.

### **4. Awareness and Education**

Women's entry into Panchayats has encouraged literacy and political awareness among tribal communities.

Younger tribal girls increasingly view politics and governance as viable aspirations.

### **5. Social Transformation**

Reservation has challenged patriarchal structures within tribal and rural societies.

Greater acceptance of women leaders has slowly normalized gender equality in governance.

Women's presence has reduced corruption in some Panchayats, as documented in field studies.

### **Case Studies**

#### **Jharkhand**

In Jharkhand, tribal women sarpanches have taken strong initiatives in forest conservation and MGNREGA implementation.

For example, a tribal woman sarpanch in Gumla district mobilized villagers for water harvesting and eco-conservation.

#### **Odisha**

Odisha's tribal women leaders have emphasized maternal health programs, improved access to Anganwadis, and school enrollment drives.

In Mayurbhanj, women Panchayat members played a key role in ensuring PDS (Public Distribution System) benefits for remote tribal households.

#### **Chhattisgarh**

In Bastar, tribal women sarpanches resisted Naxal influence and promoted grassroots governance, often at personal risk.

They advocated for road connectivity, healthcare, and education in remote villages.

### **Challenges Faced by Scheduled Tribe Women**

#### **1. Proxy Leadership:**

In many cases, male relatives (husbands, fathers, brothers) exercise de facto power, reducing women to nominal leaders.

#### **2. Low Literacy Levels:**

Limited education restricts tribal women's ability to understand bureaucratic procedures, budgets, and official documentation.

#### **3. Patriarchal Resistance:**

Even within tribal societies, male dominance persists, leading to resistance against independent female decision-making.

#### **4. Lack of Capacity Building:**

Insufficient training programs hinder effective participation of tribal women in governance.

#### **5. Socio-Economic Constraints:**

Poverty, landlessness, and dependence on male income restrict political independence.

#### **6. Intersectional Discrimination:**

Tribal women face marginalization not only as women but also as members of a disadvantaged ethnic group.

#### **7. Violence and Intimidation:**

In conflict-prone tribal areas, women leaders are vulnerable to political violence, threats, and Naxalite pressures.

#### **Policy Interventions and Support Mechanisms**

1. **Capacity Building Programs:** Training workshops to enhance women leaders' skills in budgeting, planning, and governance.
2. **Education and Literacy Drives:** Focused initiatives to improve literacy among tribal women and girls.
3. **Networking and Collective Platforms:** Formation of federations of elected women representatives to share experiences.
4. **Legal Safeguards:** Protection against gender-based violence and proxy representation.
5. **Financial Inclusion:** Linking tribal women leaders with SHGs, banks, and micro-credit schemes.
6. **Awareness Campaigns:** Encouraging community acceptance of women's leadership roles.

#### **Future Directions**

Increasing reservation from one-third to 50% nationwide, ensuring stronger representation.

Integrating digital literacy programs to enable tribal women leaders to use technology in governance.

Expanding affirmative action in capacity-building, scholarships, and political mentoring.

Promoting intersectional policies that address both gender and tribal marginalization.

Encouraging tribal women's participation in higher political levels—district councils, state assemblies, and Parliament.

#### **Conclusion**

Reservation for women in Panchayats has emerged as one of the most transformative democratic measures in post-independence India. For Scheduled Tribe women, it has provided an institutional platform to challenge historical marginalization, voice their concerns, and lead their communities. Despite challenges such as proxy leadership, illiteracy, and patriarchal resistance, the successes achieved so far demonstrate remarkable progress in grassroots democracy. The empowerment of ST women in Panchayats has not only advanced gender equality but also strengthened participatory governance in tribal regions. Sustained policy support, training, and social change are essential to consolidate these gains and ensure that Scheduled Tribe women become autonomous leaders of their communities.

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