

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS- A CHALLENGE IN REALIZING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT AMONG WOMEN IN INDIA

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The societal power structures that hinder women from leading fulfilling lives operate on both personal and public levels. According to Weber (1922); “Power (Macht) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests”. Beyond interpersonal interactions, power shapes broader dynamics such as governments, professional associations, and social groups. Legitimized power, or power that people consent to obey, is referred to as authority. Because it is believed these people are deserving of respect, people pay attention to those in positions of power. But what if the authority kneels down to power? This chapter entails observed practices prevalent in India that reach the grassroots level of administrative functioning. It also highlights the paradox of traditional authority and legal-rational authority and the former’s supremacy in villages and local bodies’ administration even in the new age of democracy.

Empowering women and improving their social, economic, and political status is essential for creating a transparent and accountable government. To attain a sustainable and equitable life United Nations declared its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN’s SDG 5 aims to “achieve gender equality and empower all

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women and girls”. Gender equality refers to equal access to resources and opportunities, irrespective of an individual’s gender. This concept encompasses a wide spectrum, from economic participation to decision-making roles to social inclusion, access to education, healthcare, etc. Achieving gender equality and ensuring the full participation of women in decision-making are essential indicators of a healthy democracy. When women are involved in all aspects of political life, societies become more equitable, and democracy becomes stronger and more representative. This acts as a catalyst for integrating equality into government policies and its implications. Without women’s active involvement in decision-making, the goals of equality, development, and peace cannot be fully realized. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that every individual has the right to participate in the governance of their country by not just only practicing adult franchises to exercise voting but also participating as decision-makers.

There have been notable milestones in history showcasing early and active female participation in power and decision-making. Some examples are: Yevgenia Bosh (Ukraine), who was the first female leader in the modern world, serving as the Minister of Interior and Acting Leader of the People’s Secretariat of Ukraine from 1917-18. Khertek Anhimaam Toka from the Tuvan People’s Republic made history as the world’s first elected female head of state in 1940. Sirimavo Bandaranaike made further progress by becoming the first woman to be democratically elected as Prime Minister of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1960. But the irony is still equal participation of females in politics is a dream. From local to global levels, women have struggled for political rights for centuries. As history has it, the ‘First wave of feminism’ began in 1848 in the United States of America when approximately three hundred women convened to discuss Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Declaration of Sentiments, which outlined women’s inferior status and called for the right to vote, or suffrage. When women in the US were given the right to vote in 1920, this wave came to an end (Britain had already made limited women’s suffrage available in 1918). First-wave campaigners thought that if women gained the vote, they could utilize it to implement other important reforms, such as those pertaining to work, education, and the ownership of property. The second wave focused on addressing a variety of issues related to women including ‘consciousness raising’, situations related to politics, the economy, technology, and culture. The third wave accommodated kaleidoscopic views (Chen, Pain, and Zhang; 2018). “Digital or online feminism,” which became popular in 2013, is the classic example of the fourth wave. Massive online mobilization is a hallmark of this period (Biana, 2023). In India however, the makers of the Constitution were prudent enough to acknowledge core women’s rights and thus were all-inclusive. The Fundamental rights so enshrined, empower the people of India to exercise their basic human, political, social, and economic rights.

As such there are no legal barriers but challenges are there. Women comprise 50 percent of the electoral pool but this composition is not visible in the composition of decision-making and power sharing. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) report the proportion of women in national parliaments was 26.1 percent worldwide in 2021, which was 11 percent in 1995. This showed an increase of 15.1 percent in 26 years (less than 0.6 per year). With the present rate of growth, the ultimate goal of equal participation in politics and decision-making seems impossible to achieve before 2077 (UN Women Facts and Figures, 2021). In addition to the issue of women's unequal representation in political decision-making, most countries have also witnessed instances of exploitation in the form of 'shadow power'. A range of factors from socio-cultural to economic and financial aspects are responsible for this condition.

Numerous studies have emphasized that social and cultural factors play a significant role in the under-representation of women in active political decision-making. In 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State' (1884), Fredrick Engel links the rise of private property to the beginnings of patriarchy and women's subordination. He maintained that the growth of the monarchy and the dividing of society into classes occurred at the same time that women were oppressed. Engel argues that gender inequality and the advancement of economic conditions clashed in a pre-capitalist egalitarian society. Generally, it is believed that women are "unsuited" for leadership roles. In traditional gender norms is widely believed that men often hold dominant positions in society and, by extension, in politics, while women are relegated to the domestic sphere, limiting them to reproductive roles and if they enter the forefront their reproductive role will get affected. Furthermore, stereotypes about women are also reinforced by the media. Women are more often judged on their appearance, looks, and personal lives rather than on their capabilities and efficiency. Stigmatizing women's roles is a major obstacle coupled with financial constraints. Worldwide women enjoy limited financial freedom so it becomes impossible for them to fund their campaigns, raise party funds, and cover their travel costs.

Promoting equal female participation in politics is a key step toward achieving gender equality and inclusive governance. Various initiatives have been undertaken globally to address systemic barriers and ensure women's representation in political decision-making processes. These initiatives operate at local, national, and international levels, involving governments, civil society, and international organizations. Some of the key initiatives are:

Gender Quotas: More than 130 nations across the world have modified their constitutions or electoral laws to provide gender quotas to increase women's representation in legislative bodies. These quotas set a minimum percentage of women candidates in elections. One of the best examples is seen in India where reservation of seats for women in local government (Panchayati Raj and Urban local bodies) ensures grassroots participation. Article 242 D (3) and Article 243 T (3) note: not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women

belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat/ municipality to be reserved for women and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat/ municipality. Similarly, Article 243 D (4)/ 243 T (4) says that not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the panchayats/ municipality at each level is to be reserved for women.

Capacity Building Programs and Awareness Campaigns: For active and productive participation in politics, improving leadership skills, political knowledge, and campaigning strategies many organizations and institutions run capacity building programs for example Women's Democracy Network. These programs challenge stereotypes about women in leadership and highlight the importance of their political importance.

Legal and Policy Reforms: The UN Executive Committee has prepared a 'Guidance Note' to provide technical advice to UN women and country teams on how they can support member states in addressing violence against women in politics. Many countries have also started with an initiative to provide financial support/ subsidies to women candidates.

Global Commitments: International agreements, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action, urge nations to ensure women's full and equal participation in politics.

Networking and Mentorship: Platforms like EMILY's List in the United States and She Should Run connect women with mentors, resources, and funding to run for office and succeed in political careers.

Gender Budgeting: In the year 1984, Australia introduced the world's first gender budget statement, which laid a foundation for gender budgeting for the entire world. The concept gained momentum in 1995 after the World Conference on Women in Beijing where the "Beijing Platform for Action" called for the consideration of women's needs and a gender perspective in budgetary policies. Gender budgeting ensures that legislation, programs, and schemes are gender sensitive.

These initiatives have a positive impact on both global and national levels. In the Indian context, one of the best examples is seen in the 1993 Constitutional Amendment – the Panchayati Raj Act (73rd Constitutional Amendment) which allowed a critical mass of women to enter into the grass-root politics of India. This historic ruling acknowledged the importance of women's voices in politics, especially in rural India where women are frequently marginalized by patriarchal traditions. The Panchayati Raj system's provision of seats for women in local government is among its most important contributions to women's empowerment. According to the amendment, women must hold at least 33% of the seats in Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies (ULBs). Due to this clause, women are now more involved in politics, enabling them to assume leadership positions and

have an impact on local decision-making. According to the data released by Jagran News agency on 16th August 2024 throughout the country in around 1.5 lakh panchayats 44 percent of women participation is reported.

As role models, women elected to Panchayati Raj institutions encourage other women to get involved in politics and community issues. In addition to questioning established gender norms, their involvement has made it easier for laws and initiatives that deal with women's concerns—like health, education, and sanitation—to be introduced. For example, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which offers job opportunities and encourages women's economic independence, was implemented in large part because of the efforts of women leaders.

Building Capacity and Developing Skills- Women's skill development and capacity building are also greatly aided by the Panchayati Raj system. Numerous workshops and training sessions are planned to give women the tools they need to carry out their responsibilities in local government. By improving their knowledge of money management, project planning, and legal rights, these programs aim to empower students to make significant contributions to their communities.

Women's participation in PRIs has also resulted in the formation of self-help groups (SHGs), which give women a forum to connect, exchange stories, and obtain financial support. SHGs have given women economic power by giving them chances to work for themselves and start their own businesses. Because it promotes a sense of independence and self-worth, economic empowerment is essential for raising women's standing in their families and communities.

Addressing Social Issues- In tackling a range of socio-economic challenges that impact their communities, women have played a crucial role in Panchayati Raj institutions. They have taken the initiative to support girls' education, fight domestic abuse, and contend for women's rights. Women leaders have helped to alter cultural attitudes and conventions that support gender discrimination by bringing attention to these problems.

For instance, programs to support the education of girls have been started by female Sarpanches (village chiefs), which has boosted the number of girls enrolled and staying in school. This has helped in increasing the GER (Gross Enrollment Ratio) in rural India. In order to guarantee that women have access to maternity and child health services, they have also worked to upgrade healthcare facilities. In addition to empowering women, these programs advance the community's general growth.

Obstacles & Difficulties- Notwithstanding the advancements, there are still several obstacles in the way of women's empowerment through the Panchayati Raj system. The continuation of patriarchal customs and cultural beliefs that undercut women's power and ability to make decisions is one of the main challenges. Women elected to PRIs are frequently viewed as stand-ins for their male relatives, which restricts their autonomy. While the system formally empowers elected representatives

the complexities of gender, power, and authority in rural India gave rise to a new phenomenon of ‘*Sarpanch-Pati/ Pradhan- Pati*’ (depending on the region).

The term Sarpanch-pati refers to the role of the husband or male family member of a female Sarpanch, who often becomes the de facto decision-maker while the woman holds the official position. This phenomenon, referred to by scholars as “Shadow Power/ Proxy power” has drawn increasing attention in academic research, media reports, and socio-political discourse. While some view the Sarpanch-pati as a manifestation of patriarchal control, others argue that it is a reflection of the broader social and familial dynamics of rural India. The phenomenon is just not limited to Panchayats, it has been found and reported in Urban local bodies too. The prevalence is found in other states too and thus deep-rooted research is required. While several factors contribute to the emergence of shadow power, a few of them are listed below:

1. Patriarchal Structure and Cultural Norms: A similar way to frame this project is to see ‘patriarchal power’ as a force that can be understood as related to Michel Foucault’s (1976/1998) bio-power. Women are frequently relegated to inferior roles in rural India due to the country’s strongly embedded patriarchal beliefs, particularly in the public and political arenas. Even after being elected to high posts, women may encounter opposition from male family members and colleagues, which can result in the rise of “shadow leaders” who may not be well-known but wield considerable power behind the scenes.

2. Customary Practices: While customs may facilitate social unity and stability, establish as the ‘rules’ of social life, inflict anguish if they are broken, endure for centuries, and exist in all kinds of communities, it also leads to it make impossible to enforce laws that contradict them. It hence becomes a customary practice that delimits the scope of women’s participation.

3. Lack of Political Experience: A large number of women elected to Sarpanch positions are believed to have no political experience and are ill-equipped to handle the intricate realm of local government. Their husbands, who might have more political exposure and expertise, frequently cover this experience gap, solidifying their position as the unofficial power brokers.

4. Social and Economic Barriers: Women’s progress in attaining political power largely depends on the degree of progress they made outside the politics. In rural regions, women frequently encounter barriers to information access, mobility, and decision-making involvement. Because of these obstacles, it is more difficult for female Sarpanchs to exercise their full authority, which results in the delegation of power to male family members.

5. Dominant Caste and Power: Despite Beteille’s (1971) findings on how new forces are upending the status quo and creating political and economic structures that are not solely reliant on caste, regular interventions have sorted the rule of Dominant caste (Srinivas, 1994) that subdues the elected representatives.

6. Social and Economic Prestige: The public also views it as an act of social prestige. Since the pressure of the representation falls on the ‘family’, it becomes imperative for the male to keep up with the social prestige along with carrying forward the economic aspect.

The practice of Sarpanch-Pati constitutes the main hurdle to optimally operating the female-led government in rural India. The impact of the Sarpanchpati has been well documented in the states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Bihar. According to research done in Rajasthan’s rural districts, the husband was actively involved in managing the Panchayat in 28% of the cases involving female Sarpanchs. The husband was regarded as the true authority behind the throne and frequently spoke on behalf of the Sarpanch in the meetings. They regularly interfered in Panchayat affairs, directing the distribution of finances and making important decisions on behalf of the village because of his lack of knowledge and the patriarchal social system.

The Consequences of Shadow Power

The emergence of the Sarpanch-Pati phenomenon has several implications for female equality, governance, and political participation:

1. The Decline of Women’s Empowerment: The Panchayati Raj system was designed to empower women; however the dominance of male family members often undermines women’s actual ability to govern. If elected women are unable to effectively represent their regions or make decisions, the core purpose of women’s political representation may be compromised.

2. Reinforcement of Patriarchy: Patriarchal standards are maintained by the existence of shadow power, which grants men ultimate political authority even when women hold official positions. This undermines the goal of challenging traditional gender norms and promoting women’s political agency.

3. Effect on Governance: The way the Panchayat functions may be impacted when power is concentrated in the hands of one individual, even if that individual is not officially in a position of authority. Decisions made by the Sarpanch-Pati that may not necessarily reflect the interests or preferences of the greater community may lead to inefficiency, corruption, or the ignoring of important local concerns.

4. Policy Implications: Given the prevalence of shadow power, policy initiatives that prioritize strengthening the capacities of female Sarpanchs are required. These could include programs for education, better access to information, and support systems that enable women to fulfill their official duties. The authority of the Sarpanch-pati may also be diminished by social awareness campaigns that challenge patriarchal norms.

5. Educated 21st-Century Females – educated, little empowered but lack political exposure and thus befooled by seniors (OBC creamy layers- politically inclined and are leading but there is a way too forward)

Despite notable advancements in recent years, India still confronts a number of obstacles to women’s political empowerment. Social and cultural hurdles still

exist, and women's political engagement is frequently impeded by deeply rooted patriarchal ideas. It is particularly difficult for women in rural areas to participate in political processes because of systematic prejudice, a lack of education, and restricted access to resources. Women are also deterred from running for political office by obstacles including sarpanch-pati, a lack of mentorship, and a supportive network. Because many women lack the financial means to manage election campaigns and frequently depend on male family members for support, economic inequality also plays a significant role. Women face gender-based assault, harassment, and intimidation in the frequently harsh political environment. Women's impact in policymaking is further limited by their underrepresentation in political leadership roles across the board. Furthermore, the Women's Reservation Bill, which calls for reserving one-third of seats in state legislatures and Parliament for women (and the newly proposed bill for 50 percent mandatory women participation), was passed, but its implementation has been postponed, indicating political parties' unwillingness to address gender inequality. To overcome these obstacles and establish a more inclusive political climate for women in India, systemic changes, more political will, systematic eradication of gender norms and customary evil practices, and more social support are needed.

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