A Structural Analysis of Gender Reservation in Panchayati Raj in India

ABSTRACT

India's experiment with women's reservation in local governance stands alone in the democratic world, both in its ambition and in its contradictions. Since the 73rd Constitutional Amendment came into force in April 1993, more than 14.5 lakh women have won seats across gram panchayats, panchayat samitis, and zila parishads — accounting for nearly 46 percent of all elected panchayat representatives nationwide (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2025). These are not small numbers. By any conventional measure of political inclusion, they represent a genuine transformation. Yet the transformation is incomplete.

This paper takes up the harder question that lies behind the statistics: are these women actually governing? Across large stretches of northern and central India, the answer is often no. A well-documented practice known variously as Sarpanch Pati, Pradhan Pati, or Mukhiya Pati has emerged in which the husband or another male relative of an elected woman assumes the practical functions of her office while she remains at home. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj's own advisory committee found that in Bihar, more than 60 percent of elected women panchayat leaders were subject to this arrangement (MoPR, 2025). The Supreme Court took note of the practice in Mundona Rural Development Foundation v. Union of India and directed the central government to recommend structural remedies.

This paper draws on constitutional law, field research, empirical studies, and government reports to argue that proxy leadership is not a cultural residue that will fade with time. It is produced and sustained by a specific set of conditions: educational disadvantage accumulated over generations, patriarchal household authority that predates the reservation system, economic dependence that gives women limited capacity to resist male assertion of their offices, and institutional gaps that for decades left the practice effectively invisible to monitoring and enforcement. Addressing it requires a coordinated four-dimensional response covering legal accountability, institutional redesign, sustained educational investment, and deliberate community-level norm change.

Keywords: *Panchayati Raj, gender reservation, women's political representation, Sarpanch Pati, 73rd Constitutional Amendment, proxy leadership, grassroots democracy, women's empowerment, substantive representation, Mundona case, Sushil Kumar Committee*

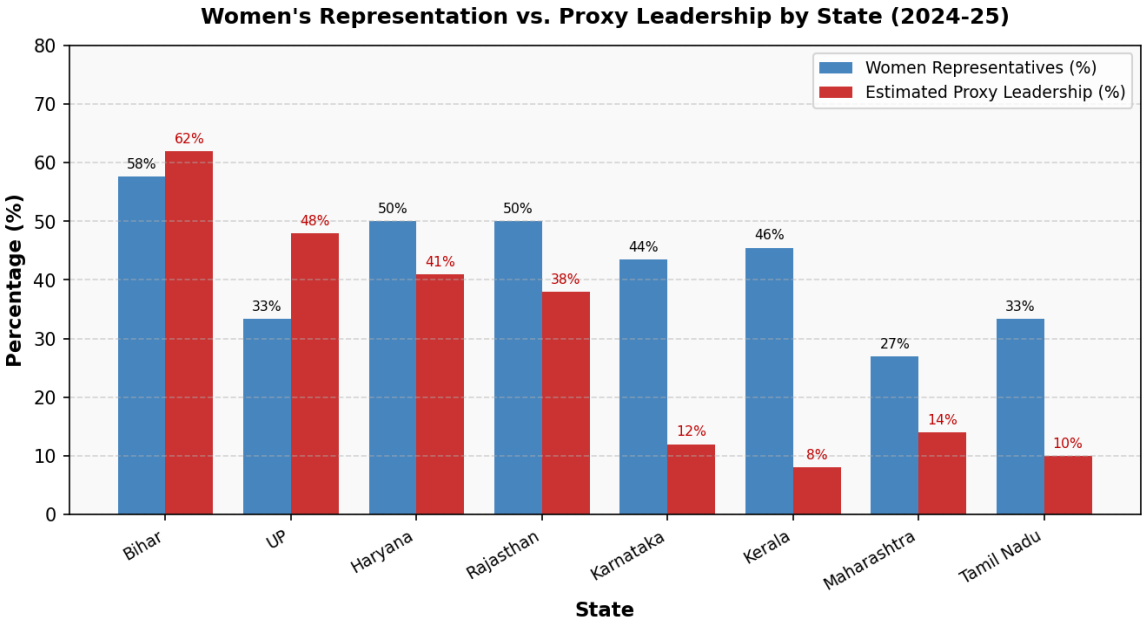

*Figure 1: Women's Representation (%) versus Estimated Proxy Leadership (%) by State, 2024-25. Source: PIB (2025); MoPR (2025); NITI Aayog (2025). *Proxy estimates from field studies.*

1. INTRODUCTION

There is something genuinely remarkable about what India set in motion in the early 1990s. Over the course of a single constitutional amendment and its subsequent implementation across twenty-eight states and eight union territories, more than a million women were brought into elected office at the village and district level. The scale of that entry into governance has no parallel in the democratic world. Countries that have debated women's political inclusion for decades, passing legislation and launching campaigns, have not come close to the numbers that India's panchayat reservation system produced in its first decade of operation alone.

Today, the figure stands at more than 14.5 lakh elected women representatives across panchayat bodies nationwide, making up nearly half of all elected seats at that level (PIB, 2025). Looked at from a certain angle, this is a success story of the first order. A country with deep, historically entrenched barriers to women's public participation managed, through a constitutional mechanism, to put women in charge of governance institutions that affect the daily lives of hundreds of millions of people. The roads that get built, the schools that get managed, the water systems that get maintained, the welfare schemes that get implemented — all of these fall within the jurisdiction of the panchayat bodies that women now partly lead.

The difficulty emerges when you look at a different angle. Political scientists who study gender and governance have long distinguished between two things that can easily be confused: the formal presence of women in a governance institution, and the actual exercise of authority by those

women within it. The first is measurable, trackable, and can be driven upward by legal mandates. The second is much harder to see and much harder to create. India's panchayat experience has made the gap between these two things unusually visible.

In large parts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh, a specific and well-documented practice has taken hold. When a woman is elected to the office of sarpanch or gram panchayat chairperson under the reservation system, her husband — or occasionally her father-in-law, adult son, or brother-in-law — steps in and performs the actual functions of the office. He attends the Gram Sabha. He meets with block development officers, signs documents, handles contractor negotiations, and manages the panchayat's funds. She, for the most part, stays at home. In Bihar alone, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj's advisory committee found this arrangement in place for more than 60 percent of elected women panchayat leaders (MoPR, 2025).

This paper argues that proxy leadership is not a temporary cultural lag that will correct itself as traditional attitudes gradually modernize. It is the predictable outcome of a policy that created formal positions for women without simultaneously creating the conditions under which women could actually occupy those positions with genuine authority. Four conditions are particularly important: basic literacy and familiarity with governance procedures, economic independence from male household members, social permission to occupy public space and speak with authority in mixed-gender settings, and institutional mechanisms capable of detecting and responding to the substitution of a male proxy for an elected woman.

2. HISTORICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Pre-Amendment Context

The intellectual and political history of village self-governance in India runs deep. The idea that the village is the natural unit of Indian democracy — that political life ought to be organized from the ground up, with communities managing their own affairs through institutions they understand and trust — was associated most powerfully with Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj. For Gandhi, the village was not simply an administrative convenience. It was the foundation of a genuinely Indian form of democratic life, one that would be rooted in local knowledge and local accountability rather than in the impersonal machinery of the colonial state.

Ambedkar disputed this vision vigorously and on principle. For him, the Indian village was not a seedbed of democratic potential. It was a site of caste hierarchy, social oppression, and entrenched inequality. The tension between these two readings — the Gandhian village as democratic possibility, the Ambedkarite village as site of power's abuse — runs through the entire history of panchayati raj policy in independent India. It has never been fully resolved, and it shapes the context in which the reservation system operates today (Omvedt, 1994; Jayal, 2001).

The Constitution adopted in 1950 reflected this ambivalence in its very structure. Village governance found a home in the document, but not in its enforceable provisions. Article 40, placed in the Directive Principles of State Policy, instructed the government to organize village panchayats and endow them with sufficient power and authority to function as units of self-government. For the better part of four decades it remained largely in that aspirational register. Some states made more serious efforts than others: Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and a handful of others experimented with panchayat systems during the 1950s and 1960s (Mathew, 1994; Bhatt, 2003).

Women's position in this period was even more constrained. Formal enfranchisement did not translate into participation in governance. Rural women were excluded from public decision-making by the intersection of several forces: widespread illiteracy, purdah norms that restricted their physical mobility and public visibility, economic dependence on male household members, and the complete absence of any institutional design that would have created space for them in the governance structures that existed (Buch, 2010; Kishwar, 1996).

2.2 The 73rd Amendment: Design, Promise, and Gaps

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act of 1992, which came into force in April 1993, was one of the more consequential pieces of legislation in post-independence India. It inserted Part IX into the Constitution, creating Articles 243 through 243-O; it attached the Eleventh Schedule listing twenty-nine subject areas to be devolved to panchayat jurisdiction; it required states to hold regular five-year panchayat elections under the supervision of independent state election commissions; and it created a constitutionally mandated three-tier governance structure (Mathew, 1994; Rai, 2011).

For women, the key provision was Article 243D, which required that not less than one-third of all seats in every panchayat, and not less than one-third of all chairperson positions at each tier, be reserved for women. This was a constitutional mandate, not a recommendation, and it was immediately applicable to state-level panchayat legislation. The design of the reservation covered both ordinary membership and the top leadership positions at each tier. If only membership seats had been reserved, women would have been present in panchayats without holding the positions that carried the most authority and commanded the most resources.

Two features of the amendment's design have had unintended effects. The first was the rotation of reserved constituencies between election cycles. The effect, in practice, has been to discourage women from investing in long-term constituency-building, since they know their current constituency will not be reserved in the next election (Ban & Rao, 2008; Bhavnani, 2009). The second gap was perhaps more fundamental: the amendment created positions for women but did not create the conditions — literacy training, governance capacity building, economic empowerment — under which women could effectively occupy those positions.

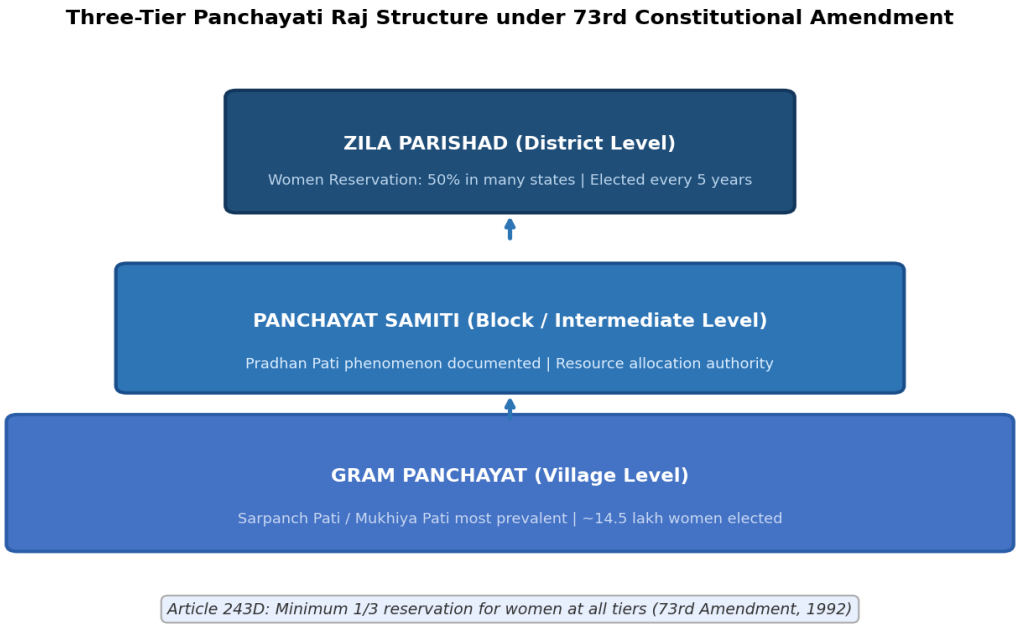

Figure 2: Three-Tier Panchayati Raj Structure under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992). Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India.

2.3 The Expansion to 50 Percent and State-Level Variation

The one-third floor established by the 73rd Amendment has been substantially exceeded across a large number of states. By 2025, more than 21 states and 2 Union Territories had enacted 50 percent reservation for women in their panchayat bodies (PIB, 2025). Bihar was among the earliest and most prominent movers in this direction — notable, given that it is also one of the states where proxy leadership is most deeply entrenched. The coexistence of high formal reservation and high rates of proxy substitution in Bihar illustrates the central problem: numerical representation and substantive authority are not the same thing (Duflo, 2012; Pande, 2003).

State-level variation in outcomes is significant and revealing. Karnataka stands out in the research literature as a case where the spill-over effects of reservation have been most pronounced. In several Karnataka districts, women have begun winning in unreserved constituencies at rates well above what chance would predict, suggesting that repeated reservation cycles have progressively normalized female candidacy and reduced informal social barriers to women's participation across the board (Iyer et al., 2012; Bhavnani, 2009).

Table 1: State-Wise Women Representation, Proxy Leadership, and Literacy (2024-25)

State	Women Seats (%)	EWR (Lakh)	Proxy Leadership (%)*	Female Literacy (%)	e-GramSwaraj Adoption (%)
Bihar	57.7	2.24	~62	53.3	38
Uttar Pradesh	33.4	2.70	~48	59.3	42
Haryana	50.0	0.38	~41	66.8	55
Rajasthan	50.0	1.48	~38	52.7	48
Madhya Pradesh	50.0	1.74	~30	60.0	52
Karnataka	43.5	1.15	~12	73.4	68
Kerala	45.5	0.42	~8	92.0	81
Maharashtra	27.0	0.97	~14	75.9	66
Tamil Nadu	33.3	0.83	~10	80.3	72
West Bengal	50.0	1.22	~22	71.2	60

*Sources: PIB (2025); MoPR (2025); Census of India 2011; NITI Aayog (2025). *Proxy leadership estimates based on field research; EWR = Elected Women Representatives.*

3. BETWEEN PRESENCE AND POWER: THE REPRESENTATION-AGENCY GAP

3.1 Descriptive and Substantive Representation

Political scientists studying gender and governance work with a distinction that turns out to be central to understanding India's panchayat experience. Descriptive representation refers to the demographic composition of a representative body: how many women, how many members of a particular caste or community, how many people from a particular region are present among those who hold formal office. Substantive representation refers to something quite different: whether the decisions and policies produced by that body actually reflect the interests, priorities, and perspectives of the groups nominally represented within it. Naila Kabeer's (1999) framework of resources, agency, and achievements is directly applicable here: a woman who holds office but cannot exercise agency within it has resources without achievements — a form of representation that satisfies formal criteria while denying substantive power (Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999; Naila, 1999).

These two dimensions of representation can diverge substantially. India's panchayat experience has given researchers an unusually rich laboratory for studying this relationship. The reservation system produced a large, rapid, and geographically varied expansion in women's descriptive representation across local governance bodies. The variation in conditions across states has created something close to a natural experiment in the conditions that determine whether formal representation translates into substantive authority. The findings, across dozens of studies, are consistent: translation occurs where supporting conditions exist, and fails to occur where they do not (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Beaman et al., 2012).

3.2 The Literacy and Administrative Capacity Deficit

Running a gram panchayat is more administratively demanding than most outsiders appreciate. The elected sarpanch is expected to manage correspondence with block and district-level government offices; oversee the implementation of large welfare programs including MGNREGA, PM Awas Yojana, Jal Jeevan Mission, and Swachh Bharat; maintain financial accounts that are subject to audit; and preside over Gram Sabha meetings. None of this is straightforward, and all of it requires, at a minimum, basic literacy and some familiarity with government procedures (NIRDPR, 2014; Ghosh, 2006).

Many women who entered panchayat office under the reservation system in its first decades lacked these skills — not because of any inherent incapacity, but because the educational investment that would have given them these skills had not been made. The districts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, and Rajasthan that show the highest rates of proxy leadership are, without exception, among the districts with the lowest female literacy rates in the country. This is not coincidental (Drishti IAS, 2025a). When a woman cannot read, and documents arrive at the panchayat office that need to be read and responded to, someone else has to read them.

3.3 The Authority Problem: Public Space, Purdah, and the Right to Speak

Even among women who have the literacy and administrative knowledge to govern effectively, the exercise of formal authority can be blocked by a second set of obstacles that operate at the level of social norms. In many communities across northern India, norms governing gender roles in public life do not simply prefer male leadership. They actively police female authority through social sanction, communal pressure, family conflict, and in some documented cases, explicit coercion (Buch, 2010; Jayal, 2001).

Purdah, in its varied regional forms, is the most familiar of these norms. In its most restrictive versions, it limits not only a woman's physical mobility but also her visibility and her capacity to engage in face-to-face interactions with men who are not family members. Attending a Gram Sabha meeting, meeting with block development officers, and managing contractor relationships all

conflict, in varying degrees, with the expectations placed on women in many northern Indian communities (Kishwar, 1996; Omvedt, 1994; Ban & Rao, 2008).

3.4 Economic Dependence and the Capture of Office Benefits

A third structural factor operates at the level of material interests and economic relationships. In most rural households across northern India, women's access to income, property, and financial resources runs through their husbands. Formal land ownership is overwhelmingly male. Independent bank accounts are the exception rather than the rule. Primary earning capacity is predominantly male. This economic dependency is not incidental to the proxy leadership problem. It is one of its structural foundations (Duflo, 2012; Mitra & Singh, 1999).

The office of sarpanch controls real resources: the allocation of MGNREGA work, the approval of PM Awas Yojana housing lists, the management of village-level infrastructure funds, and relationships with contractors. Deininger, Jin, and Nagarajan (2013) found that women's political leadership in panchayats significantly improved MGNREGA implementation outcomes — precisely because women prioritised equitable wage work allocation over contractor-driven distortions — confirming that who holds the actual authority of the office has concrete, measurable consequences for public good delivery. In a context where women are economically dependent on their husbands, the prospect of challenging a husband's proxy role means risking household conflict with real material consequences (Rau's IAS, 2025; Deccan Chronicle, 2025; Deininger et al., 2013).

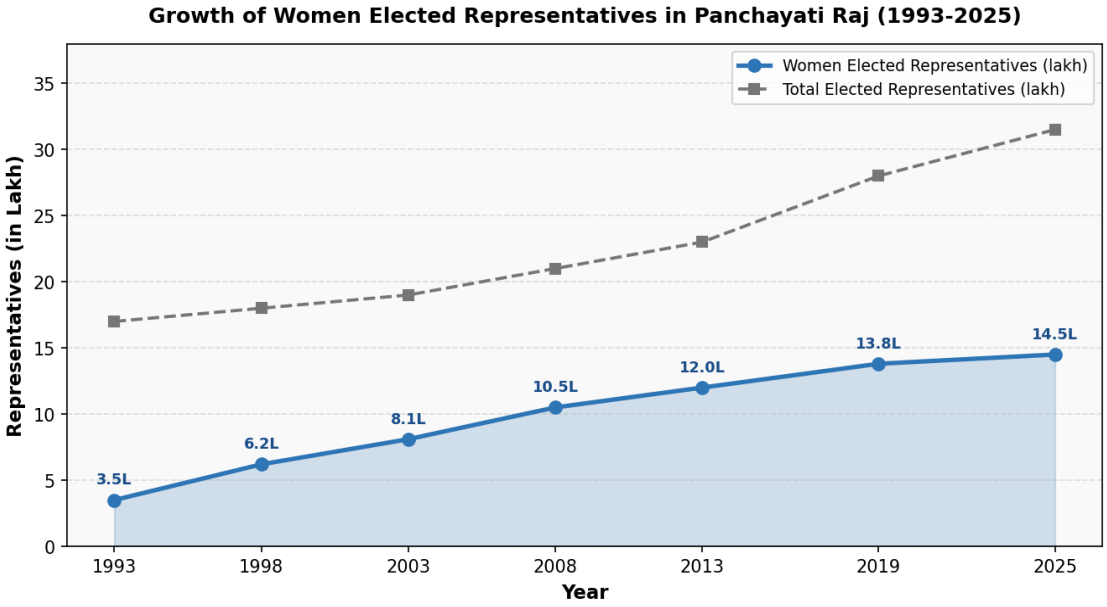

Figure 3: Growth of Women Elected Representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, 1993-2025 (in Lakh). Source: PIB (2025); Ministry of Panchayati Raj Annual Reports.

4. PROXY LEADERSHIP: ANATOMY OF THE SARPANCH PATI SYSTEM

4.1 What Proxy Leadership Looks Like in Practice

The term Sarpanch Pati names a recognizable and well-documented behavioral pattern. A woman wins election to the office of sarpanch under the reservation system. Within a short time of taking office — sometimes immediately — her husband, or occasionally another male relative, assumes the practical functions of the position. He is the one who shows up at the Gram Sabha. He sits at the head of the table in panchayat committee meetings. He travels to the block development office, meets with government functionaries, negotiates with contractors, and manages the panchayat's financial dealings (MoPR, 2025; Buch, 2010).

The vocabulary that communities have generated for this practice is itself revealing. Pradhan Pati, Mukhiya Pati, and state-specific variants are not terms that outside researchers invented to describe something they observed. They are terms that local people use without apparent embarrassment to describe what is happening. The existence of this vocabulary suggests that the practice is not experienced as exceptional or problematic in the places where it prevails. It is a recognized social role, with its own understood expectations and its own informal legitimacy (Ghosh, 2006; RSIS International, 2023).

4.2 The Geography and Scale of the Problem

Measuring proxy leadership with precision is genuinely difficult. It is an informal practice, and its practitioners have obvious reasons to avoid creating official records that document it. Panchayat meeting registers record who was present; they do not record who was actually performing the functions of the office. Field researchers who study the phenomenon rely on interviews, direct observation, and triangulation across multiple sources (ORF, 2024; Drishti IAS, 2025a).

Despite these measurement challenges, the available evidence points consistently toward the same conclusions. The Sushil Kumar Advisory Committee, reporting to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in early 2025, identified Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, and Rajasthan as the states where proxy leadership is most severe. In Bihar, field research found that over 60 percent of elected women panchayat leaders had male relatives performing governance functions on their behalf (MoPR, 2025). The regional picture is not uniform: states in southern and western India show considerably lower rates of proxy leadership.

4.3 Causation at Multiple Levels

Explanations of proxy leadership that focus on a single cause will miss the phenomenon's actual complexity. The practice is generated simultaneously at several different levels of social organization — individual, household, community, and institutional — and it persists precisely

because interventions that address only one level tend to be absorbed without producing fundamental change (Collins, 2000; Mansbridge, 1999; Beaman et al., 2012).

At the individual level, the literacy and governance capacity gaps create genuine practical dependency that makes proxy substitution the path of least resistance. At the household level, patriarchal authority structures and women's economic dependence create an environment in which male relatives can assert control without facing meaningful internal resistance. At the community level, social norms that restrict women's public roles are maintained by the accumulated weight of communal expectation and social sanction. At the institutional level, governance systems have — until very recently — failed to create mechanisms capable of detecting and responding to proxy substitution (Deccan Chronicle, 2025; GK Today, 2026).

4.4 The Judicial Dimension: Mundona and Its Aftermath

The Supreme Court's engagement with proxy leadership marked a shift in how the practice is legally understood. The Court held in Mundona Rural Development Foundation v. Union of India that the reservation of seats and chairperson positions for women was not simply a rule about who wins elections. It was a constitutional guarantee that the governance functions of those positions would be exercised by the women who were constitutionally entitled to exercise them. A male proxy performing those functions was an unconstitutional usurper of constitutionally reserved authority.

This framing matters for several reasons. It establishes that the state has not merely a policy interest but a constitutional obligation to ensure that elected women actually govern. It grounds the case for legal prohibition and enforcement in constitutional text rather than in policy preference, making it harder for state governments to treat the issue as optional. The Court directed the Ministry of Panchayati Raj to recommend structural measures, which led in October 2023 to the formation of the advisory committee under Sushil Kumar (MoPR, 2025; Rau's IAS, 2025).

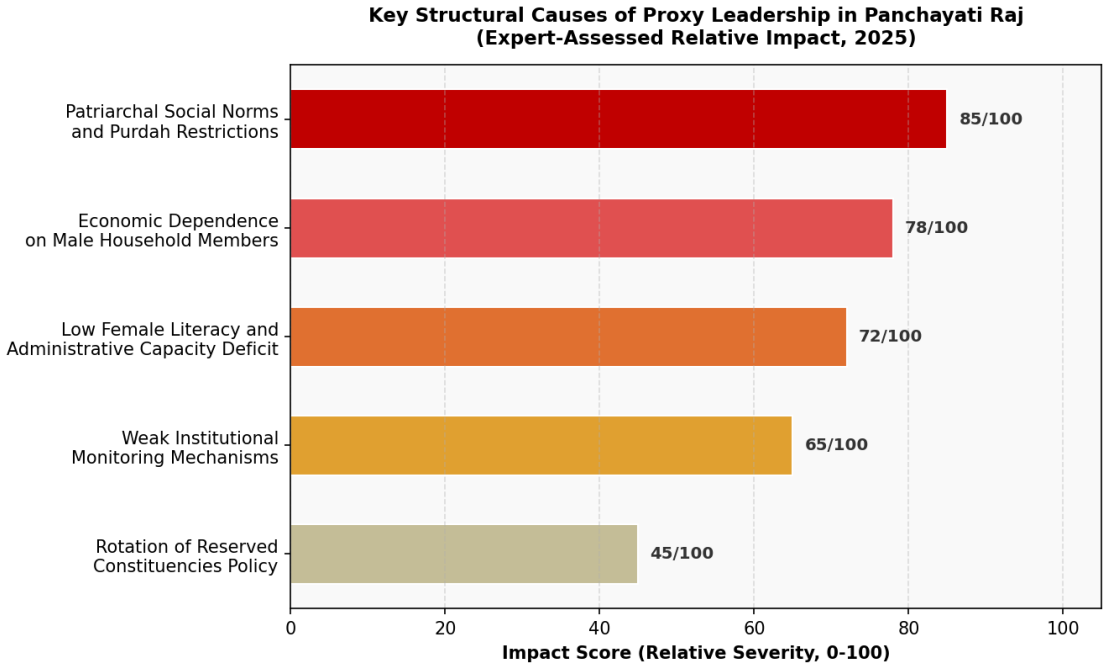

Figure 4: Key Structural Causes of Proxy Leadership in Panchayati Raj — Expert-Assessed Relative Impact Scores (2025). Source: MoPR Advisory Committee (2025); Drishti IAS (2025a); Author's synthesis.

5. POLICY RESPONSES SINCE 2023

5.1 The Sushil Kumar Advisory Committee

The advisory committee constituted by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in October 2023 submitted its report in early 2025. The recommendations were more comprehensive and structurally ambitious than observers had anticipated. The committee did not limit itself to recommending awareness campaigns. It addressed the problem at the level of law, institutions, monitoring infrastructure, and social norms (MoPR, 2025; GK Today, 2026).

On the legal front, the committee called for specific statutory provisions at both the central and state levels that would explicitly prohibit proxy participation and define its key elements with sufficient legal precision to be actionable. It recommended that penalties go beyond fines to include disqualification from panchayat office for the male proxy and, where applicable, for the elected woman who knowingly allows the substitution. The argument was that fines alone have historically failed to deter the practice, partly because the economic benefits of controlling a sarpanch's office often exceed the cost of any fine that has actually been imposed (Deccan Chronicle, 2025).

On the institutional side, the committee's recommendations centered on creating monitoring and accountability systems capable of actually detecting proxy leadership. Specific proposals included the integration of digital attendance monitoring for panchayat meetings into the e-GramSwaraj

platform, the creation of confidential helplines through which women representatives facing proxy substitution could report the practice without fear of immediate retaliation, the establishment of block-level women's watchdog committees, and the appointment of district-level ombudspersons with powers to recommend remedial action (Deccan Chronicle, 2025; GK Today, 2026).

5.2 Capacity Building Programs

Running alongside the legal and institutional reform agenda is a set of programs focused on building the governance capacity of elected women representatives. The Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyan, delivered through the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, is the central national initiative. The program provides governance training to elected women representatives with materials specifically designed for participants who may have limited formal education (NIRDPR, 2014; MoPR, 2025).

Mission Shakti includes a dedicated component for elected women in local governance, providing mentorship connections with experienced women legislators at the state and national level, and supporting peer networks through digital messaging groups where women can share experiences and seek advice. The Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan channels central funds to states specifically for panchayat capacity building, with gender-disaggregated sub-programs for women members and chairpersons (PIB, 2025; ORF, 2024).

5.3 The 2026 Awareness Campaign

In March 2026, timed to coincide with International Women's Day, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj launched the Say No to Proxy Sarpanch campaign across a range of platforms. The campaign invited citizens to share stories of women sarpanches governing independently and effectively, publicly named proxy leadership as a problem rather than a private family matter, and promoted digital governance tools as a means of creating verifiable records of women representatives' participation (College Simplified, 2026; GK Today, 2026).

The community radio component of the campaign, broadcasting through stations in Bihar, Karnataka, and Maharashtra under the Jan Jan Tak Jankari program, reached audiences who would not typically be engaged through social media or digital platforms. This matters because the communities where proxy leadership is most entrenched are precisely the communities where smartphone ownership and internet access are lowest (GK Today, 2026; RSIS International, 2023).

Table 2: Sushil Kumar Committee Key Recommendations (2025)

#	Reform Dimension	Key Recommendation	Expected Outcome

#	Reform Dimension	Key Recommendation	Expected Outcome
1	Legal Framework	Enact explicit statutory prohibition of proxy participation with disqualification penalties for male proxy and enabling elected woman	Binding deterrence; constitutional clarity
2	Institutional Monitoring	Integrate biometric attendance in e-GramSwaraj; establish block-level Women Watchdog Committees; district ombudspersons	Real-time detection of proxy substitution
3	Capacity Building	Mandatory Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyan training before assumption of office; sustained 5-year accompaniment programs	Reduced administrative dependency
4	Economic Empowerment	Expand SHG credit access in high-proxy districts; promote women's land titling; link MGNREGA benefits to elected women accounts	Reduced economic vulnerability
5	Norm Change	Anti-Pradhan Pati Award for states; Jan Jan Tak Jankari community radio campaigns; school-level civic education modules	Gradual social norm shift
6	Complaint Mechanism	Confidential digital helplines via mobile apps; guaranteed confidentiality; 72-hour initial response mandate	Safe reporting without fear of retaliation
7	Transparency	Live-streaming pilot of Gram Sabha meetings (Kerala model); mandatory digital authorization for panchayat correspondence	Accountability and public oversight

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj Advisory Committee Report (2025); Deccan Chronicle (2025); GK Today (2026).

6. TOWARD REAL AUTHORITY: A REFORM FRAMEWORK

6.1 The Evidence Base for Reform

Three decades of experience with the panchayat reservation system yield a body of evidence sufficient to ground a reform framework. The broad conclusion is not complicated: formal quotas do not, by themselves, produce substantive political power. They create the structural opportunity for women's inclusion in governance. Whether that opportunity translates into genuine authority depends on conditions that formal quotas alone do not create or change (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Beaman et al., 2012; Pande, 2003).

These conditions — literacy and administrative knowledge, economic independence, social permission to occupy public space and exercise authority, and institutional accountability mechanisms — are all amenable to policy intervention. None of them is fixed by nature or immune

to change. But changing them requires different kinds of interventions, operating at different timescales, and the interventions need to work in combination rather than in isolation (Duflo, 2012; Bhavnani, 2009; Mansbridge, 1999).

6.2 Legal and Institutional Reforms

The most fundamental legal gap remains the absence of explicit statutory prohibition of proxy participation with meaningful and enforceable penalties. States need to enact explicit legislation that defines proxy participation, specifies what evidence is required to establish it, and sets penalties that are proportionate to the seriousness of the violation. Institutional reforms need to focus on closing the information gaps that currently allow proxy leadership to go undetected (Rau's IAS, 2025; Deccan Chronicle, 2025).

Biometric attendance systems for panchayat meetings, mandatory digital authorization from elected representatives for official correspondence, and real-time reporting dashboards accessible to district-level supervisory officials would all make it significantly harder to sustain proxy participation without detection. Kerala's practice of live-streaming certain panchayat meetings represents a relatively inexpensive transparency mechanism with potentially significant deterrent effects. Isaac and Franke (2002) documented how Kerala's decentralised planning model — built on genuine community participation and transparent governance — provides a replicable institutional template for other states seeking to strengthen the substantive authority of elected women (Drishti IAS, 2025b; GK Today, 2026; Isaac & Franke, 2002).

6.3 Educational and Economic Investment

Literacy and administrative capacity deficits cannot be fully addressed by panchayat-level training programs, however well-designed those programs are. The deficits reflect decades of underinvestment in the education of rural women, and closing them requires sustained investment at the level of the basic education system. The evidence is clear that proxy leadership rates correlate strongly with female literacy rates, and that increases in female education reduce rates of proxy substitution over time (Ghosh, 2006; Bhatt, 2003; Omvedt, 1994).

Economic empowerment is a longer-run dimension. Women who own land in their own names, who have independent income-generating capacity, and who participate in Self-Help Group financial networks are better positioned to resist proxy substitution. Agarwal (1994) established that women's land rights are foundational to their household bargaining power and public agency — a finding directly applicable to the panchayat governance context. Expanding women's land rights, deepening SHG credit access in the districts where proxy leadership is most entrenched, and creating additional employment pathways are all relevant investments (Duflo, 2012; Collins, 2000; Jayal, 2001; Agarwal, 1994).

6.4 Intersectionality as a Design Principle

Any reform framework that treats elected women as a homogeneous group will misallocate its resources and miss many of those who most need support. The challenges facing a Dalit woman elected to a gram panchayat in rural Bihar are substantially different from those facing a woman from a dominant caste elected in a peri-urban constituency in Maharashtra. The first faces the intersection of gender disadvantage with caste-based exclusion — a combination that compounds both forms of marginalization in ways that neither produces alone (Collins, 2000; Kishwar, 1996; Rai, 2011).

Collins's (2000) concept of intersectionality is useful here not as theoretical decoration but as a practical design principle. It directs attention to the specific combinations of disadvantage that shape the experiences of different categories of elected women, and it pushes against the tendency to calibrate reform interventions to the average or the modal case. Effective reform requires disaggregating the target population and designing differently for different segments of it (Phillips, 1995; Ban & Rao, 2008; Pande, 2003).

Table 3: Comparative State-Level Policy Outcomes in Panchayati Raj (2024-25)

State	Reservation Level	Avg. Terms Completed by Women	Women in Unreserved Seats (%)	Welfare Scheme Performance Index	SHG Penetration (%)	Overall Empowerment Score (/10)
Kerala	45.5%	3.1	18.4	87/100	78	8.6
Karnataka	43.5%	2.7	14.2	76/100	65	7.8
Tamil Nadu	33.3%	2.6	12.8	80/100	71	7.5
Maharashtra	27.0%	2.2	9.6	70/100	58	6.9
W. Bengal	50.0%	2.0	7.1	65/100	52	6.1
Rajasthan	50.0%	1.6	4.3	54/100	38	4.8
Haryana	50.0%	1.4	3.8	51/100	32	4.3
Uttar Pradesh	33.4%	1.3	3.2	49/100	28	4.0
Bihar	57.7%	1.2	2.6	44/100	24	3.5

Sources: PIB (2025); NITI Aayog (2025); ORF (2024); MoPR (2025); NIRDPR (2014). Empowerment Score = composite index of governance participation, SHG penetration, literacy, and welfare delivery (Author's compilation).

7. CONCLUSION

India's panchayat reservation policy has done something genuinely unusual in the history of democratic governance. It has used constitutional mandate to bring more than a million women into formal positions of local authority across one of the world's most complex and populous democracies. The empirical literature on women's panchayat leadership has found consistent evidence that women in office produce different governance outcomes than men — more attention to water, sanitation, and primary education; greater responsiveness to the needs of other women in the community; different priorities in the allocation of public goods. Swaminathan et al. (2004) demonstrated through detailed field analysis in Tamil Nadu that welfare scheme delivery was demonstrably more equitable and accessible when women held substantive — not merely nominal — governance authority at the local level, reinforcing the argument that making the reservation system work is not merely a matter of formal compliance but of concrete material consequence for millions of beneficiaries (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Iyer et al., 2012; Beaman et al., 2012; Swaminathan et al., 2004).

At the same time, and without contradiction, the system has produced a serious and well-documented failure in the regions where social conditions most constrain women's governance capacity. In Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Rajasthan, the constitutional office of sarpanch belongs to the woman who was elected. The practical authority of that office belongs, in a majority of documented cases, to her husband. The reservation system has, in these contexts, redistributed formal political position from one set of men to another, while creating the administrative appearance of female leadership. The constitutional guarantee has been honored in form and violated in substance (MoPR, 2025; Drishti IAS, 2025a; Rau's IAS, 2025).

The good news is that the analytical foundation for effective reform is now clearer than it has ever been. The Sushil Kumar Committee's recommendations address the problem at the appropriate systemic level rather than retreating to symbolic gestures. The 2026 awareness campaign marks a shift in the central government's public stance toward the practice. Digital governance tools, including the e-GramSwaraj platform and the live-streaming mechanisms pioneered in Kerala, create new possibilities for transparency and accountability that did not exist in 1993 (College Simplified, 2026; GK Today, 2026; Drishti IAS, 2025b).

What remains uncertain is whether the political will exists to implement these reforms in the states where the need is greatest. Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Rajasthan are large, politically complex states where the local power structures that benefit from proxy leadership are entrenched and politically connected. Enforcing women's governance authority against those structures requires state governments to take on constituencies that have historically been important to their electoral coalitions. Nevertheless, the 73rd Amendment itself demonstrated that constitutional mandates, when backed by genuine institutional infrastructure and enforcement, can drive behavioral change at very large scale. The task now is to ensure that the women who hold these formal positions actually govern — that the constitutional promise is honored not just in words but in

the daily reality of who walks into the panchayat office and makes decisions that affect their communities.

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