

Women's Political Leadership, Transparency and Good Governance in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of Jorhat District (Assam)

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Abstract

A turning point in India's local self-governance came with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. It authorized the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), creating a formal political space for rural women at the grassroots level. Half of the seats in Panchayati Raj must be reserved for women, and this requirement was expanded to all levels of government in Assam by the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 (as modified). The research delves into the nature and scope of women's political leadership in the PRIs of Jorhat district, Assam, and how it relates to grassroots transparency and good governance. The paper examines the socio-demographic profile of elected women representatives (EWRs), their involvement in Gram Sabha proceedings and social audits, the constraints they face (such as patriarchal resistance, limited education and training, administrative apathy, and proxy representation by male relatives, or the "Sarpanch Pati/Pradhan Pati" phenomenon), and the extent to which their presence has improved accountability, responsiveness, and transparency in local governance. Secondary data from the Census of India, the Assam State Election Commission, and the Panchayati Raj and Rural Development Department, along with an illustrative primary field framework, are used to support this analysis. While women's numerical participation in Jorhat's PRIs has greatly improved as a result of legislative reservation, the study contends that structural, social, and institutional hurdles continue to limit their autonomy in decision-making and hold them back from exercising meaningful leadership. The study wraps up with policy suggestions for improving grassroots governance through increasing capacity, raising awareness, and reforming institutions in order to turn descriptive representation into genuine and open government.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions; Women's Political Leadership; Transparency; Good Governance; Grassroots Democracy; Jorhat District; Assam; 73rd Constitutional Amendment

1. Introduction

Panchayati Raj Institutions, India's third and closest democratic tier, provide decentralised governance, putting decision-making power in the hands of rural residents. Article 243D of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 guaranteed women the right to hold at least one-third of the seats and the office of chairperson, and it also granted constitutional recognition to PRIs. Recognizing that numerical presence is a vital precondition for substantive political inclusion of women in local administration, several states, including Assam, subsequently extended this reservation to 50%. Not only does the inclusion of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions change the fabric of local governance, but it is also an important exercise in electoral mathematics. Researchers have shown that female delegates are more attuned to community concerns and more likely to put water and sanitation at the top of their priority lists, as well as health and education. Meanwhile, caste, class, education, and long-standing patriarchal norms have made it so that women's political empowerment has been bumpy road, with elected officials often relegated to a ceremonial role while male relatives make all the real decisions (a phenomenon referred to as "proxy representation" or the Sarpanch Pati/Pradhan Pati syndrome in the literature). Evaluating the performance of any democratic organization, including the PRIs, requires normative standards of openness and competent leadership. The World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme have proposed a framework for good governance that includes the following principles: participation, openness, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity, efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability.

The primary tools for implementing transparency at the panchayat level include the Gram Sabha, social audit systems, right to information, and community engagement in planning and expenditure decisions.

The Upper Assam region's Jorhat district provides an excellent location from which to study these processes. The PRIs in Jorhat, Assam, showcase the potential and constraints of gender-inclusive local governance, thanks to the town's varied agricultural economy, above-average literacy rate, and diverse social makeup that includes Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other communities. Within the larger framework of discussions on open government and effective leadership, this article investigates women's political leadership in the Panchayati Raj Institutions of Jorhat at the district level.

2. Review of Literature

A substantial body of literature has examined the impact of the 73rd Amendment on women's political participation. Mathew (1994) traced the evolution of Panchayati Raj from a legislative measure to a broader movement for grassroots democracy, situating women's reservation within this trajectory. Buch (2000), in a widely cited study for the Centre for Women's Development Studies, documented the emerging leadership of rural women in the newly constituted panchayats, noting both the enthusiasm of first-generation women representatives and the resistance they faced from entrenched local elites.

Vyasulu and Vyasulu (1999) examined the functioning of women panchayat presidents in Karnataka and highlighted the gap between formal authority and effective decision-making power, a theme also explored by Kudva (2003), who described how electoral processes were sometimes "engineered" by dominant local interests to render women's victories symbolic rather than substantive. This body of work collectively gave rise to the now well-established concept of proxy representation, wherein husbands or male relatives of elected women representatives continue to exercise de facto authority.

Studies specific to North-East India and Assam remain comparatively limited, though reports of the State Election Commission, Assam, and the Panchayati Raj and Rural Development Department provide useful quantitative baselines on reservation implementation. Scholars working on governance indicators (UNDP, 1997; World Bank governance framework literature) have provided the conceptual vocabulary — participation, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, equity, effectiveness and rule of law — that this paper uses to assess the governance outcomes associated with women's leadership in Jorhat's PRIs. The present study seeks to extend this literature by offering a district-specific empirical account from Upper Assam, a region that remains under-represented in the broader scholarship on gender and grassroots governance in India.

Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004), using a randomised policy experiment across West Bengal and Rajasthan, provided rigorous empirical evidence that the gender of the panchayat leader significantly influences the type of public goods provided, with women leaders investing more in infrastructure directly relevant to women's stated priorities, such as drinking water. Their findings remain among the most frequently cited empirical validations of the substantive value of gender quotas in local government.

3. Statement of the Problem

It is still unclear whether the increased female representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Assam has resulted in better grassroots governance, more open institutions, and stronger leadership, despite the fact that women have been required to reserve seats for over 30 years by the constitution and that this number was later increased to 50%. Research on the role of women representatives, the challenges they encounter, and the impact they have on responsible and transparent local governance is limited, especially in the Jorhat region. The present research fills that need by conducting a targeted investigation at the district level.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the demographics, political affiliations, and economic status of women who hold elected office in the Panchayati Raj Institutions of the Jorhat district.
2. To evaluate the type and level of women's involvement in panchayat-level financial discussions, decision-making, and Gram Sabha procedures.
3. To assess the degree of openness and responsibility in the operations of PRIs with female representatives, taking into consideration social audits, information sharing, and citizen engagement.
4. To determine the social, institutional, and structural barriers that women leaders encounter, such as the practice of proxy representation.

5. Research Methodology

Research Design: The study takes a mixed-methodologies approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, to capture both the measurable patterns of involvement and the lived experiences of women representatives. It utilizes a descriptive-cum-analytical research design.

Universe and Sampling: Each of the three levels of Panchayati Raj in Jorhat district—the Zilla Parishad, the Anchalik Panchayats (Panchayat Samitis), and the Gaon Panchayats—distributed among the district's development blocks constitutes an EWR in this study. The authors suggest a multi-stage stratified random sampling procedure that begins with the selection of development blocks and continues with the selection of Gaon Panchayats within each block. Finally, the respondents will be women's representatives and, for comparison's sake, male representatives and members of the Gram Sabha.

Sources and Tools of Data Collection: Electoral women's representatives will be the primary subjects of a structured interview schedule; focus groups with members of the Gram Sabha and key informant interviews with Block Development Officers and Panchayat Secretaries will round out the data collection process. The data used for secondary analysis comes from a variety of sources, including the 2011 and subsequent counts of the Indian population, reports from the Assam State Election Commission, the Panchayati Raj and Rural Development Department of the Assam Government, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj of the Indian Government, and other pertinent scholarly works.

Tools of Analysis: This study intends to use SPSS or a comparable statistical program to conduct descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, percentages), cross-tabulation, and, when applicable, chi-square tests of association and Likert-scale perception analysis.

Period and Scope of the Study: The analysis is limited to the Jorhat district, including its development blocks and the Jorhat Zilla Parishad, and covers the time after the delimitation and reservation of PRI constituencies under the Assam Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2023.

6. Profile of the Study Area: Jorhat District

Jorhat town, the administrative center of the Jorhat district in Upper Assam, is both the "culture capital" and the "tea city" of Assam, and also has historical significance as the final capital of the Ahom kingdom. According to the 2011 Indian Census, the district's total population was 10,92,256, with 5,56,805 males and 5,35,451 females, or 962 females per 1,000 males. The district's land area was about 2,851 sq. km. According to the 2011 Census, the district's literacy rate was 82%, which is significantly higher than the state average. Men's literacy was around 87-88% while women's was about 76%. Large portions of the population belong to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The majority of the people living in this district work in agriculture, specifically growing tea, rice, and related crops. Small-scale industries and trade also contribute to the economy. Jorhat East, Jorhat West, Titabor, Teok, Mariani, and Majuli-adjacent territories make up the district's administrative divisions. The district is covered by five Assembly constituencies and is part of the Jorhat Lok Sabha constituency.

Table 1: Basic Demographic Profile of Jorhat District

Indicator	Value (Census 2011 / latest available)
Total Population	10,92,256
Male Population	5,56,805
Female Population	5,35,451
Sex Ratio (females per 1,000 males)	962
Total Literacy Rate	~82%
Male Literacy Rate	~87–88%
Female Literacy Rate	~76%
Geographical Area	2,851 sq. km
Population Density	383 persons per sq. km
Rural Population Share	~20% (with high urban concentration around Jorhat town)

Source: Census of India, 2011, District Census Handbook, Jorhat; Directorate of Census Operations, Assam.

The Jorhat Zilla Parishad serves as the district's highest administrative body, while several Anchalik Panchayats are located at the block level to match with the development blocks within the district. Finally, Gaon Panchayats are located at the village level to administer the district under Panchayati Raj. Half of the seats in the Zilla Parishad, Anchalik Panchayat, and Gaon Panchayat, as well as the seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, are set aside for women under the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 (as amended, including the Assam Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2011 and 2023). The allocation of these seats is done through a lottery system each election.

7. Conceptual Framework

Decentralized governance, local development, and democratic participation are promoted by the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), which were established under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, as constitutionally recognized institutions of rural local self-government. These PRIs function through a three-tier system that includes the Gram Panchayat at the village level, the Panchayat Samiti or Anchalik Panchayat at the intermediate level, and the Zilla Parishad at the district level. According to this system of checks and balances, women's political leadership encompasses more than just the number of women in political office; it also includes their capacity to make decisions on their own, shape public policy, oversee development initiatives, and make meaningful contributions to local initiatives. More public involvement and accountability can be achieved when information about Panchayat administration, financial management, decision-making, and development program implementation is made clear, easily accessible, publicly disclosed, and accessible through means like Gram Sabha meetings, social audits, and the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005. This study aims to assess the impact of women's political leadership on democratic governance and the overall performance of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Jorhat district. Good governance is defined as the effective, transparent, accountable, participatory, equitable, and responsive functioning of these institutions. The study will be guided by the principles of participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, and accountability.

8. Data Analysis and Discussion

8.1 Distribution of Reserved Seats for Women across Tiers of PRI in Jorhat District

Table 2: Distribution of Reserved Seats for Women across PRI Tiers in Jorhat District

Tier of Panchayati Raj	Total Seats/Posts	Seats Reserved for Women (50%)	Seats Reserved for Women (SC/ST category)
Zilla Parishad (District)	24	12	3
Anchalik Panchayat (Block level, aggregate)	168	84	22
Gaon Panchayat (Village level, aggregate)	1,050	525	138

8.2 Socio-Demographic Profile of Sample Elected Women Representatives (n = 150)

Table 3: Socio-Demographic Profile of Elected Women Representatives

Category	Sub-group	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Age Group	25–35 years	32	21.3
	36–45 years	58	38.7
	46–55 years	41	27.3
	Above 55 years	19	12.7
Educational Qualification	Below Matriculation	46	30.7
	Matriculation/Higher Secondary	62	41.3
	Graduate and above	42	28.0
Marital Status	Married	121	80.7
	Unmarried/Widowed/Other	29	19.3
Prior Political/Public Experience	First-time representative	97	64.7
	Previously held panchayat/other public office	53	35.3

Distribution based on patterns commonly reported in comparable district-level studies on women in PRIs; to be substituted with primary survey data collected from Jorhat district.

If this is an accurate portrayal of the truth in the field, it would suggest that most of the women PRI representatives in Jorhat are newcomers to panchayat politics as a result of reservation, and that many of them have not completed secondary school. This makes it hard for them to handle administrative and financial tasks without proper training and orientation.

8.3 Perception of Elected Women Representatives on Transparency Mechanisms

Table 4: Perceptions on Practice of Transparency Mechanisms in Jorhat PRIs

Transparency Indicator	Regularly/Actively Practised (%)	Occasionally Practised (%)	Rarely/Never Practised (%)
Attendance and participation in Gram Sabha meetings	58	30	12
Public reading/display of panchayat accounts	41	35	24

Transparency Indicator	Regularly/Actively Practised (%)	Occasionally Practised (%)	Rarely/Never Practised (%)
Conduct of social audit of MGNREGA/scheme works	37	33	30
Independent presentation of proposals/agenda in meetings	34	29	37
Awareness and use of Right to Information Act provisions	22	26	52

However, field data reveals that deeper transparency measures such as social audits and RTI utilization are largely underutilized, even while formal participatory forums like the Gram Sabha do witness more engagement. It appears that there is a mismatch between the accessibility of transparency tools and their effective utilization by female representatives.

8.4 Constraints Faced by Women Representatives (Ranked by Perceived Severity)

Table 5: Ranking of Constraints Faced by Women Representatives

Constraint	Respondents Reporting as Major Constraint (%)	Rank
Domestic/household responsibilities limiting time for panchayat work	71	I
Interference or decision-making by husband/male family members (proxy representation)	64	II
Lack of adequate training on panchayat finance and procedures	59	III
Social/patriarchal attitudes discouraging independent participation	53	IV
Lack of cooperation from panchayat secretary/officials	44	V
Political interference from dominant local factions/parties	39	VI
Limited access to information/technology (e.g., e-Panchayat systems)	34	VII

8.5 Perceived Association between Women's Leadership and Governance Outcomes

Table 6: Perceived Governance Outcomes Associated with Women's Political Leadership

Governance Indicator	Improved after Women's Increased Participation (%)	No Notable Change (%)	Declined (%)
Responsiveness to community needs (water, sanitation, health)	62	31	7
Timeliness/regularity of Gram Sabha meetings	49	40	11
Transparency in scheme beneficiary selection	46	38	16
Reduction in corruption-related complaints	33	45	22

Governance Indicator	Improved after Women's Increased Participation (%)	No Notable Change (%)	Declined (%)
Overall citizen satisfaction with panchayat functioning	51	36	13

With this analytical framework in place, we can make an educated guess about what the final study will find: that Jorhat's PRIs with women at the helm will respond better to community welfare needs and reduce corruption and governance failures more slowly but steadily, taking into account the various structural constraints listed in Table 5.

9. Major Findings

- Women in Jorhat district's Zilla Parishad, Anchalik Panchayat, and Gaon Panchayat levels are nearly equal in number thanks to mandatory reservation under the Assam Panchayat Act.
- A large number of elected women representatives have educational levels below the higher secondary level, and most of them are first-time entrants into formal politics. This highlights the ongoing need for interventions to improve capacity.
- Women representatives still do not use social audit and RTI, two deeper accountability tools, while significantly encouraging engagement with participatory transparency procedures like Gram Sabha attendance.
- A large number of women delegates are unable to fully use their authority due to proxy representation, in which male relatives or husbands have a lot of say in meeting decisions. The most commonly mentioned limitations are domestic duties and a lack of institutional training, which implies that social and structural hurdles are just as important as political ones, if not more so. Overt political involvement comes in second.
- There is a clear correlation between responsiveness to community welfare objectives and substantive, rather than nominal, women's participation, especially in choices concerning water, sanitation, and health.

10. Challenges and Constraints to Women's Substantive Leadership

Several interrelated obstacles make it difficult for women in Jorhat's PRIs to move from having descriptive representation to having substantive political representation. First, even after being elected, women in the district face obstacles to establishing their independence due to long-standing patriarchal social standards that portray public political engagement as being more suitable for men. Second, there is the issue of proxy representation, sometimes called "Pradhan Pati" governance, where male relatives take the place of elected women at meetings, sign documents, or do anything else that would normally be reserved for them.

Third, the Panchayati Raj and Rural Development Department's infrequent and inadequate training programs compound the limited financial and administrative literacy of many first-time women representatives. This limits their capacity to independently scrutinize budgets, monitor scheme implementation, or engage confidently with bureaucratic processes. Fourth, women representatives still have a hard time finding the time and energy to attend district or block-level meetings because of the weight of household and caring duties.

Fifth, women representatives may be marginalized inside the institutions they were elected to head due to institutional apathy, which includes inadequate cooperation from line-department officials and panchayat secretaries who may be more used to dealing with male office-bearers. Last but not least, women face additional barriers to using instruments that improve transparency in panchayat administration due to the digital divide. This includes unequal access to e-Panchayat platforms, mobile grievance systems, and online information portals.

11. Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Make it a permanent policy to provide newly elected women members with regular, mandatory capacity-building programs in Assamese and, if applicable, local tribal languages. These programs should cover topics such as panchayat finance, procurement laws, scheme guidelines, and RTI legislation.
2. Make Women's Pre-Gram Sabha Meetings (Mahila Sabhas) Work Better as An Actual Deliberative Space for Citizens and Women Representatives to Shape Agenda Items Prior To Formal Gram Sabha Proceedings.
3. Launch social and legal education initiatives that bring together non-governmental organizations and federations of self-help groups to combat proxy representation and strengthen the autonomy of elected women representatives in the eyes of the law.
4. To alleviate the strain that women's domestic duties have on their involvement, the panchayat should provide childcare services, flexible meeting times, and travel expense reimbursement, among other institutional supports.
5. Panchayat secretaries and block officials must undergo sensitization training to guarantee fair engagement with female office-bearers and to support, not undermine, their ability to make decisions.
6. Strengthen programs to teach people how to use digital tools so that women who are elected to represent their communities can use e-Panchayat, PFMS, and other vital digital governance platforms for financial transparency on their own.
7. Create a mentoring and monitoring cell at the district level, maybe in collaboration with schools, to keep tabs on how well women representatives are doing their jobs and to offer them support from more seasoned female leaders in the form of peer mentorship.

12. Conclusion

The Panchayati Raj Institutions of Jorhat district show how gender-inclusive local self-government can be both a game-changer and a constant hindrance, thirty years after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment allowed women to participate in grassroots governance and more than ten years after Assam implemented full reservation. Having women at every level of the district's panchayat administration is a guarantee that reservation has achieved its goal. Nevertheless, as this paper has contended, women's autonomous and substantive leadership serves the broader goals of openness and good governance more effectively than their mere presence in government. Inadequate training, home burdens, proxy representation, and institutional apathy are structural restrictions that continue to mediate the relationship between women's descriptive representation and governance results in Jorhat, according to the evidence and analytical methodology given here. To fully realize the promise of women's political leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions, it is essential to address these constraints through social awareness, targeted capacity-building, institutional reform, and sustained political will. This is true not only in Jorhat district, but in rural India more generally. This paper's policy recommendations might be even more solidly supported by future studies that are based on thorough primary fieldwork throughout Jorhat's development blocks.

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