ALiGN Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms

ALIGN REPORT

From margins to leadership: caste and gender dynamics in India's local governance

By Ekata Bakshi and Rahul Kumar

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POLICY & DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY GROUP

About the
Policy & Development
Advisory Group

The Policy & Development Advisory Group (PDAG) is a New Delhi–based social impact advisory operating at the intersection of public policy, social research and strategic communications to advance evidence-based, data-driven, people-centric policymaking. PDAG partners with governments, multilateral institutions, academia, the private sector and civil society to translate rigorous analysis into policy action at scale.

About the authors

Rahul Kumar is a Senior Associate Consultant at PDAG and led this study. A mixed-methods researcher and policy professional, his work spans governance and social equity, combining grounded field research with analytical and strategic policy analysis to support evidence-informed decision-making.

Ekata Bakshi is a critical feminist ethnographer and development researcher at PDAG. Her work draws on qualitative, ethnographic and action-research approaches to examine and transform unequal social and political (im)mobilities, with a focus on gender and local governance.

Acknowledgements

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Acronyms

ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
BDO	Block Development Officer
BDC	Block Development Council
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
EWR/s	Elected woman representative/s
INC	Indian National Congress
LHI	Life-history interview
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament
NCP	Nationalist Congress Party
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NT	Nomadic Tribes
OBC	Other Backward Classes (according to governmental classification)
PRIs	*Panchayati Raj* Institutions
PS	*Panchayat Samiti*
PVTG	Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups
RSCD	Resource and Support Centre for Development
SC	Scheduled Caste
SHG/s	Self-help group/s
ST	Scheduled Tribe
UR	Un-reserved (seats)
VJNT	*Vimukta Jati* – Nomadic Tribes
VT	*Vimukta Jati* and Nomadic Tribe category
YASHADA	Yashwantrao Chavan Academy of Development Administration
ZP	*Zilla Parishad*

Key terms

Adivasi: A socio-cultural and political identity used by many Indigenous communities in India, emphasising indigeneity, land rights and cultural autonomy. It is not a constitutional category; the legal classification is Scheduled Tribe (ST) under Article 342. *Adivasis* are Indigenous groups, many of whom are constitutionally recognised as ST.

Ambedkarite movement: A broad anti-caste political and social movement grounded in the ideas and praxis of Ambedkar (1942), centred on the annihilation of caste and the promotion of democratic rights, dignity and substantive equality. Historically, the movement has combined constitutionalism, legal reform, education, and mass mobilisation to challenge Brahmanical patriarchy and caste hierarchy. In Maharashtra, Ambedkarite traditions have exerted a particularly strong influence, shaping Dalit political consciousness, women's participation in public life and rights-based engagement with state institutions.

Block Development Officer (BDO): Administrative head at the block level who supervises *Panchayats* and coordinates the implementation of government schemes.

Block office: Administrative units between village and district levels where Panchayat representatives interact with state bureaucracy.

Bureaucratic literacy: Ability to navigate state systems, including forms, schemes, budgets, welfare portals, file movement and official protocols.

Casted/casted relations: Social structures, institutions or interactions shaped by caste logics, similar to terms like 'gendered' or 'racialised'. Emphasises caste as a constitutive force in Indian society.

Caste-patriarchal political mediation: A relational arrangement in which an elected woman representative's formal authority is informally exercised, mediated or constrained through caste-ordered kinship and political networks. While husbands or male relatives may act as visible intermediaries, proxyhood is structured by caste- and class-based power relations that shape political legitimacy, access to resources and control over decision-making within local governance institutions.

Caste patriarchy: A well-established theoretical concept in feminist scholarship, referring to the interlocking operation of caste hierarchies and patriarchal gender norms in structuring social relations, authority and power.

Dalit: A socio-political identity used by many Scheduled Caste communities to assert dignity and resist caste oppression. *Dalit* is not a constitutional category; the legal category is Scheduled Caste (SC) under Article 341. *Dalit*s belong to formerly 'untouchable' communities placed outside the traditional caste hierarchy.

Elected women representatives (EWRs): Women elected to *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs), including *Sarpanch*, *Mukhiya*, Ward member, *Panchayat Samiti* (PS) member, and *Zilla Parishad* member.

General/unreserved: Seats or posts that are not reserved for those from SCs, STs or Other Backward Class (OBC) categories. While these are legally open to all, they are often dominated by upper-caste groups.

Gram Sabha: The assembly of all adult residents of a village registered on electoral rolls (Art. 243(b)). It serves as the primary forum for direct participation and accountability in local governance including the review and endorsement of village development plans, beneficiary lists and welfare priorities, as provided under Article 243A and state Panchayati Raj Acts.

Gram Sevak (Gram Secretary): Permanent administrative officer supporting the *Gram Panchayat* and responsible for records, scheme implementation and liaison with higher bureaucracy.

Mahila Gram Sabha: A women-only meeting convened in some states prior to the main Gram Sabha. Resolutions from the meeting are then put before the Gram Sabha for consideration.

Intersectionality: A theoretical framework originally articulated by Crenshaw (1989) to explain how multiple axes of social power – such as gender, race and class – intersect to shape lived experiences and political opportunities. Feminist and critical scholars have extended this framework to different contexts, including southern Asia, where it has been used to analyse how caste interacts with gender and class to structure inequality within social and institutional settings.

Mahila Sangathan: Women's collectives and organisations involved in rights-based mobilisation and leadership, such as *Dalit Mahila Sangathan, Mahila Rajsatta Andolan*, the All India *Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch*, and other women-led collectives across local, state and national levels.

Morcha: Forms of organised protest or mass mobilisation in India. A *morcha* usually refers to a specific, time-bound rally or procession such as a street march or public demonstration.

Mukhiya: Elected head of the *Gram Panchayat* in Jharkhand, Bihar, and parts of eastern India; equivalent to the *Sarpanch* in Maharashtra (see below).

Other Backward Classes (OBC)[1]: Recognised as 'socially and educationally backward' under Articles 15(4) and 16(4), institutionalised by the Mandal Commission and the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC). The following are subcategories in the state of Maharashtra:

- Nomadic Tribes (NT)
- *Vimukta Jatis* (VJNT) (Denotified/Nomadic Tribes)
- *Vimukta* (VT) (Nomadic Tribes)

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs): India's three-tier local governance system consisting of:

- *Gram Panchayat* (village)
- *Panchayat Samiti* (block): Block-level middle tier of PRIs, coordinating planning and implementation across *Gram Panchayats*
- *Zilla Parishad* (district): District-level tier responsible for planning, budgeting and coordination across blocks.

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG): A subcategory of ST communities characterised by very low literacy, small population size and high levels of deprivation.

Pradhan (Manjhi-Hadam): In Jharkhand's *Adivasi* areas, this refers to a traditional authority linked to customary governance, distinct from elected PRI officeholders.

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1   The term 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC) in India has been a subject of debate and criticism because of its potential to perpetuate stereotypes and limit the scope of social justice initiatives. Critics argue that the OBC category does not adequately address the diverse experiences and needs of various communities with India's broader social hierarchy.

Proxy leadership/proxyhood: A relational arrangement in which a husband, male relative or political intermediary exercises authority informally on behalf of an elected woman representative.

Reservation roster/rotation: Administrative mechanism that determines which seats are reserved for SC, ST, OBC and women in each electoral cycle.

Sarpanch: Elected head of the *Gram Panchayat* in Maharashtra and many other states.

Sarpanch Pati/Mukhiya Pati: Colloquial terms for husbands of elected women representatives who perform or control official duties informally. These terms reflect gender norms and proxy practices in local governance.

Scheduled Castes (SC): Communities notified under Article 341 that have, historically, been subjected to untouchability and caste-based disadvantage. SC is the legal category; many groups identify socio-politically as *Dalit*.

Scheduled Tribes (ST): Communities listed under Article 342, historically associated with cultural distinctiveness, relative geographic isolation and socio-economic marginalisation. While *Adivasi* is a socio-cultural identity, ST is the legal category.

Upsarpanch: Deputy head supporting the *Sarpanch* (see above).

Upper Caste: Groups that have been positioned at the top of the caste hierarchy (*Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya*), associated with ritual purity, landownership, literacy and political dominance. Although the general/unreserved category of seats is legally open to all, it remains socially coded as upper caste.

Ward member: Elected representative of a ward within the *Gram Panchayat*.

Key findings

- **Women's political agency is built through practice and is not guaranteed by holding political office alone:** They often enter Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as a result of 'proxy' arrangements and household negotiation and their authority is acquired gradually through trial and error and engagement with administrative procedures, meetings, bureaucratic actors, and local governance schemes and budgets. It is practice, rather than formal designation, which drives their journey from a tokenistic presence to procedural authority. Training, peer learning and social support accelerate this journey by reducing their dependence on intermediaries and strengthening their confidence and competence in everyday governance.

- **Quotas expand women's entry but do not generate upward political mobility:** The reservation of local government seats for women and certain castes has increased access to local office for marginalised women but has not dismantled the caste, class, and kinship-based hierarchies that shape and curtail political ambitions. Entry into PRIs that is mediated through others, from family networks to self-help groups (SHGs), rarely translates into sustained political trajectories beyond the local level. They cannot overcome the barriers of financial costs, domestic responsibilities, limited party sponsorship, and weak institutional pathways to higher office.

- **Caste shapes women's political autonomy unevenly, and often in ways that are counter intuitive:** Contrary to assumptions that social advantage translates into political independence, Dalit and Adivasi women often have greater procedural autonomy than their upper-caste counterparts. Drawing on their experience of political mobilisation, collective organising, and labour participation, many marginalised women develop assertive, practice-based leadership. In contrast, upper-caste women are more likely to reproduce household or caste norms within political office: they may be the elected representatives, but others make the decisions.

- **Authority is negotiated within caste-inflected bureaucratic and public arenas:** Women representatives operate within bureaucratic systems marked by paternalism, procedural gatekeeping and caste-coded hierarchies, and are often approached by constituents as welfare intermediaries rather than as decision-makers. However, through their accumulated procedural experience and collective strategies, many women carve out limited but meaningful authority in everyday governance.

- **Male mediation is relational, shifting, and does not always disempower:** Husbands and male relatives often facilitate women's mobility, access to bureaucratic spaces, and initial legitimacy. This support can vary by caste and class: upper-caste households tend to frame male involvement through norms of honour and respectability, while Dalit and Adivasi households are more likely to treat it as pragmatic cooperation to tackle disadvantage. For many women, initial dependence evolves into shared decision-making and, in some cases, growing autonomy. Peer support through collective forums and women's networks plays a critical role in reducing isolation and enabling collective learning.

Executive summary

Introduction

This report examines how elected women representatives (EWRs) in India's *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs) convert their formal political inclusion into practical authority and why this conversion remains uneven, disruption-prone and often non-cumulative. Drawing on comparative qualitative research in Maharashtra and Jharkhand and using a feminist political economy perspective, the study advances a practice-based account of political authority.

The study finds that while the constitutional reservation of elected seats expands women's entry into office, their authority does not follow automatically. That authority is produced and often withheld through routine governance shaped by caste, gendered norms of mobility and respectability, party organisation, household mediation and bureaucratic discretion (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004).

The reservation of seats for women does not necessarily produce 'empowered' women politicians at the grassroots level. In an environment where political resources such as consciousness, capacity, experience and exposure are still distributed unevenly across caste lines, women negotiate electoral democracy from their intersectional social locations to maximise political gains (George, 2025; Paik, 2021a). Their political agency lies not in their direct, autonomous decision to advance gender-focused governance, but in the space and legitimacy they are able to carve out for themselves within local political competition and institutional constraints. It also lies in the normative shifts in gendered organisation that women are able to bring about using such space and legitimacy (Harper et al., 2020). In doing so our research suggests that their caste becomes relevant.

Why representation has not translated into authority

India is one of the world's largest experiments in quota-driven political inclusion. Over 1.4 million women currently serve in PRIs, including substantial numbers from Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (Government of India, Press Information Bureau, 2024). Yet descriptive representation has not yielded commensurate decision-making power, institutional responsiveness or durable pathways into higher tiers of leadership. This report challenges the assumption that reservation, supplemented by stand-alone capacity-building, is a predictable way to produce substantive political authority. It shifts attention from participation alone to authority as a political outcome that depends on whether institutions recognise and act on women's mandates in everyday governance.

Entry without mobility: how authority is constrained in practice

Reservation creates access to office, but it does not redesign the distribution of authority within local governance systems. A mandate becomes meaningful only when institutions respond to it - when bureaucracies act on instructions, political parties treat claims as legitimate and constituents recognise women as decision-makers rather than nominal officeholders.

Meanwhile, gender and caste norms operate as informal governance rules that shape how authority is recognised and constrained. Across both states, women's ability to exercise authority is conditioned not only by formal rules but by expectations of caste-moral femininity, respectability and domestic priority. Many elected women comply with these norms: maintaining household responsibilities,

regulating their own mobility and adapting their dress and speech to secure legitimacy in male-dominated political arenas (Ciotti, 2012; Harper et al., 2020; Paik, 2021a). This form of political performance can enable their continued participation but it also makes their authority conditional on conformity rather than institutional recognition of competence.

In contexts where parties control candidacies and campaign finance, where households channel mobility and information, and where officials retain discretionary control over procedures and files, reservation can widen women's participation. However, decisions around resources and public recognition are taken elsewhere (Advisory Committee on Women Pradhans, 2025).

A recurrent pattern emerges across both states: entry without mobility. Many women enter office through intermediated routes and consolidate procedural competence only at a late stage in an electoral term. They confront structural ceilings on re-election and advancement that are produced by rotational reservation, party gatekeeping, the monetised structure of local elections and caste-coded sanctions within administrative arenas (Election Commission of India, 2024; George, 2025). Together, these constraints interrupt their political apprenticeship and prevent them from carrying their authority forward across electoral terms.

The result is a leadership pipeline that widens at entry but narrows sharply at consolidation. Electoral finance functions as a caste-differentiated barrier that places disproportionate limits on the ability of SC and ST women to convert their incumbency into repeat candidature or upward mobility beyond reserved constituencies.

Proxy, caste and institutional mediation

Gender norms are not uniform; they are caste-differentiated and have political consequences. Among upper-caste and dominant OBC households, stricter expectations around female mobility and respectability can normalise more durable proxy arrangements, with male relatives retaining control over files, finances and political negotiation (Ciotti, 2012; Paik, 2021a). Among SC and ST women, wider participation in wage labour, collective organising and movement-linked politics has often expanded their mobility and public interaction to enable more direct engagement with governance, even though they face sharper scrutiny and caste-based obstruction within administrative arenas (Arya and Rathore, 2020; George, 2025).

Proxying, where husbands, male relatives or political intermediaries exercise authority informally on behalf of elected women, reflects not a lack of capacity, but the intersection of caste power, gender discipline and institutional response. In this sense, proxying often operates as a stable institutional arrangement: quota rules are satisfied, while control is retained over brokerage, resources and key negotiations (Ciotti, 2012; George, 2025). This dynamic is illustrated by the experience of one elected woman representative (EWR) from a marginalised caste in Maharashtra, who described how authority was ceded informally to a male leader from a dominant community:

> 'The male *Sarpanch*[2] was from a dominant community and was well-educated and resource-secure, so I let him have the position. I wanted to, but everything doesn't happen as per one's wishes—you must go by collective decisions.'

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2   Elected head of the *Gram Panchayat* (village-level PRI in Maharashtra and other states).

Conversely, what is seen as proxy among SC and ST households is also a pooling of resources at the household level to maximise political agency while negotiating with caste-patriarchy. As a result, criminalising proxy without addressing structural conditions in such contexts risks reinforcing political marginalisation (Advisory Committee on Women Pradhans, 2025).

How authority operates in practice

Proxy and agency are not fixed or binary conditions, but positions shaped by historically produced relations of power. Women's political authority is influenced not only by reservation or social location but by how caste interacts with labour regimes, access to resources and state organisation. Processes such as industrialisation, shifting regimes of work and histories of social and political mobilisation continue to shape whether women are able to exercise authority in practice (George, 2025).

Women from similar caste backgrounds can, therefore, experience divergent political outcomes depending on local political economies and institutional environments. For example, the visible gains in participation or representation that are often stronger in settings with greater institutional density or longer histories of economic development do not necessarily translate into durable decision-making power. Women's political agency is best understood as relational and contested, shaped by ongoing struggles over recognition, resources and access to state systems, rather than as a uniform outcome of inclusion or training alone (Ciotti, 2012; Harper et al., 2020; George, 2025).

Method and evidence: authority as a process traced over time

The analysis draws on qualitative research in Maharashtra and Jharkhand, combining 88 life-history interviews (LHIs) with elected women representatives across PRI tiers and 8 key informant interviews (KIIs) with civil-society actors and state-level women leaders. The life-history approach traces how authority is built, contested, consolidated and sometimes withdrawn over an electoral term. These LHIs show not only whether women exercise authority, but where and through which interfaces it is enabled or constrained in routine governance.

Why Maharashtra and Jharkhand: political context as a mediator of authority

Maharashtra and Jharkhand offer analytically instructive contrasts. Maharashtra is marked by longer histories of PRI functioning, relatively institutionalised party competition and entrenched caste hierarchies shaped by both dominant-caste power and Ambedkarite[3] political traditions. In contrast, Jharkhand is characterised by a younger state apparatus, a significant history of *Adivasi*[4] assertions (including the demand for local autonomy over decision-making processes), weaker party institutionalisation at the local level and the continued relevance of movement-based politics rooted in struggles over land, forests and water (Paik, 2021a). The study's comparison is not evaluative: it demonstrates how identical reservation rules, filtered through different political contexts, caste configurations and bureaucratic routines, generate distinct pathways to authority and distinct ceilings on leadership.

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3   An anti-caste political and social movement grounded in the ideas and praxis of Dr B.R. Ambedkar.
4   A socio-cultural and political identity used by many Indigenous communities in India.

Findings: how authority is produced, constrained and interrupted

1 Pathways to entry: mediated inclusion and caste-differentiated trajectories

Across both states, women's entry into PRI politics is rarely framed as an autonomous ambition at the outset. Candidacy is often activated through household negotiation, caste expectations, party calculations and/or movement affiliation. Reservation enables entry but does not determine the terms of participation, the degree of control women exercise once elected, or the pace at which they can consolidate their authority.

Proxy arrangements are neither uniform nor static. In some settings, male relatives initially manage mobility, paperwork or negotiations with officials, which enables an informal apprenticeship. In others, proxying persists as a durable structure that restricts women's voice, visibility and decision-making while meeting official quota requirements. Whether proxying eases or persists depends on the local distribution of political finance, reputational risk, party protection and administrative gatekeeping.

These trajectories are mediated by caste. Across our research interviews, caste position repeatedly surfaced as a structuring factor in both entry into office and experience as an elected representative, including in an interview from Dhanora, Maharashtra, where the participant notes:

> 'Yes, there was caste discrimination. They think if STs progress, they will have competition, so they try to create obstacles through caste bias.'

Dalit[5] and *Adivasi* women often face heightened scrutiny and obstruction when asserting authority, while upper-caste women may encounter socially normalised forms of proxying that draw less overt contestation yet remain deeply restrictive. These differences shape both the conditions of entry and the feasibility of moving from symbolic representation to recognised leadership.

2 How authority is built: exposure, procedure and institutional recognition

Political authority is built through routine governing work, rather than being conferred by electoral victory alone (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). Women expand their decision-making space through procedural mastery, repeated engagement with officials, credible command over meetings, management of funds and sustained interaction with constituents. And their authority strengthens when institutions treat their directives as binding in everyday interactions.

One consistent finding is that authority can move between mediated and publicly recognised forms, depending on whether women gain procedural competence and whether party and administrative systems respond accordingly. As an EWR from Jharkhand noted:

> 'At that time we were new, so we were afraid of the officials. Thought of speaking, but did not have the courage. If you had spoken too much, there could have been adverse pressure.'

Where discretionary blockages and informal mediation persist, authority can stall or reverse even for women who remain visible officeholders.

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5   A socio-political identity used by many SC communities to assert dignity and resist caste oppression.

Collective infrastructures, self-help groups, movement networks and peer groups often function as parallel political learning systems that build confidence and credibility while providing collective backing, particularly where formal party support is limited, conditional or controlling. These spaces enable the experiential political learning that is rarely generated by short training courses, including the negotiation of conflict, the navigation of file work and the coordination of demands.

3 Households, parties and bureaucracy: the arenas that allocate authority and the everyday sites of risk

Authority within PRIs is produced through interaction among households, political parties and the bureaucracy. Across these sites, three binding constraints recur: first, access to routine administrative procedure; second, control over candidacy and the financing of re-contestation; and third, whether party and bureaucratic actors treat women's authority as valid in everyday interactions. Household mediation shapes women's capacity to either navigate each constraint to enable entry and legitimacy in some cases, while disciplining behaviour and restricting mobility and information in others.

Parties can provide organisational backing and protection from administrative harassment, but they also enforce ceilings through ticket allocation, financing decisions and gendered assessments of leadership legitimacy.

Upon being asked about the role of political parties in facilitating political entry for women, an EWR from Maharashtra responded:

> 'In whichever party you go, if there is women's reservation, they give the ticket to women from their own families. They never recognise women workers from outside.'

Bureaucratic actors often determine whether authority is undermined on a daily basis through non-cooperation, procedural stalling, selective scrutiny and reputational attacks that can operate as caste-coded sanctions rather than neutral accountability.

Financial governance is a particularly high-stakes area where authority is tested and contested. Women who seek transparency or insist on proper procedures may face pressure to sign inflated bills, accommodate contractor collusion or accept decisions taken elsewhere. If they refuse, this pressure can be followed by social retaliation, administrative harassment or political moves to discipline them (including threats of removal or votes of no-confidence). These dynamics make fund management not merely a technical function, but a conflict-prone arena where women's autonomy is actively negotiated.

A further constraint is the mediated nature of citizen-state interaction. Constituents often approach women representatives as conduits for support with welfare access and paperwork, expecting delivery while decision-making remains concentrated in intermediaries. This 'conduit politics' can intensify governable visibility: women absorb public demands and blame even when authority over funds, files and approvals sits elsewhere.

4 Sequencing and time: why learning consolidates late and why it often fails to accumulate

Authority development is non-linear and time-sensitive. Early terms in office are often marked by restricted mobility, limited procedural knowledge and reliance on intermediaries. Confidence and administrative familiarity tend to develop through repetition across meetings, budget cycles, file work and bureaucratic interfaces, but this learning often consolidates late in an electoral term.

Authority remains truncated where re-election is structurally foreclosed by rotational reservation or politically constrained by party gatekeeping.

5 Limits of agency

Many women articulate ambitions for re-election and, in some cases, progression to *Panchayat Samiti* or *Zilla Parishad*[6] roles. Yet aspirations unfold within tight limits shaped by money, mobility constraints, caste inequality and gendered expectations. As one EWR in Maharashtra explained:

> 'If I am made to stand again as a member, then I will contest for member, but I will not contest for *sarpanch*. Because to become *sarpanch* requires a lot of expense.'

Even where women developed procedural competence and confidence during their term, few were able to continue in office or advance once the reservation of their seat ended. Their second-term participation depended largely on the continuation of reservation, while contests in unreserved seats or progression to higher PRI levels remained rare.

Women's progression beyond district-level politics is exceptional and often requires political lineage, elite mentorship or unusually strong patronage networks. In the life histories, repeat terms are the exception rather than the norm, and rotation and party control often limit re-contestation even after women have consolidated their competence.

Rotation, therefore, functions as an attrition mechanism: competence consolidates when re-contestation becomes difficult or impossible, producing a one-term trap that undermines political apprenticeship, continuity and cumulative leadership (George et al., 2020). Attrition from local politics reflects structured exclusion and institutional exhaustion more than any lack of interest or capability.

At the same time, political energy does not always disappear when formal office ends. Across both states, many women redirect their leadership horizontally into social work, collective organising, self-help group (SHG) federations or into the mentoring of other elected women. They sustain civic authority even when their vertical progression is blocked.

Conclusion

Women's leadership in local governance is not a technical deficit that can be resolved through training alone. It is a political process shaped by caste hierarchies, party structures, household mediation and bureaucratic discretion. The reservation of seats creates entry into this field but does not neutralise its inequalities. Without direct engagement with the institutional conditions through which authority is produced or blocked, empowerment efforts risk increasing women's visibility while leaving existing power relations intact. Democratic deepening depends not only on who occupies office, but on whether governance systems enable marginalised women to convert their presence into durable authority.

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6   The block-level and district-level tiers of PRIs.

Policy implications for different actors: from capacity-building to authority-building

For state governments

- Reduce the 'one-term trap' and strengthen continuity. Where rotational reservation can be reformed, do so; where rotation persists, create continuity mechanisms (peer cohorts across election cycles, alumni networks, handover protocols, and formal recognition of experienced former EWRs in advisory/committee roles) so that learning and networks are not lost after one term.

- Treat leadership continuity as a governance requirement. Design PRI systems so that institutional familiarity, administrative learning and procedural confidence can be carried forward rather than being repeatedly reset.

- Protect women's authority in financial decision-making. Strengthen safeguards against coercion and collusion around bills, contracts and approvals through transparent workflows, routine audits and enforceable accountability for procedural manipulation.

For district/block administrations and line departments

- Address caste-based political obstruction as a systemic governance risk through institutional safeguards and clear accountability mechanisms.

- Standardise bureaucratic engagement with elected representatives. Establish clear protocols for meetings, file movement, information-sharing, response timelines and escalation when officials do not cooperate.

- Embed mentoring in real governance work early in the term. Pair training with guided exposure to budgets, *Gram Sabha* processes, file work and portals, particularly at the start of a term when the barriers to learning are highest.

- Treat caste-based obstruction as an institutional accountability failure. Put in place grievance, review and redress mechanisms to tackle procedural stalling, intimidation and discriminatory non-cooperation that narrow women's decision space, particularly for SC/ST EWRs.

For political parties

- Reform gatekeeping in ticket allocation and campaign finance. Make candidature and financing processes transparent and predictable to support women's re-contestation beyond reserved seats and reduce their dependence on male intermediaries.

- Address lineage- and patronage-based bias within parties. Limit preferential ticketing for family members of established leaders and ensure that women without political family backgrounds (particularly SC/ST women) are not systematically deprioritised.

- Confront the monetised and broker-driven structure of local elections. Where money and constituency-level brokerage determine political mobility, the reservation of seats risks becoming a protective enclosure rather than a leadership pipeline, especially for SC/ST women with fewer patronage networks.

For donors and civil-society organisations

- Shift from project-based training courses to multi-year accompaniment. Support women through real governing challenges, budget cycles and electoral transitions rather than classroom training alone.

- Invest in collective infrastructures. Strengthen peer networks, SHG federations and movement-linked ecosystems that sustain political confidence, collective bargaining power and public legitimacy.

- Work with institutions, not around them. Engage parties and bureaucracies directly by intervening in the institutional sites where authority is allocated (files, meetings, approvals, funds), rather than building parallel support structures that leave gatekeeping untouched.

Practical design principles for policy and programming

- Embed learning in governance routines. Prioritise hands-on engagement with files, budgets, meetings and administrative procedures over stand-alone workshops. Authority develops through repeated exposure to everyday decision-making, not episodic training that is detached from practice.

- Design for continuity across electoral cycles. Create mechanisms for formal handovers, alumni networks, peer cohorts and mentoring arrangements that allow procedural knowledge, institutional familiarity and political networks to accumulate – even where rotational reservation limits re-election.

- Reduce the material dependence that sustains proxying. Ensure that elected women have direct, reliable access to institutional resources and procedures, including timely information, file movement, financial accounts and clearly defined, non-transferable procedural roles.

- Protect mobility and authority in practice. Treat mobility, time and safety as governance inputs by providing logistical support, predictable meeting schedules, childcare or time-use accommodations and basic connectivity. Pair these with clear escalation pathways and enforceable accountability whenever administrative or political obstruction limits women's ability to act.

1 Introduction

> '**Even if it takes multiple attempts, women who refuse to stop and continue fighting will eventually be accepted by society.**'
> Ex-*Zilla Parishad* President, Maharashtra

Women's representation in political office has expanded globally, yet parity remains a distant prospect. As of 2025, women held roughly 25% of parliamentary seats worldwide and only 10% of head-of-government positions (IPU, 2025). Their access to leadership is shaped by the resources they control, the networks they can enter, and the norms that govern their mobility, authority and public voice (Harper et al., 2020). These constraints are intensified by widening economic inequality, climate change, and social polarisation, which affect low-income and marginalised women disproportionately (Norton and Greenfield, 2023; WEF, 2023). Gaps in livelihoods and financial inclusion, alongside women's limited access to political networks, time and financial capital, continue to narrow their pipeline into leadership (ILO, 2023; UN Women, 2019; IPCC, 2022). Together, these structural inequalities shape women's everyday lives and define the landscape for their meaningful political inclusion.

Mirroring global trends, women's participation in politics in India is marked by deep inequalities, even though women are more visible in political institutions than ever before. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1993) marked a watershed moment by reserving one-third of seats in local self-governance for women, later expanded to half in most states. Crucially, this expansion unfolded alongside the constitutionally mandated caste-based reservation of seats, producing a distinctive institutional configuration in which gender and caste quotas operate simultaneously rather than sequentially (see Figure 1 for a timeline of institutional milestones).

Figure 1 Timeline of institutional milestones in women's political participation in India
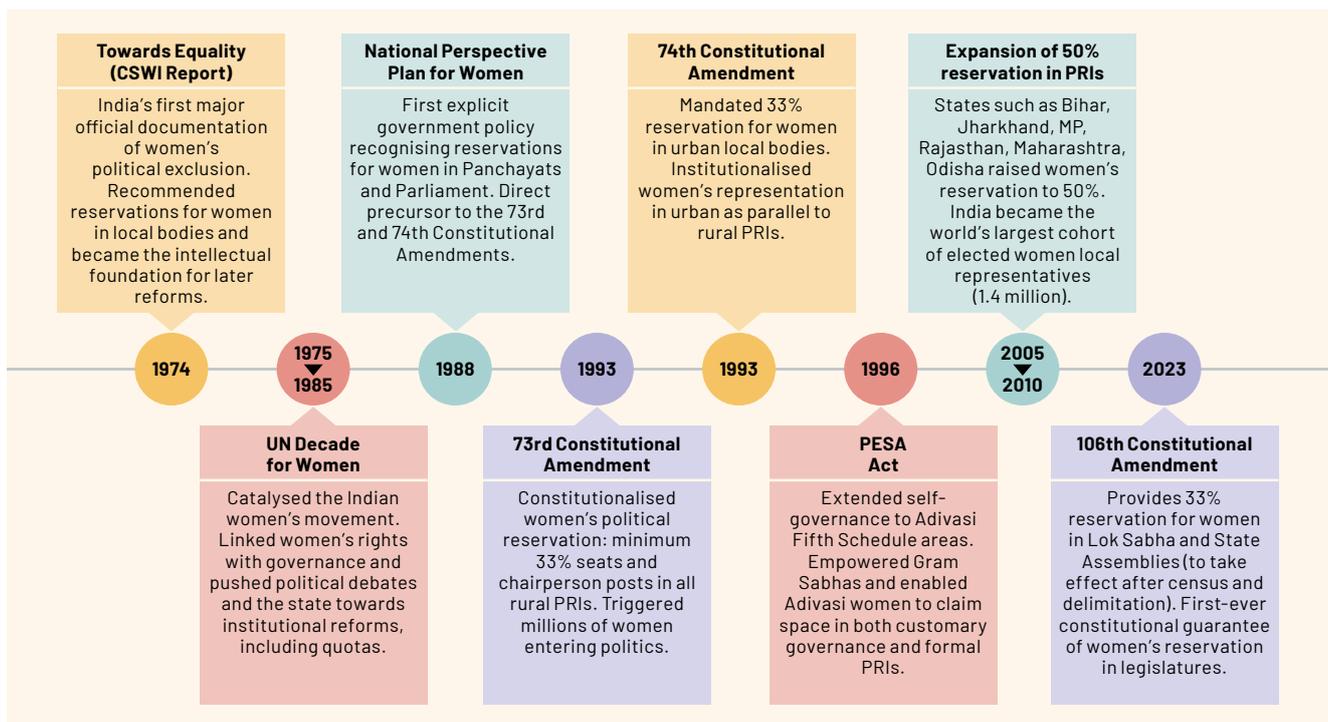
Source: Rahul Kumar (PDAG), authors' visualisation based on Constitutional Amendments, state Panchayati Raj Acts, government gazette notifications, and secondary literature on women's political participation in India.
Notes: CSWI = Committee on the Status of Women in India; MP = Madhya Pradesh.

Today, over 1.4 million women serve as elected representatives in local government, placing India among the world's leaders in terms of descriptive representation (Government of India, Press Information Bureau, 2024). Yet their inclusion has not translated into commensurate influence (Aldrich and Daniel, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2024). Women occupy only 14% of seats in Parliament, and the absence of gender quotas at higher levels of political representation is likely to persist until the Women's Reservation Bill (2023) comes into effect after 2029, mandating 33% reservation of seats in legislative bodies. As a result, women's political representation remains concentrated in local governance, and in particular in the three-tiered *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs) at village, block and district levels (see Figure 2). Meanwhile their influence in state and national decision-making remains limited.
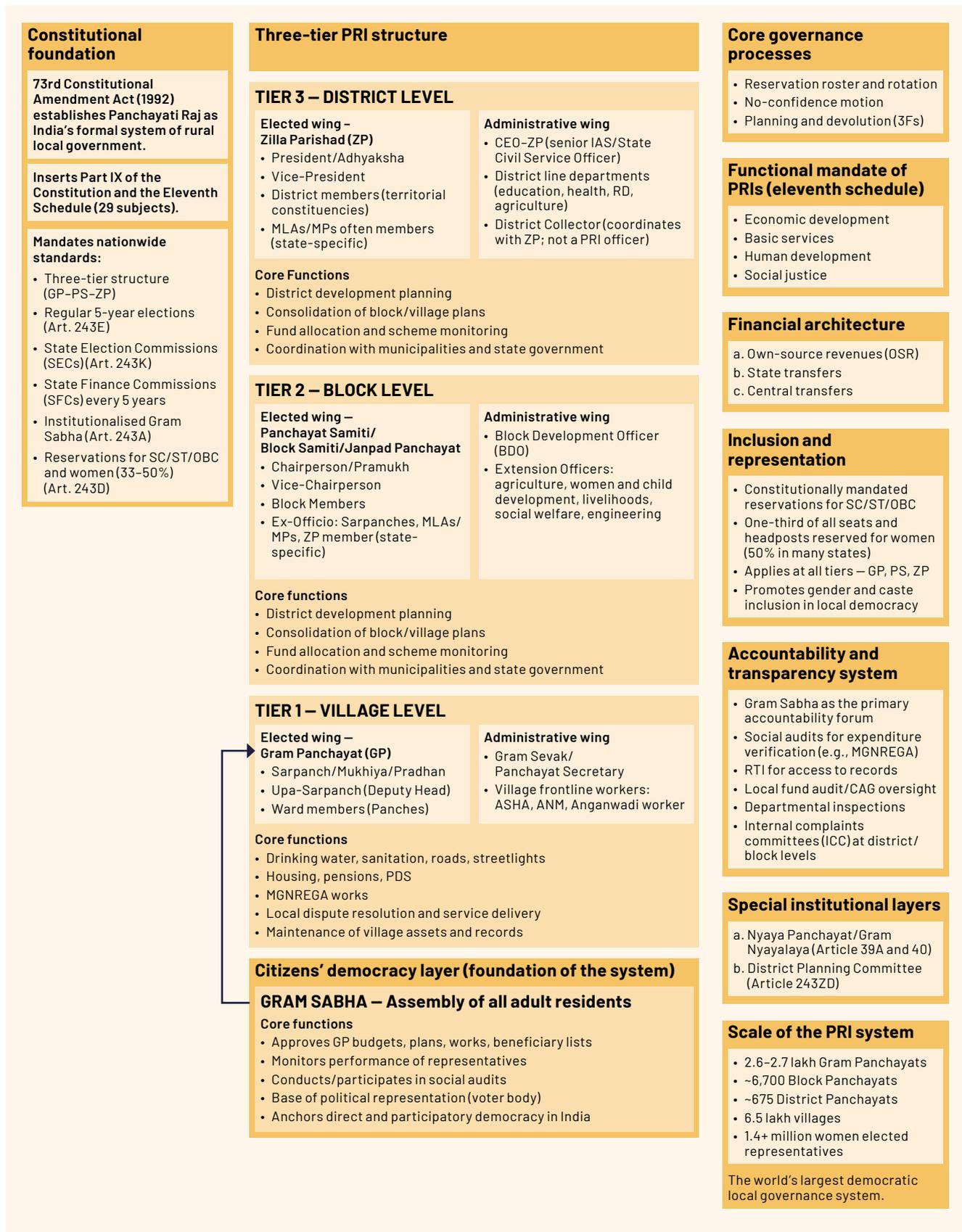
In India, these patterns of representation are refracted through a historic system of caste stratification, a social institution sustained by intertwined occupational and class-based hierarchies. Caste determines access to resources, mobility, authority, and whose voices are heard and whose participation is constrained (Chakravarti, 1993; Guru, 2005). It is more than a background variable: caste shapes the way in which political authority is recognised, delegated and contested within PRIs.

For marginalised women, particularly those from *Dalit* and *Adivasi* communities, political participation involves navigating overlapping exclusions that are patriarchal, economic, and caste-based (Kishwar, 1996). Their experiences differ from those of upper-caste women, who may face gender bias but not the social stigma of caste (Govinda, 2006; Malik and Shrivastava, 2011; Bhukya, 2024). This intersectional disadvantage has gained international visibility: a 2025 UN Women policy paper identifies *Dalit* women as part of global Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD), highlighting how caste-based exclusion, combined with gendered constraints, produces persistent and inherited inequalities (UN Women, 2025).

Beneath the surface of India's expanded representation, the everyday functioning of PRIs continues to reproduce caste and patriarchal hierarchies. This is most visible in the persistence of what is popularly termed 'proxy leadership', where women hold office while male relatives or community intermediaries make the decisions on their behalf, constraining women's political agency even though they occupy formal positions (Buch, 2000; Nambiar, 2011; George et al., 2020; Kumar and Ghosh, 2024). Rather than treating proxy leadership as a generic outcome of patriarchy, this study situates it within a specifically Indian institutional ecology: mass local-level reservations for women and caste groups operating within a caste-ordered society, where legitimacy, authority and political mobility are relationally produced and unevenly distributed. While upper-caste women may encounter gender bias, their political roles are often accommodated within dominant social imaginaries[7] (Waylen, 2013). In contrast, the entry of *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women into public life is often seen as a challenge to both caste and gender norms, provoking hostility and sanctions that reflect their structural marginalisation (Paul, n.d.). Hierarchies within Other Backward Classes (OBC) categories further complicate these dynamics, shaped by differential control over land, labour and local capital.

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7 The collective values, institutions and symbols through which people understand and imagine their social existence.

Figure 2 *Panchayati Raj* system

Constitutional foundation

73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) establishes Panchayati Raj as India's formal system of rural local government.

Inserts Part IX of the Constitution and the Eleventh Schedule (29 subjects).

Mandates nationwide standards:
- Three-tier structure (GP–PS–ZP)
- Regular 5-year elections (Art. 243E)
- State Election Commissions (SECs) (Art. 243K)
- State Finance Commissions (SFCs) every 5 years
- Institutionalised Gram Sabha (Art. 243A)
- Reservations for SC/ST/OBC and women (33–50%) (Art. 243D)

Three-tier PRI structure

TIER 3 — DISTRICT LEVEL

Elected wing – Zilla Parishad (ZP)
- President/Adhyaksha
- Vice-President
- District members (territorial constituencies)
- MLAs/MPs often members (state-specific)

Administrative wing
- CEO-ZP (senior IAS/State Civil Service Officer)
- District line departments (education, health, RD, agriculture)
- District Collector (coordinates with ZP; not a PRI officer)

Core Functions
- District development planning
- Consolidation of block/village plans
- Fund allocation and scheme monitoring
- Coordination with municipalities and state government

TIER 2 — BLOCK LEVEL

Elected wing — Panchayat Samiti/ Block Samiti/Janpad Panchayat
- Chairperson/Pramukh
- Vice-Chairperson
- Block Members
- Ex-Officio: Sarpanches, MLAs/ MPs, ZP member (state-specific)

Administrative wing
- Block Development Officer (BDO)
- Extension Officers: agriculture, women and child development, livelihoods, social welfare, engineering

Core functions
- District development planning
- Consolidation of block/village plans
- Fund allocation and scheme monitoring
- Coordination with municipalities and state government

TIER 1 — VILLAGE LEVEL

Elected wing — Gram Panchayat (GP)
- Sarpanch/Mukhiya/Pradhan
- Upa-Sarpanch (Deputy Head)
- Ward members (Panches)

Administrative wing
- Gram Sevak/ Panchayat Secretary
- Village frontline workers: ASHA, ANM, Anganwadi worker

Core functions
- Drinking water, sanitation, roads, streetlights
- Housing, pensions, PDS
- MGNREGA works
- Local dispute resolution and service delivery
- Maintenance of village assets and records

Citizens' democracy layer (foundation of the system)

GRAM SABHA — Assembly of all adult residents

Core functions
- Approves GP budgets, plans, works, beneficiary lists
- Monitors performance of representatives
- Conducts/participates in social audits
- Base of political representation (voter body)
- Anchors direct and participatory democracy in India

Core governance processes
- Reservation roster and rotation
- No-confidence motion
- Planning and devolution (3Fs)

Functional mandate of PRIs (eleventh schedule)
- Economic development
- Basic services
- Human development
- Social justice

Financial architecture
a. Own-source revenues (OSR)
b. State transfers
c. Central transfers

Inclusion and representation
- Constitutionally mandated reservations for SC/ST/OBC
- One-third of all seats and headposts reserved for women (50% in many states)
- Applies at all tiers — GP, PS, ZP
- Promotes gender and caste inclusion in local democracy

Accountability and transparency system
- Gram Sabha as the primary accountability forum
- Social audits for expenditure verification (e.g., MGNREGA)
- RTI for access to records
- Local fund audit/CAG oversight
- Departmental inspections
- Internal complaints committees (ICC) at district/ block levels

Special institutional layers
a. Nyaya Panchayat/Gram Nyayalaya (Article 39A and 40)
b. District Planning Committee (Article 243ZD)

Scale of the PRI system
- 2.6–2.7 lakh Gram Panchayats
- ~6,700 Block Panchayats
- ~675 District Panchayats
- 6.5 lakh villages
- 1.4+ million women elected representatives

The world's largest democratic local governance system.

Source: Rahul Kumar (PDAG), authors' visualisation.

Notes: Based on Constitutional Amendments, state Panchayati Raj Acts, government gazette notifications, secondary literature on women's political participation in India, and primary fieldwork conducted by PDAG. ˜15 Lakhs is equivalent to 1.5 million.

MGNREGA = Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, ANM = Auxiliary Nurse Midwife, RD = Rural Development.

Caste-patriarchal norms that organise village politics also regulate women's entry into party organisations and their mobility to higher electoral tiers. Even in states with substantial populations of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), their representation in the *Lok Sabha* (the lower house of India's Parliament) and *Vidhan Sabha* (State Legislative Assembly) remains largely confined to reserved constituencies. Few SC/ST leaders win from unreserved seats, which are dominated by the upper castes through entrenched party networks and long-standing patterns of political gatekeeping. This ceiling is reinforced within party structures, where SC and ST women, in particular, remain largely absent from district-level leadership.[8] Because these organisational tiers control candidate selection, resource flows and political grooming, exclusion operates well before electoral competition begins.

Consequently, today's reservations system within PRIs ensures women's numerical presence at the local level, but does little to dismantle the power structures that constrain their political mobility into unreserved constituencies and higher arenas of authority. At the same time, PRIs remain the primary institutional arena through which *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women can reach the public authority spaces where everyday negotiation, visibility and statecraft become possible. The divergence between women's expanded presence in PRIs and their constrained entry into state and national legislatures underscores the core puzzle of this study.

Against this backdrop, the study asks:

1. How do gender, caste and class norms shape women's entry into and participation in PRIs, and their prospects for political mobility beyond local office?

2. How do proxy arrangements shape women's political agency and legitimacy within PRIs?

3. How do *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women build, *negotiate and expand* political agency over time within PRIs, despite persistent structural constraints?

These questions look beyond binary perceptions of proxy leadership as either the domination of women or their lack of agency. Drawing on relational and processual approaches, this study conceptualises political authority as a continuous negotiation that accumulates unevenly over time. To examine how these dynamics unfold in practice, the study focuses on two states, Jharkhand and Maharashtra, with distinct demographic and political histories. A focus on granular practices of representation, committee work, budget management, and everyday decision-making illuminates how political agency is exercised, mediated and constrained within PRIs. Understanding these dynamics is essential to assess the conditions for women's meaningful participation in local governance and to identify the institutional and social barriers that limit their political voice.

Proxy leadership remains one of the most widely documented challenges to women's decision-making authority in PRIs.[9] In northern India, the term *sarpanch pati* (the sarpanch husband) captures the informal power men often exercise over elected women, a pattern observed across states (George et al., 2020). Patriarchal and caste norms often restrict women's participation, particularly for SC, ST

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8 Across the 60 districts of Jharkhand (24) and Maharashtra (36), only 8 women currently serve as district-level party presidents across major parties, the Indian National Congress (INC), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Shiv Sena, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM). Of these, three are in Jharkhand (all INC) and five in Maharashtra (four BJP, one INC). Representation thins further up the party hierarchy. State and national executive committees, ticket-distribution bodies, core committees, and other decision-making platforms remain dominated by upper-caste men, with women broadly absent and SC, ST, and OBC women almost entirely missing. The near absence of SC and ST women in district presidencies or other senior organisational roles and key pipelines for candidature highlights how caste-patriarchal gatekeeping restricts mobility long before candidate selection.

9 Recent policy deliberations by the Government of India, including guidance from the Supreme Court and the constitution of an Advisory Committee by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, acknowledge proxy participation as a systemic challenge that undermines accountability and the intent of constitutional reservations.

and OBC representatives, who are expected to remain deferential while male relatives manage public responsibilities (Kumar and Ghosh, 2024). Early studies document how newly elected women relied on husbands or kin to navigate paperwork and bureaucratic procedures (Mangubhai et al., 2020).

Dalit feminist scholarship, however, cautions against assuming that proxy-hood is primarily a *Dalit* women's problem. Dominant-caste women are often positioned as proxies, and male mediation can, in some contexts, shield first-time SC and *Adivasi* representatives from harassment by officials or political elites (Malik and Shrivastava, 2011; Bhukya, 2024).

These dynamics highlight broader debates on democratic practice and institutional change. While women's presence in office does not automatically translate into authority, existing research suggests that political office can function as a site of learning, where repeated exposure to governance processes reshapes skills, confidence and expectations over time (Sharma, 2017). Studies from different Indian states show that sustained interaction with women leaders can also shift community perceptions of competence and leadership (Beaman et al., 2012). This matters for *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women, given their historical exclusion from public authority.

These issues are increasingly urgent. India faces a widening gap between formal representation and effective authority, intensified by the impending implementation of parliamentary quotas and an increasingly polarised political environment. Women parliamentarians have begun to voice concerns about gendered exclusion in legislative forums, echoing dynamics long visible in PRIs. Internationally, this study contributes to debates on how gender quotas interact with entrenched social and economic hierarchies, demonstrating that while numerical representation is necessary, it does not guarantee meaningful political inclusion.

This report develops this argument. After Section 2 outlines the study's analytical framework and approach, Section 3 situates the analysis within the regional political and social contexts of Jharkhand and Maharashtra. Section 4 presents key findings, tracing how *Dalit*, *Adivasi* and OBC women enter PRIs, navigate everyday governance, and negotiate proxy arrangements shaped by caste, kinship, and local political cultures. Section 5 outlines the implications for policy and practice and identifies ways to strengthen women's political agency within local governance systems. Section 6 offers conclusions, reflecting on the study's broader contributions.

2 Analytical framework and approach

This study examines how caste, class and gender norms intersect to shape women's political trajectories within India's PRIs, with a focus on SC, ST and OBC elected women representatives (EWRs). It adopts a *Dalit*-feminist and intersectional analytical framework grounded in standpoint epistemology (Rege, 2006; Paik, 2021a, 2021b; Arya and Rathore, 2020) to examine how authority, mediation and political agency are negotiated in PRI practice, as well as qualitative research design centred on women's political trajectories. It centres the lived experiences of women at the intersections of caste and gender hierarchies and looks beyond diagnosing proxy participation as an individual or behavioural deviation.

By emphasising caste-based power relations alongside gendered dynamics, the framework departs from binary framings of empowerment or subordination. It enables a critical reading of proxy leadership (Chaudhuri and Sud, 2022), recognising that women's political participation often unfolds within constraining institutional and social arrangements, while still allowing scope for differentiated and context-specific forms of agency. A woman's agency is understood as relational and processual, rather than a binary condition based on her presence or absence, and is embedded in kinship structures, life-course dynamics and everyday gendered expectations. It is shaped through interactions with relatives, and by community norms, political actors and state institutions. It is not, therefore, limited to formal decision-making authority or individual autonomy but includes the negotiated and informal practices through which women navigate everyday governance (Ciotti, 2012).

A *Dalit*-feminist lens, which explores lived experiences of power and exclusion, treats these often-overlooked practices as part of a broader spectrum of political agency (Kamble, 2008; Pawar and Moon, 2004; Rege, 2006). Factors such as limited education, constrained financial autonomy and entrenched social hierarchies shape the conditions under which elected women representatives act, particularly for those from marginalised caste and tribal communities (Sharma, 2022).

The study adopts a comparative lens to examine how regional political cultures mediate women's experiences within PRIs. It focuses on two contrasting contexts (Maharashtra and Jharkhand) which have different historical trajectories of social mobilisation, political consciousness and institutional engagement. Rather than treating these as isolated cases, the study uses them to illustrate the different ways in which women's political participation and democratic inclusion are negotiated in India.

2.1 Data collection and analysis

The study draws primarily on life-history interviews (LHIs) to capture women's lived experiences of political entry, authority and negotiation within PRIs. These interviews traced women's trajectories through formative experiences, kinship relations, community expectations, and interactions with political and bureaucratic institutions. LHIs were supplemented by key informant interviews (KIIs) with legislators, bureaucrats, activists, and intermediaries to provide institutional and contextual perspectives on women's political participation.

Interviews were semi-structured, organised around thematic clusters such as entry into politics, governance practices, discrimination, and political aspirations. Interview data was complemented by field-based[10] observations in *Panchayat* meetings, community events, and informal gatherings to explore how elected women negotiate visibility, scrutiny and authority in public spaces. Local administrative records, including meeting minutes and election notices, were also reviewed (see Figure 3 for the research timeline).

Figure 3 Data collection timeline, 2025
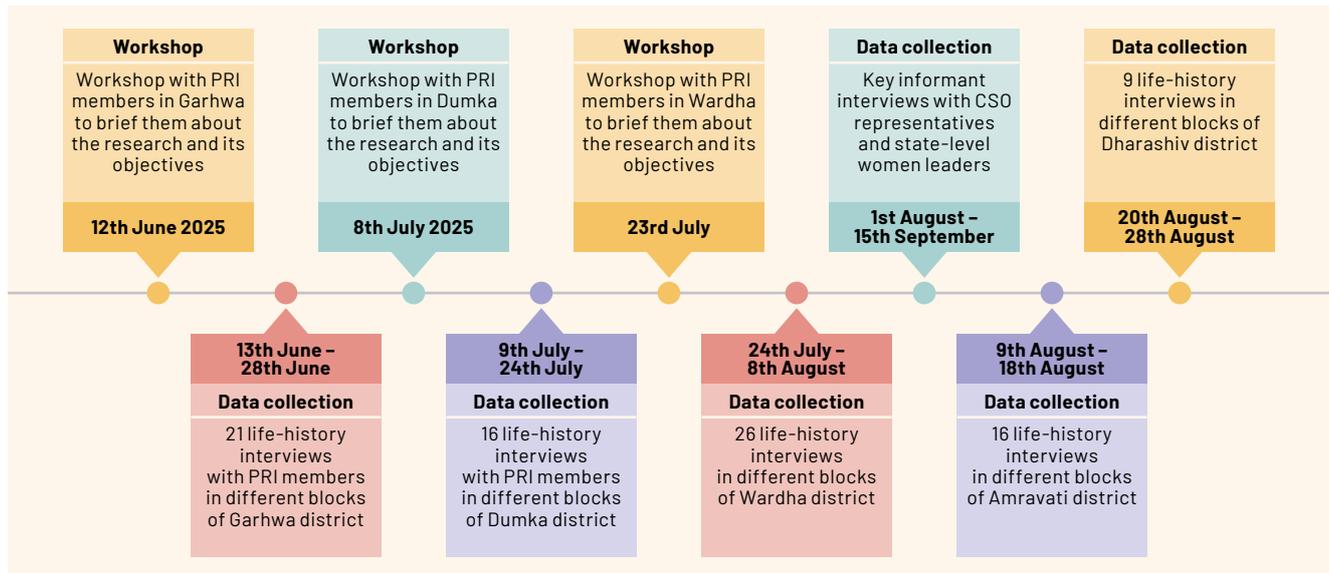
Source: Rahul Kumar (PDAG), authors' visualisation.

Notes: Based on primary data, supplemented by project documentation. CSO = civil society organisation.

Fieldwork was conducted across five districts to capture social diversity (see Figure 4). A purposive and stratified sampling strategy was used to ensure representation across caste, class and institutional positions. Data collection was undertaken in collaboration with local partner organisations, which facilitated access, contextual understanding and field coordination.

Interviews were transcribed, translated from Hindi, Santali and Marathi into English, and coded thematically using an intersectional analytic lens that treated caste and class as mutually constitutive structures of power. Narrative and content analysis methods were combined to trace how women articulated political legitimacy, authority and agency in relation to their governance work and domestic roles. Male involvement in governance was not treated as a simple deficit, but analysed as a relational process shaped by caste, gender and institutional context. Ethnographic field notes were read alongside interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns, silences and tensions.

Reflexivity was central to the analytical process. Researchers examined how their own positionalities shaped their interpretation and prioritised participants' vocabularies of leadership, authority and marginalisation. Divergent interpretations were discussed within the research team and, where feasible, with respondents, to ensure fidelity to participants' perspectives.

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10 While the study did not involve long-term participant observation in the classical ethnographic sense, repeated field visits over a three-month period enabled sustained engagement with elected women representatives, their families, community members and local officials. Observational insights generated through interviews, Panchayat visits and informal interactions situate women's political practices within the everyday social and institutional contexts through which authority, visibility and scrutiny are negotiated.

Figure 4 Geographic distribution of interviews across Maharashtra and Jharkhand

Garhwa, Jharkhand
Total LHIs – 20
SC – 7
ST – 6
OBC – 5
General – 2

Amravati, Maharashtra
Total LHIs – 16
SC – 3
ST – 7
OBC – 6

Dumka, Jharkhand
Total LHIs – 16
ST – 13
OBC – 2
Muslim – 1

Dharashiv, Maharashtra
Total LHIs – 9
SC – 1
OBC – 4
General – 3
Muslim – 1

Wardha, Maharashtra
Total LHIs – 26
SC – 9
ST – 5
OBC – 11
General – 1

8 key informant interviews with CSO representatives and state-level women leaders
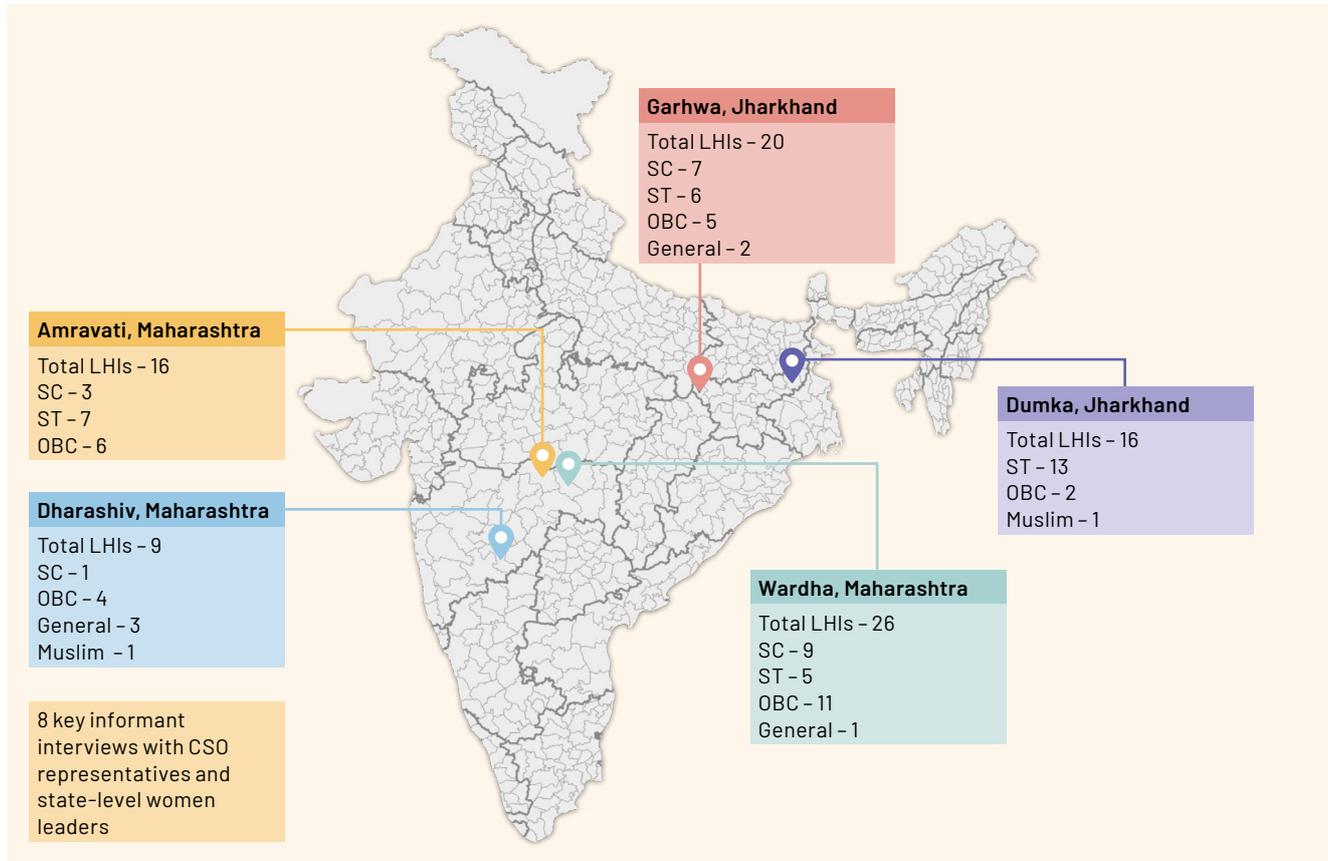
Source: Rahul Kumar (PDAG), authors' visualisation.

2.2 Ethical considerations and limitations

The study received ethical approval from the ODI Global Research Ethics Committee and from *Monk Prayogshala* (India), whose Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols comply with international standards for research involving human participants.

Informed consent was obtained in participants' local languages. Respondents could choose to be identified by name or remain anonymous. Preferences regarding attribution varied by context: most respondents in Jharkhand opted for anonymity, while a small number requested attribution; in Maharashtra, most respondents requested attribution, with anonymity preferred by a few.

To ensure ethical consistency and minimise potential risk, the report adopts a cautious and standardised approach to identification. Names have been retained where respondents requested attribution while identifying details have been removed for those who chose anonymity. All respondents referenced in the report are identified by their official positions and regions. Bilingual facilitators ensured linguistic clarity and cultural sensitivity, particularly in caste- and gender-sensitive contexts.

In terms of limitations, the qualitative analysis is limited to five districts and is not, therefore, generalisable. Access to senior women leaders, particularly in Jharkhand, was constrained by institutional hierarchies, time availability and norms governing interaction with higher-ranking officials. Translation across languages and dialects may have softened some nuances. While reflexive practices mitigated interpretive asymmetries, they could not eliminate them. Despite these limitations, the study offers grounded comparative insights into how caste and gender hierarchies are negotiated within India's local democratic institutions.

3 Regional and political context for elected women representatives

Because women's political participation and authority are shaped by regionally specific histories of mobilisation and institutional development, this section situates the study's analysis in the political and social contexts of two distinct regions: Maharashtra and Jharkhand. Research on women's local representation in these regions suggests that the effects of gender quotas and the forms of mediation surrounding women's office-holding are shaped by regionally specific political cultures, social hierarchies and institutional trajectories.

Analysis of these contexts enables the interpretation of how authority, legitimacy and mediation are organised in different PRI settings. As Figure 5 shows, there are clear gaps between the two regions in terms of the presence and representation of SC/ST women in state and national legislatures.

Figure 5 The demographic presence and representation of SC/ST women in state and national legislatures
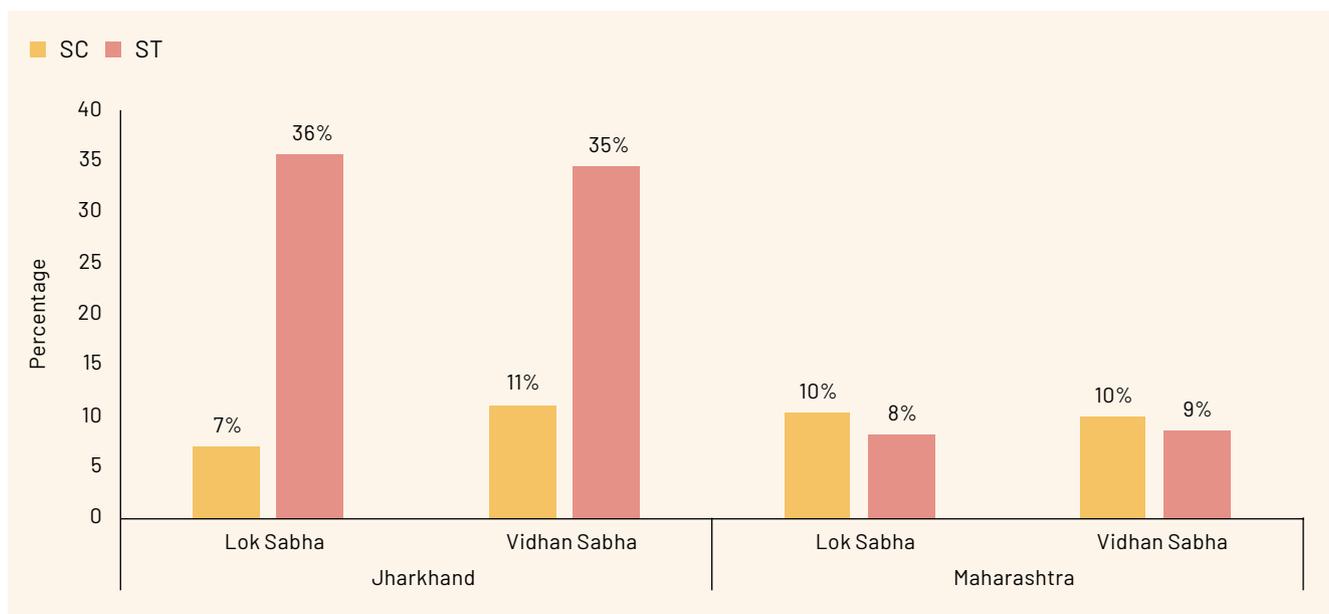
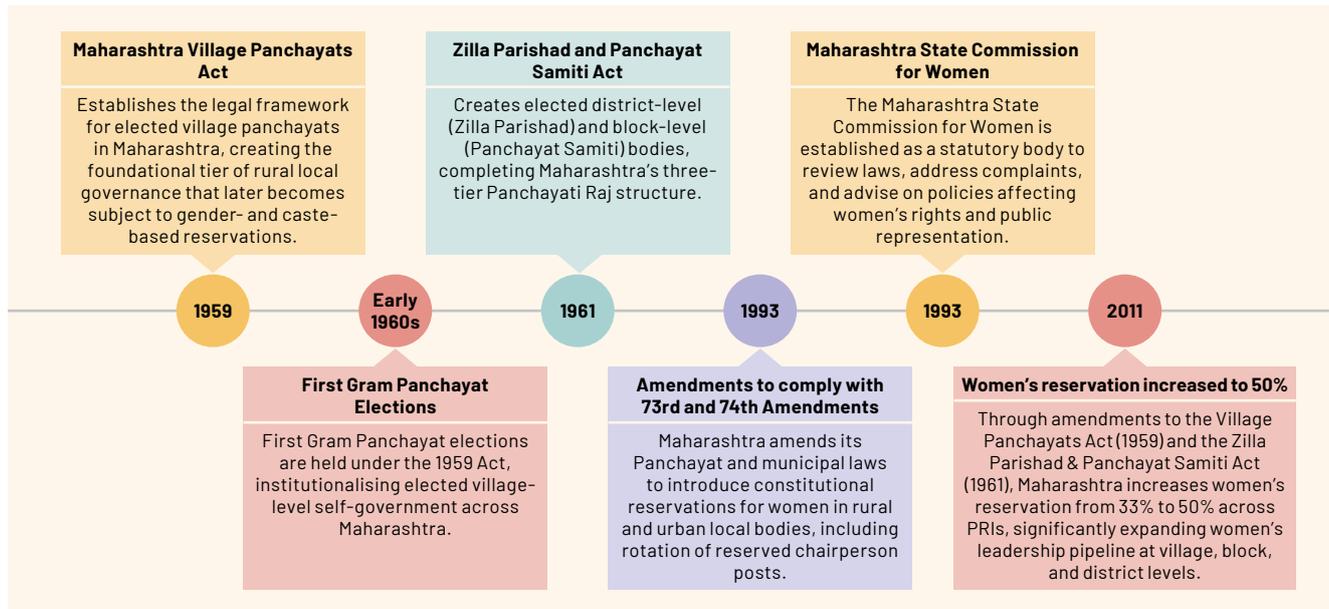*Source: Rahul Kumar (PDAG), authors' visualisation.*
Notes: Based on data from the Election Commission of India (2024).

3.1 Maharashtra

Maharashtra's political landscape has been shaped by a long history of anti-caste reform, social mobilisation and feminist critique, making it relevant for examining women's political participation (Omvedt, 1994; Jaffrelot, 2005). From the 19th century onwards, reformers such as Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule challenged Brahminical patriarchy and prioritised women's education, producing social challenges to both caste hierarchy and gendered exclusion. These reformist traditions were consolidated in the 20th century through Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's mass political project centred on dignity, equality and justice (Paik, 2016). Struggles such as the Mahad Satyagraha (1927) and the Kalaram Temple Entry movement (1930) asserted *Dalit* claims to public space while contesting the patriarchal foundations of caste domination.

These social currents were reinforced through labour, farmers, student, and urban movements in industrial centres such as Bombay, Nagpur and Pune, contributing to a political culture in which rights, citizenship and institutional engagement came to the fore (Chandavarkar, 1994). Ambedkar's emphasis on women's rights, including his advocacy for the Hindu Code Bill, also embedded feminist concerns within anti-caste politics (Zelliot, 1992; Kamble, 2008). In the post-Ambedkar period, *Dalit* women's writing and organisations, including the *Dalit Mahila Sanghathan* and the All-India *Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch* (AIDMAM), further articulated women's experiences as sites of political critique and collective claim-making (Rege, 2006; Paik, 2016).

Figure 6 Maharashtra: Historical pathways to women's political participation

Source: Rahul Kumar (PDAG), authors' visualisation.

Notes: Based on Constitutional Amendments, state Panchayati Raj Acts, government gazette notifications, and secondary literature on women's political participation in India.
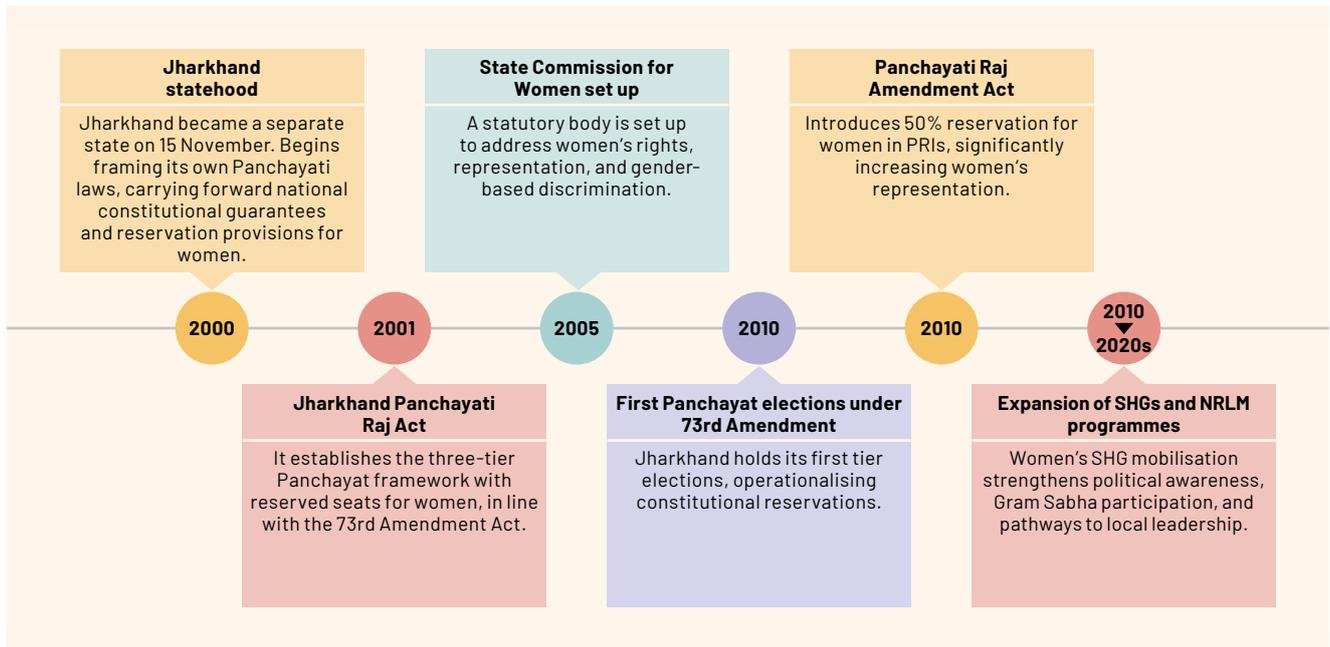
3.2 Jharkhand

Jharkhand's political context has been shaped by its relatively recent state formation in 2000, following long-standing demands for *Adivasi* self-rule and autonomy. Historically, political mobilisation in the region has centred on struggles over land, forests and resource rights, particularly in the Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas regions (Corbridge, 1988; Devalle, 1992; Shah, 2004). Movements organised around *jal, jangal, zameen* (water, forest, land) emerged in response to successive waves of dispossession, including colonial forest governance and post-independence mining and infrastructure projects.

These mobilisations have often been anchored in collective identities, customary governance practices, and kinship-based solidarities, producing a political culture distinct from the caste-reformist and industrial traditions associated with Maharashtra. Authority and public legitimacy have often been embedded in community networks and collective decision-making structures with an emphasis on local autonomy and decentralised governance.

Women's participation in PRIs in Jharkhand has also been shaped by institutional conditions, including the degree of devolution, bureaucratic interface and the material demands of domestic and agricultural labour. Participation in *Adivasi* movements, self-help group (SHG) federations,

and village-level institutions has provided some women with organisational experience and moral legitimacy that informs their engagement with formal political office.

Figure 7 Jharkhand: Historical pathways to women's political participation

Jharkhand statehood
Jharkhand became a separate state on 15 November. Begins framing its own Panchayati laws, carrying forward national constitutional guarantees and reservation provisions for women.

State Commission for Women set up
A statutory body is set up to address women's rights, representation, and gender-based discrimination.

Panchayati Raj Amendment Act
Introduces 50% reservation for women in PRIs, significantly increasing women's representation.

2000 — 2001 — 2005 — 2010 — 2010 — 2010 ▶ 2020s

Jharkhand Panchayati Raj Act
It establishes the three-tier Panchayat framework with reserved seats for women, in line with the 73rd Amendment Act.

First Panchayat elections under 73rd Amendment
Jharkhand holds its first tier elections, operationalising constitutional reservations.

Expansion of SHGs and NRLM programmes
Women's SHG mobilisation strengthens political awareness, Gram Sabha participation, and pathways to local leadership.

Source: Rahul Kumar (PDAG), authors' visualisation. Notes: Based on Constitutional Amendments, state Panchayati Raj Acts, government gazette notifications, and secondary literature on women's political participation in India.
Note: NRLM = National Rural Livelihoods Mission

3.3   Comparative rationale

The comparative design of this study is motivated by the contrast between two trajectories: a political culture shaped by reform and movement in Maharashtra, and *Adivasi* mobilisation and distinct community governance traditions in Jharkhand, alongside different patterns of institutional development. Rather than conflicting, the study sees these distinctions as analytically useful for examining how regional political contexts, particularly those with a history of mobilisation by marginalised groups, shape women's entry into PRIs, the idioms of legitimacy available to them, and the mediation through which political authority in local governance is recognised or denied.

4 Women in *Panchayati Raj* politics: from entry to authority

This section examines women's engagement in *Panchayati Raj* politics, tracing how gender norms, regional political trajectories, and constitutionally mandated reservations shape their journey from entry into politics to wielding authority. It is structured chronologically and thematically. The section begins with women's entry into local politics and the social negotiations that shape candidature. It then examines how women build public competence, navigate party sponsorship, and make themselves visible during campaigning. Subsequent sections analyse office-holding, relationships with bureaucracy and constituents, and prospects for political mobility beyond the village. This allows engagement with the study's research questions on how women negotiate constraints, exercise political agency, and sustain (or limit) leadership trajectories within PRI institutions.

4.1 Evolution of gender norms and political culture

Building on the historic and political specificities of Maharashtra and Jharkhand that frame women's entry into PRIs outlined in the previous section, this section examines how these translate into everyday gender norms, practices of authority, and modes of political participation on the ground. It traces how shared gendered constraints take shape in regional political contexts.

In Maharashtra, women's pathways into PRIs were shaped by region, caste location and political histories, producing different idioms through which authority was negotiated and sustained. In Marathwada, for example, including districts such as Dharashiv, women's political participation unfolded within contexts of agrarian distress, caste-differentiated land ownership, and dependence on agricultural and informal wage labour. The long-standing engagement of *Dalit*, *Adivasi* and OBC women in wage work had normalised and expanded their physical visibility outside the household, but had not translated into comparable political participation or authority. Their everyday visibility coexisted with authority, mobility and decision-making that was tightly regulated through economic dependence on dominant-caste landowners, party intermediaries and kin-based patronage.

As one former woman *Sarpanch* from Dharashiv explained:

> 'SC/ST women have less land, they have to work daily,' often carrying a double burden, since 'they go to the fields and work, and after coming home, do housework too.' The same respondent recalled, 'we women were not allowed to go out... only after I became *Sarpanch* did I start going out a little. Before that, never.'
> Former *Sarpanch*, upper caste, Dharashiv, Maharashtra

While Ambedkarite influence was present in Marathwada, it was institutionalised unevenly and was often subordinated to local hierarchies of control.

In Vidarbha – particularly in districts such as Wardha and Amravati – different households had different perspectives on the route to women's public presence. In many *Dalit* households, respondents linked participation to longer histories of Ambedkarite mobilisation, Buddhist conversion and exposure to education and civic activity. Women spoke of learning authority through office-holding itself. As one

Dalit woman leader noted, 'once you sit in that chair, it teaches you everything – how to speak, how to deal with officers.' In upper-caste households, this shift was seen as more gradual and contested. A Rajput *Sarpanch* from Wardha recalled, 'the first issue was that I didn't even have permission from home to go outside... in our caste, this is the biggest problem,' while also observing that 'the custom of covering the face has reduced.' Participation here was described less as a rupture than an extension, shaped by caste norms, household negotiations and local political economies.

Across caste locations, women described different conditions under which legitimacy was sustained. An upper-caste woman leader reflected, 'I can go out anytime, stay late till night because I have built that trust.' Among many SC and ST households, mobility was routine due to labour, but institutional navigation often depended on male intermediaries. OBC households appeared to occupy an intermediate position, where women's labour participation coexisted with expectations of controlled visibility.

Field observations reflected these varied arrangements. Some women emphasised independence, as a former *Sarpanch* from Vidarbha stated:

> 'I work independently... my husband never came to the *Gram Panchayat*,' adding, 'he doesn't interfere in decisions. I take my own decisions.' She described routine engagement with officials, noting, 'even now, I go to the *Gram Panchayat*... I go to the *Panchayat Samiti* to discuss with the Block Development officer (BDO).'
> Former *Sarpanch*, OBC, Vidarbha, Maharashtra

In other cases, mediation was closer to substitution. A former upper-caste woman *Sarpanch* from Marathwada recalled, 'my husband told me everything... all the decisions were his,' and 'he did all the speaking', adding that no one questioned this arrangement locally (see also Annex 1, case study 4).

Across these contexts, women often spoke of authority being established through visible work rather than symbolic presence. As one long-serving representative remarked, 'people say I shout, so my work gets done'.

In Garhwa, Jharkhand, however, a district largely insulated from *Adivasi* politics and the kind of vibrant anti-caste politics seen in Uttar Pradesh, the political sphere was still regulated by the norms of the caste society. Conversations were peppered with references to concerns about '*izzat*' (respect, but here implying respectability), '*nazar mein bura lagna*' (considering indecent) and '*log kya kahenge*?' ('what would people say?'). Women's lives were shaped by access to resources that were still distributed along caste lines. Crossing these lines meant loss of resources and respectability and greater vulnerability. One Brahmin participant – a sitting member of the *Panchayat Samiti* (PS) – proudly declared:

> 'Ever since I got married, I have never stepped out of my house... I only saw people outside, from my terrace.'
> Current Block Development Council (BDC) member, *Brahmin*, General, Garhwa, Jharkhand

Surprised by this answer, we asked her if she had left the house to campaign for votes before her election. She replied, 'I did not need to. I knew so many people by being in my house itself... They all work for us, in our fields, our house, and they all love me'. Her power and status in the household and outside was assured by her caste position.

In contrast, a *Dalit* member of a *Gram Panchayat* from the same block said:

> 'I know I could have done a lot better, but I do not have the means… As you can see, I am poor, I do not even have a *pukka*[11] house…I tried a lot, but my husband is an alcoholic…How far can a woman, who does not have her man's support go? …I think I was chosen as a ward member because they thought someone in my position would be compliant…But even then, I tried.'
> Current ward member, SC, Garhwa, Jharkhand

Between these two extremes were women *Mukhiyas*[12] like Rakhi, Uma, Suman and Sunita, who had assumed office with the help of their husbands and with little public exposure. Their husbands, upwardly mobile figures in local politics, had secured their own places in local politics by aligning with local ruling Rajput elites. But while Sunita and Suman, both from *Bahujan*[13] backgrounds, claimed their power while acknowledging that 'all important decisions are made by him', Uma and Rakhi were emphatic that '…we do things together, we coordinate with each other so that we can claim our place.' Uma said it was her decision to run for office and her husband supported her, despite her husband implying that the decision was his.

Similar dynamics were noted among *Adivasi* families, particularly *Oraons* in Garhwa, yet women's exercise of their power was often driven by structural conditions where their husbands were often migrants. The only *Mukhiya* from the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) from the *Parhaiya* community was probably elected by the help of *Yadavs*, an OBC caste group that dominated the local politics and rivalled the Rajput-led block. They chose her to contest in a seat reserved for STs to contest the *Kharwar-Oraon* led block. However, she refused to be restricted to a proxy role and was determined to etch her name, quite literally, on the public work done during her tenure so that '*people could remember*' and deeply regretted that she was not elected for a second term despite 'such good work'.

Many *Adivasi* households, particularly in Santhal Parganas District, practised gender norms less tightly governed by Brahmanical ideals. Where men migrated for labour, women's public and domestic responsibilities expanded, giving them greater everyday authority even though community elders took final decisions. Cathrine, a respondent in Santhal Parganas, observed that the gender norms of the *Adivasi* community, unlike those of caste Hindus, allowed women to participate in public activities, helping her take up public employment and seek election to the *Panchayat*. She added that Christian missionary activities and her family's conversion to Christianity had helped its women pursue formal education. She concluded:

> 'Unlike you, we *Adivasi* women can work with equal ease in fields and offices, we are not afraid of labour, that is how the gender norms of my community have helped me.'
> Current *Mukhiya*, ST, Dumka, Jharkhand

Women's leadership often emerged where authority was embedded in kinship networks and collective decision-making. Fieldwork also revealed that EWRs were rarely interviewed alone, with male relatives

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11 'Pukka' refers to a permanent, usually cemented dwelling, conventionally contrasted with kaccha housing. In rural India, pukka houses function not only as a material category but also as a social marker of stability, security and relative upward mobility, even though they do not necessarily indicate high construction quality or comfort.

12 The term, *Mukhiya*, refers to the elected head of a *Gram Panchayat* in several states in eastern India notably in Bihar and Jharkhand. The post is also known as *Sarpanch* in Maharashtra, and some other states. The position denotes the institutional head of rural local government under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. Regardless of the nomenclature, they are the institutional anchor of village-level self-government, the *Mukhiya/ Sarpanch* is responsible for convening and presiding over *Gram Sabha* and *Gram Panchayat* meetings. They oversee the executive and financial administration of the *Panchayat*.

13 'Bahujan' is a political term from India's anti-caste traditions, denoting a coalitional 'majority' mobilised against Brahmanical dominance, historically centred on SC, ST and OBC communities. It is used in political and electoral discourse to frame anti-caste solidarity and majority-formation rather than as a fixed social or administrative category.

or intermediaries often present and speaking on their behalf. While *Adivasi* political traditions may recognise women's leadership symbolically, this recognition does not always translate into institutional autonomy. Intra-tribal inequalities, including the marginalisation of PVTGs such as the *Mal Paharia* and *Sauriya Paharia*, further complicated the meanings and outcomes of representation.

Women in both states gradually adjusted these relational balances, moving from symbolic presence to substantive participation. However, the idioms of legitimacy mobilised by women were deeply gendered. In Maharashtra, efficiency, paperwork and visible development projects undercut doubts about women's competence, although they remained vulnerable to rumour. In Jharkhand, care, civility and service expanded their space for decision-making without provoking social veto. Across both states, women merged the institutional openings created by quotas with local repertoires of dignity, care and endurance. Through such practices, symbolic inclusion gradually deepened to enable substantive, though uneven, claims to authority.

4.2   Pathways to entry

Across Maharashtra and Jharkhand, women's entry into PRIs followed a strikingly similar pattern: the reservation of seats opened the door, but the terms of entry were shaped by caste hierarchies, kinship structures and household negotiations. Women in our study seldom entered politics as autonomous actors; instead, their candidacies were mobilised contingently through the persuasion, encouragement or strategic decisions of male relatives and community leaders.

Yet, what followed their entry varied, and it was the trajectory of learning, negotiation and assertion that revealed different forms of agency. The idea of 'proxy', when used as a singular category, obscured these caste-inflected variations. Women's dependence on men was neither uniform nor enduring; it shifted with caste location, community expectations and the opportunities created by institutional exposure (see also Annex 1, case study 1).

In Maharashtra, many women described how political life was perceived as inappropriate or unsafe for women, discouraging self-driven entry. As an ST *Sarpanch* from Melghat noted:

> 'There is often a very negative picture that is painted... that politics is a dirty game involving thugs, bullying, and intimidation.'
> Current *Sarpanch*, ST, Maharashtra

Women were often drawn into electoral politics through obligation or persuasion, typically reassured that 'someone else will handle things.' Across Wardha and Amravati, respondents acknowledged that without reservation 'a male relative or another man would have contested in our place.'

The reservation roster itself became a decisive moment that shaped when and whether women entered politics. Women described anxiously tracking the roster through the Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs)[14], party workers, or Yashwantrao Chavan Academy of Development Administration (YASHADA)[15] contacts to see if 'our chance has arrived.' Once a seat was declared reserved, intense negotiations in households and villages would identify which woman would be put forward. These negotiations revealed the underlying logic of male control, i.e., women were fielded not as independent leaders, but as the constitutional face of the household or local faction.

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14   An MLA is broadly comparable to a state legislator or provincial parliamentarian in other democratic systems — operating above local councils but below the national parliament.

15   YASHADA: Yashwantrao Chavan Academy of Development Administration is Maharashtra's apex training institute for civil servants and elected representatives.

In Jharkhand, the pattern was similar but layered through deeper caste and class gradients. Women entered politics primarily when seats were reserved and entry depended on minimal levels of social capital such as schooling, mobility and household support. As one respondent put it:

> 'When the seat was reserved for women, everyone started looking around for someone educated. They said, "You are educated, so you contest".'
> Current *Mukhiya*, OBC, Garhwa, Jharkhand

Dalit and *Adivasi* women emphasised that they could stand 'only because the seat is reserved', not only for women but also for SCs and STs, as the financial demands of campaigning, the dominance of upper castes, and the absence of political networks made unreserved constituencies inaccessible. For many, mobility across caste-segregated hamlets was a challenge, reinforcing their dependence on male or caste networks for safe passage, campaigning and public meetings. Yet women also described reframing their candidacy as a form of defiance. One SC woman recalled:

> 'People told me, "You won't be able to do it; you don't have the money". But I thought, let me try once. If I lost, at least I would have tried.'
> Former *Mukhiya*, SC, Jharkhand

In both states, entry was shaped not only by gendered norms but by the financial architecture of local politics. Although formal spending caps were low, they were exceeded by the real costs. Campaigning required funds for transport, food and payments to local supporters. Women stressed that the money came from male relatives, as one Jharkhand *Mukhiya* explained: 'When we contest, who else will pay? The money comes from the household, from our husbands'. This dependence bound women's political legitimacy to household and caste structures, reinforcing male brokerage despite the constitutional provisions creating space for women's formal entry.

Within this shared structure of contingent entry, caste produced sharply differentiated pathways once women assumed office. Among upper-caste households in Maharashtra, reservation was often seen less as a democratic opening and more as a disruption of domestic order. Men described quotas as a form of loss ('the seats belonged to us, but the government gave them to women') and responded by exerting quiet control over candidature and conduct. Women were encouraged or compelled to contest, but only as stand-ins for the male head of the family.

A similar dynamic unfolded among dominant OBC groups, especially *Maratha-Kunbi* and *Lingayat* families in Wardha, Amravati, and Dharashiv, where elected women were the constitutional face of office while their male relatives managed contracts, bureaucratic interactions and village-level negotiations. However, many dominant OBC women had higher literacy and exposure to public institutions than upper-caste women, which created the conditions for an informal apprenticeship: 'husbands' help' enabled women to learn procedures, even though substantive authority remained conditional and contingent on reservation cycles.

Among marginal OBC women, especially NT and VJNT groups, 'proxy' took a different form. They entered office with long histories of participation in labour markets, seasonal migration and public negotiation. Their political learning was faster, drawing on lived experience rather than formal training. They often handled everyday governance tasks themselves, interacting with officials, maintaining registers, and coordinating welfare distribution. Yet their autonomy remained limited by financial dependency and the need to rely on caste networks for legitimacy, making their authority both grounded and precarious.

Dalit women in Maharashtra encountered a distinct pathway shaped by Ambedkarite and *Dalit Panther*[16] legacies, particularly in Vidarbha. Many women identified as Buddhists approached their roles with a strong rights-based ethic. As one Wardha *Sarpanch* said, 'We learnt from Babasaheb[17] that power should serve the people, not the powerful'. Their ideological grounding enabled them to read files before signing, insist on chairing *Gram Sabhas*, and resist pressures to sign blank documents. Yet caste prejudice persisted. Bureaucrats ignored their instructions, upper-caste colleagues challenged their decisions, and party intermediaries attempted to appropriate their work. Ironically, this strengthened their procedural literacy, with *Dalit* women among the most assertive representatives in several Maharashtra sites.

Adivasi women in Maharashtra, particularly in Melghat, approached political office through necessity. Limited access to schooling, early marriage and infrastructural deprivation restricted their preparation for governance. Yet when male relatives migrated for work, *Adivasi* women often found themselves handling *Panchayat* responsibilities by default. Their authority emerged through practical engagement with welfare schemes, registers and interactions with the block office. Governance became an extension of the subsistence labour they already performed, and their confidence grew through repeated trial and error.

Jharkhand reflected a similar caste-differentiated landscape, although shaped by its own histories of dispossession, forest-based economies and community structures. Among upper-caste and OBC households, women's participation largely upheld household strategies to retain power under reservation. Educated women were selected as candidates, but male relatives continued to exercise substantive control. As one *Mukhiya* from Garhwa recalled, even when she was present, people asked, 'Where is the *Mukhiya*?' a reminder of the gap between formal authority and social recognition. Yet some educated OBC women, often teachers or long-time SHG members, used their social capital to extend their authority, challenging community expectations that women should remain symbolic heads.

Among SC households in Jharkhand, gender relations tended to be less hierarchical, shaped by shared marginalisation and economic hardship. Here, husband–wife cooperation enabled rather than constrained women's authority. One SC *Mukhiya* described campaigning across seven villages and later filing a court case independently after losing narrowly. 'People told me to give up,' she said, 'but I wanted justice'. Governance became a site of experiential learning, rooted in struggle rather than institutional support.

Adivasi women in Jharkhand, especially *Santhal* women in Dumka entered politics through community selection rather than household delegation. Villages nominated them collectively when seats were reserved, viewing their participation as part of a strategy to preserve community control, and their learning unfolded slowly but consistently. In Dumka, the entry of a Muslim OBC candidate into politics was orchestrated by her father-in-law, who had earlier contested elections for the Block Development Committee (BDC). When the *Mukhiya* seat became reserved for women, he put her forward:

> 'I said, "I don't know anything," but he said, "If you don't know, you will learn. Come into politics once and see".'
> Current *Mukhiya*, Muslim, OBC, Dumka, Jharkhand

She openly acknowledged that her victory rested on his social standing: 'It happened because of my father-in-law... his behaviour, how he talks and makes people comfortable.' Similar entries were noted by an *Adivasi Panchayat Samiti* (PS) member and an *Adivasi Mukhiya*.

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16   *Dalit Panthers* were a radical anti-caste political formation that emerged in Maharashtra in the early 1970s, drawing on Ambedkarite thought and global Black radicalism. They reframed caste oppression as a structural relation of power, advancing a politics of dignity, resistance and collective assertion against Brahmanical hegemony.

17   A term of affection for B.R. Ambedkar, meaning 'respected father'.

Across both states, women's political journeys revealed that while candidacy was often contingent and dependent, governance unfolded through processes of learning, negotiation, and incremental assertion. As the next section describes, women who began as symbolic representatives often developed procedural competence and public confidence over time, while others remained circumscribed by household authority. Agency here did not emerge as a clean break from dependency but as a gradual reworking of it.

4.3   Building public competence

Not every woman entered into politics through coercion or familial negotiation. For many in Maharashtra, and among the younger cohort in Jharkhand, SHGs (or *bachat gats,* as they are called in Maharashtra) cultivated public competence and leadership skills long before formal political entry. In districts such as Wardha and Amravati, many women *Sarpanches* and *Panchayat* members had been SHG office-bearers, presidents or treasurers before they stood for election. Through these groups, they learned to conduct meetings, manage finances, negotiate with bureaucrats, and speak in public. In one Wardha village, an SHG leader's campaign became a collective effort, with fellow members canvassing door-to-door, convincing hesitant male voters, and defending her candidacy. Such experiences grounded women's political legitimacy in community work and collective trust, providing a more autonomous entry compared to women nominated by families or political patrons.

In Jharkhand, similar processes were visible among younger women, particularly those from OBC and SC backgrounds. Many described their SHG engagement as their first experience of organised public life, granting them mobility across villages and exposure to administrative procedures. A few even considered SHG work as a long-term career. However, their SHG involvement often met resistance at home, with husbands complaining that they were neglecting their domestic duties. At the same time, the skills women gained, like negotiating with officials, travelling independently, and managing group finances, pushed against these norms and laid the groundwork for more public-facing roles within the PRI system. One OBC respondent explained that her teaching job, rather than SHG work, had similarly prepared her to handle government procedures, with limited professional exposure substituting for political apprenticeship. Another OBC *Mukhiya* observed:

> 'Earlier my husband would be offended when I would be away from home for SHG meetings, but later when the seat got reserved and he could not contest he realised how helpful it had been. I could contest the elections. Now he encourages me to have public interactions.'
> Current *Mukhiya,* OBC, Jharkhand

Among older respondents, particularly in Jharkhand, prior exposure to public life was rare. Two exceptions stood out, both *Adivasi* women. One, raised in a Christian family (where missionary influence normalised girls' education) was a school principal before entering politics. The other gained experience through decades of community service and activism. Their trajectories highlight how long-term engagement in education and social work could substitute for formal political grooming, laying the groundwork for credible leadership.

Across both states, SHGs were vital preparatory spaces where women learnt organisational discipline, built social networks and exercised collective voice. However, their empowerment remained largely economic and social rather than political. SHGs nurtured confidence and legitimacy but this seldom translated into independent political agency unless accompanied by the structural opening of reservation. The bridge from SHG to political office is, therefore, contingent upon and mediated by caste, class and a balancing act between public participation and domestic responsibility.

4.4   Familial mediation and the evolution of political agency

Across both Maharashtra and Jharkhand, family support or its strategic withdrawal proved decisive in shaping women's political journeys. For most EWRs, male family members often played the dual role of gatekeepers and mentors, as illustrated by the story of a ST *Sarpanch* from Amravati. Initially uninterested in politics, she agreed to contest only after she was persuaded by her husband, a seasoned *Panchayat* member, and other women from her community. Once elected, her husband guided her through bureaucratic procedures but did not interfere in decision-making. 'He made me understand my role but never decided for me,' she said. His mentorship, while critical to her success, remained bound by recognition of her growing autonomy. Yet such partnerships were rare. She observed that her successor, an OBC woman, was controlled by her husband.

In both states, respondents described similar patterns of gradual learning and self-assertion. Many began their tenure with husbands or male relatives attending meetings on their behalf and their lack of formal education, exposure to public work and knowledge of formal bureaucratic procedures were, at first, major impediments. Over time, however, repeated exposure to bureaucratic processes fostered familiarity and confidence. As Rakhi, a *Mukhiya* in Jharkhand noted:

> 'At first, my husband went to meetings with me, but now I go just by myself. Gradually, you learn how to talk and handle people.'
> Currently serving her second term, *Mukhiya*, SC, Garhwa, Jharkhand

While familial mediation often reinforced patriarchal authority, it could also create pathways for women's empowerment. Uma, a two-term SC *Mukhiya* from Jharkhand reflected:

> 'Earlier I did it because my husband said so. Now people come to me for help, and I don't depend on anyone.'
> Currently serving her third term, *Mukhiya*, SC, Garhwa, Jharkhand

Saroj, a SC former *Mukhiya* added, 'When they call me *Mukhiya ji*, I feel respected as if I have become someone'. Such testimonies point to a gradual shift from instrumental representation, where women occupy positions as extensions of male power, to substantive participation, where they begin to exercise voice and authority in their own right.

In Jharkhand, this progression was visible particularly among women who had previously worked in SHGs or public-sector jobs and were accustomed to collective decision-making. In Maharashtra, similar processes unfolded among women from politically active families who learned to navigate public office under the shadow – but not full control – of their husbands.

4.5   Party sponsorship, self-motivation and the limits of autonomy

In the districts of Dharashiv in Maharashtra and Garhwa in Jharkhand, proxy politics revealed not only patriarchal but also distinctly caste-bound mechanisms of control. In Maharashtra, although formal party tickets were uncommon at the *Gram Panchayat* level, informal alignment with larger parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Indian National Congress (INC), the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), or Shiv Sena was routine. Party-backed panels often pre-selected women who matched the caste and gender profile of the reserved seat.

In Dharashiv, for example, an OBC woman known for her voluntary work with village children was approached by the local BJP unit when the *Sarpanch* position was reserved for her caste category. The party provided resources and organisational backing, enabling her to win, yet the same men who sponsored her campaign later directed many of her decisions. Her tenure remained tightly

embedded in party networks, revealing how political openings for women were entangled with male intermediaries who controlled funds, paperwork and negotiations with bureaucrats.

Such political arrangements coexisted with a smaller but significant category of 'accidental' or self-motivated entrants. A tribal woman from Melghat, active in forest rights mobilisation, contested independently for a ward seat without party or family support and defeated a male rival by a narrow margin. Cases like hers, however, remained exceptions and tended to occur at lower tiers where the financial and political stakes were modest. For positions such as *Sarpanch* or *Upsarpanch*, family elders, caste groups and party panels decided who would contest. As a senior activist in Wardha remarked, 'The door opens for women, but who steps through is still decided by others.'

Across field sites in Maharashtra, interview evidence suggests that proxy was not a uniform condition but operated along a continuum. Among upper-caste and dominant OBC households, proxy often functioned as a protective mechanism that maintained household and caste control under the guise of female representation. Among marginal OBCs and *Adivasi*s, proxy more often took the form of cooperative governance, where male involvement facilitated access while women handled everyday administration. Among *Dalit* women, male relatives often mediated access to bureaucratic spaces, but as mentioned, women's upward mobility was based on ideological convictions shaped by Ambedkarite traditions. These findings suggest that while reservation triggered political entry, trajectories of governance were shaped by caste history and social exposure.

In Jharkhand, as similar dynamics unfolded its *Adivasi* struggles for self-rule, men from upwardly mobile households cultivated local legitimacy through small acts of public facilitation: helping families secure welfare benefits, arranging transport to hospitals or coordinating minor works like culvert repairs. These acts built their reputations as the 'doers' of the village and translated into tight control over who would contest. Men from such families, however, relied on patronage from entrenched political strongmen – the region's former landed '*Rajas*' who decided which households would field candidates. Male brokers from relatively higher castes associated with political parties often expected compliance, as one former SC *Mukhiya* noted:

> 'We were told to take X's support... but then we would have to do everything he said. We have never bowed down like that.'
> Former *Mukhiya*, SC, Jharkhand

Such refusals demonstrated how women negotiated moral agency within clientelist structures, even when this refusal had electoral costs. This former *Mukhiya* also underlined the continued relevance of caste in electoral management by stating that her competitor and successor followed [broker X]'s instructions, therefore she won with his support behind her. She described how local power brokers used women's mandates to sustain influence over *Panchayat* decisions. Another respondent recalled how party workers made her a ward member because she, a SC woman with an alcoholic husband who did little to support her, was seen as a pliable choice.

Among SC households, however, gender relations tended to be less hierarchical, shaped by shared struggles and the absence of rigid Brahmanical caste norms. Here, women described campaigning on foot across several villages, negotiating with *Panchayat* secretaries, and even approaching courts independently. A *Dalit Mukhiya* from Garhwa described losing an election and filing a legal challenge on her own, saying 'people told me to give up, but I wanted justice'.

Adivasi women, particularly *Santhal* women in Dumka, entered politics through collective nomination rather than as a household strategy. Villages often selected women when seats were reserved, seeing it as an assertion of *Adivasi* presence within state structures. Once elected, their learning curves were steep. A *Santhal Mukhiya* recalled being silent in her first meeting, but starting to speak in her second, gaining confidence over time. She later learned to submit written complaints when officials ignored her:

> 'At first, the BDO didn't answer my calls. Then I started giving everything in writing, and after that, the work began.'
> Current *Mukhiya*, ST, Dumka, Jharkhand

The authority of *Adivasi* women remained tempered by the expectation that decisions must align with the views of community members, particularly elders. A young *Adivasi Mukhiya* mentioned that she had contested a seat when it became reserved on behalf of her father and subsequent decisions were taken mainly by the male elders of her community. Even though she had undertaken a significant number of public works projects, she did not claim much decision-making power for herself. Even women like E.M. and M.H. who had contested seats because of their own goals of becoming significant public figures in their communities rather than their husbands, said that they contested the elections because people urged them to and that they always made decisions in consultation with community members. While many non-*Adivasi* women also claimed that they contested the elections because the community wanted them to, to underline their popularity and legitimacy, they noted that, once elected, the household unit was the major decision-maker rather than community members.

Predictably, anxieties around maintaining community boundaries shaped male mediation. A *Santhal* woman married to a non-tribal man was perceived by her villagers as proxy for a *Mukhiya* seat by her husband, who financed and controlled her campaign. Indeed, villagers viewed their marriage as a way to control governance structures despite tribal reservations. These suspicions echoed longer histories in which marriages between tribal women and non-tribal men, were seen as attempts to access land or reserved seats. While such views are shaped by patriarchy, they also stem from perceptions of the exercise of power by the husband of a non-*Adivasi Mukhiya* as an outsider to community decision-making. This can be seen alongside *Adivasi* traditions of self-governance, which have often clashed with state backed models of self-governance.

The intersecting norms of caste and ethnicity operated in other ways too. In Jharkhand, two ST women *Mukhiyas* noted that there had been attempts to remove them on grounds of incompetence. They also noted that groups that tried to file such petitions before the BDO were led by relatively upper caste men who were unhappy with their independent decision-making and wanted to regain control. Stereotypical and negative connotations associated with *Adivasis*, particularly *Adivasi* women, as incompetent and ignorant, were used to bolster such campaigns, even when one of the women was a retired school principal.

Across Jharkhand, therefore, proxy spanned a wide spectrum. In upper-caste families it ensured control; in OBC households it combined support with constraint. Among SC households it often facilitated women's self-assertion; and among Adivasis it coexisted with community-driven expectations of collective decision-making.

Yet all of these variations were underscored by financial constraints. Campaign costs always exceeded official limits, making women reliant on husbands, brothers or community networks. As one woman said bluntly, 'When we contest, who else will pay?'. The financial costs of elections often 'priced out' the poorest and most marginalised people, and those from marginalised backgrounds who were able to contest could only do so as a household unit rather than as individuals, particularly in a context where women seldom had a personal income (George, 2025). Even if they worked outside the household in some capacity, their income was too low for financial independence. As stated by Rakhi:

> 'The two have to work together to earn upward mobility. If the husband works outside the house, the wife works inside to ensure that the family is making progress. So one cannot undermine the other.'
> Currently serving her second term, *Mukhiya*, SC, Garhwa, Jharkhand

The marginal financial advantage and the freedom from full-time agricultural work that allowed such families to contest elections could be manoeuvred only at the household level: if they chose to rely on other caste groups for financial support, they risked losing autonomy. However, for upper-class families who had access to generational wealth, the aim was to consolidate and maintain their class position as a family unit through electoral participation, rather than through individual assertion by women.

4.6   Campaigning and gendered visibility

The period after nomination marked a turning point in women's political journeys across both states as they entered the physically and emotionally taxing world of door-to-door campaigning. Days began at dawn with cooking and cleaning before setting out to meet voters, usually accompanied by female relatives. After several hours of canvassing, they came home to resume domestic chores, only to campaign again in the afternoon. The 10-15 days before the election were described as the most exhausting, filled with competing pressures of household labour and public engagement. Yet, women spoke of them with pride as moments when they combined public roles with familial support and proved to themselves and others that they could straddle both worlds. Many kept their campaign posters as symbols of transformation and recognition.

For most, campaigning remained a family enterprise. Husbands often encouraged them to 'see it through' while women relatives stepped in to shoulder domestic work. Those without such support described being 'drained,' revealing how unpaid care labour undermined the very possibility of political participation. Only one Brahmin representative distanced herself from the campaign process, explaining that her husband and other men 'handled it,' as notions of respectability required her to remain at home, demonstrating how caste-coded norms of femininity continued to define acceptable public behaviour.

Caste and class differences also shaped the texture of women's campaigns. OBC and SC candidates alike canvassed on foot to connect with their constituents, but material disparities remained sharp. OBC women mentioned being able to hire vehicles to reach distant areas, while SC candidates could rarely afford such transport. For many *Dalit* women, limited mobility had a direct impact on their ability to expand political reach. As Uma observed:

> 'If I contest a district or state-level election, I'll need vehicles to cover all villages. That's beyond what we can afford.'
> Currently serving her third term, *Mukhiya*, SC, Garhwa, Jharkhand

Even though the reservation of seats opened symbolic access to politics, the unequal burden of domesticity and financial precarity curtails women's journeys – both literally and politically – within the system.

4.7   Holding office: from figurehead to leader

Once elected, women across Maharashtra and Jharkhand faced the challenge of converting symbolic authority into meaningful leadership. Although their trajectories diverged across regions and caste locations, the overall pattern remained strikingly consistent: most began in conditions of dependence on husbands, sons, fathers, secretaries, or other male intermediaries but gradually carved their own spaces for decision-making, even if within circumscribed limits. The manner of their entry shaped the pace and form of this learning. Women fielded by powerful upper-caste men or party factions typically began as figureheads, while those with prior public exposure through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), SHGs, teaching work or community activism started off more independently.

Across both states, the first and most universal hurdle was the challenge of navigating institutional systems for the first time. Many women had never entered a *Panchayat* office before the election and, given the prevailing gender norms, bolstered by poverty and low levels of education, women had little exposure to bureaucracy in general. In addition, politics and governance were not always seen as desirable careers for women, which hampered their familiarity with formal politics. A *Sarpanch* in Wardha explained:

> '**I had no knowledge in the beginning. After being elected, I met ex-*Zilla Parishad* members, studied their files, and learned.**'
> Current *Sarpanch*, OBC, Nalwadi, Wardha, Maharashtra

Some used the interval between election results and their assumption of office for self-training; others learned slowly 'on the job,' often through correction by secretaries or block officials.

In Maharashtra, training through YASHADA or NGOs like the Resource and Support Centre for Development (RSCD)[18] proved transformative for those who could attend. Several women representatives in Maharashtra who had undergone RSCD training described it as a turning point in their political journeys. As a former SC *Upsarpanch* from Nalwadi *Gram Panchayat*, Wardha, recalled:

> '**The more we opened RSCD's course books, the more we learnt about our responsibilities. We realised we had the power to demand our quotas, budgets, and whatever else was allotted to us. I used to carry my book with me to show that I had the authority to demand these things.**'
> Former *Upsarpanch*, SC, Maharashtra

Such organisations helped to compensate for irregular government training schedules and a lack of accessible information by offering detailed coursework on different aspects of *Panchayat* functioning, while building a wider network of socially and politically active women through events, seminars, conferences and WhatsApp groups. The same respondent, now a master trainer with YASHADA, credited her continued work in this field to this support:

> '**It was a blessing for me. It gave me not just confidence and self-respect, but also a way to sustain myself and my son after my husband's death. Without this work, and the two or three students I tutor, I would have had to take odd jobs in other people's homes.**'
> Former *Upsarpanch*, SC, Maharashtra

Many, however, were prevented from taking part in training by family restrictions or were simply never informed about it. In addition, Jharkhand's three-day orientation programmes were described as rushed and inadequate. 'How can one learn everything in three days?' one *Mukhiya* asked, leaving women with no option but to learn largely through practice.

The challenge was greater for SC and ST women with comparatively lower levels of education and with an experience of historical exclusion from structures of power. Even when educated, they feared being misinformed and misled by the bureaucracy (largely upper caste or working at the behest of upper castes) or being dismissed by it as incompetent. They depended, therefore, on their husbands and other male relatives to navigate such challenges.

The second and deeply intertwined challenge was negotiating the role of male relatives in governance. Across castes, they were indispensable intermediaries yet could also be controlling.

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18 RSCD: Resource and Support Centre for Development, a Maharashtra-based NGO strengthening local governance, gender equality, and community empowerment through the training of elected women representatives, *Dalit* women and *Adivasi* women.

In many upper-caste and OBC households in Maharashtra, the *Panchayat* became, in effect, an extension of the home: men handled files, liaised with officials and shaped schemes, while women provided the constitutional 'face'. A *Sarpanch* from Amravati recalled being asked to sign blank papers while her male *Upsarpanch* publicly told villagers, 'You can't speak, but I can.' Initially indebted, she eventually refused to comply, insisting decisions be taken in her presence. Her stance provoked conflict but, ultimately, earned respect. Such stories were common. An OBC *Sarpanch* in Dharashiv described enduring domestic quarrels when she began attending meetings herself: 'after a year of silence, I started going. Slowly officials began addressing me directly.' In Jharkhand, similar experiences of initial dependence were widespread:

> **'When I became *Mukhiya*, I didn't even know what to do on the first day. I learned where to go, how to get signatures, and whom to talk to...but I gradually learnt.'**
> Currently serving her third term, *Mukhiya*, SC, Jharkhand

Women's dependence on husbands and other male relatives was reinforced by limits on physical mobility, particularly when travelling at night or without access to an official vehicle. Few women drove, and unaccompanied travel carried the risk of harassment, making male accompaniment an unspoken requirement. Social legitimacy also hinged on conforming to caste-sanctioned norms of 'respectable femininity,' compelling most women, even those in leadership, to frame their public presence as undertaken with their husband's approval. With some exceptions among *Adivasi* communities, women across caste groups travelled with husbands or close male relatives to avoid moral scrutiny. As the husband of a SC *Mukhiya* put it, 'If she goes out daily while her husband sits at home, people will talk, so I accompany her,' signalling concerns about a respectability-sustained male presence in women's political work.

The line between support and control was rarely stable, and while 'supportive male kin' often enabled mobility and bureaucratic learning, it could also reinforce patriarchal decision-making. *Adivasi* women offered vivid accounts of ambivalence: one *Mukhiya* recalled being pressured by officials to take charge of a fair-price shop while her husband was away. She agreed but feared that her husband would reprimand her for the decision, although she noted that, 'Later when he understood my situation he supported me, on that occasion and many others.' Despite gradual assertions of her agency by making decisions without her husband in urgent situations, she still believed he was a better leader because of his education. Another ST respondent said her entry had been orchestrated by her father but once elected, she herself built roads and wells, displaying excellent administrative skills. Yet, she was reluctant to continue and wanted her father to 'take back the office' when her term was over and the seat was no longer reserved.

Despite these constraints, gradual shifts emerged across both states. Women increasingly refused to sign documents without reading them, questioned paperwork, or demanded to be addressed directly by officials. For some, the elected office itself eased their domestic containment: regular block visits, evening meetings and exposure to administrative routines slowly reframed family expectations and women's own self-perceptions. One Wardha woman (SC) noted, 'My husband was a great support... He helped me but never made decisions for me', proudly recalling that when she insisted on hiring a female employee, 'he himself admitted that it [the decision] was a good one.' In contrast, another interview recorded a husband answering for his wife: 'It was my decision. I explained everything to her... especially because the seat was reserved.'

Such contrasts show how the meaning of support varied sharply by caste and region. For example, caste shaped potential autonomy in Maharashtra. Upper-caste women often treated politics as a temporary duty – an extension of their husbands' or fathers' authority. However, *Dalit* and OBC women in Vidarbha and Amravati described more active participation; Ambedkarite histories helped SC women adopt a rights-based approach. Regionally, such confidence was less common in Dharashiv,

where upper-caste dominance exerted subtler but firmer control. NT/VJNT women built autonomy through labouring histories that normalised public negotiation and were often quick to learn welfare procedures, manage registers or resolve disputes, even though economic dependence made them vulnerable to male interference. The journeys of *Adivasi* women in Melghat differed again: their political participation grew from necessity rather than ideology. Patriarchal norms were less rigid, but chronic poverty, limited schooling and male outmigration compelled women to undertake governance responsibilities.

Jharkhand presented a parallel but different landscape. Upper-caste and some OBC households in Garhwa treated women's tenure as a tool to preserve family power. Yet, some OBC women with teaching experience or SHG leadership used existing social capital to assert themselves and gradually shift community perceptions. Among SC women, cooperation with husbands acted as both a necessity and enabling force. *Adivasi* women in Santhal Parganas entered office primarily through collective nomination. Their political authority was shaped by the ethic of community rather than household control. Yet, even within dominant *Adivasi* blocs, community elders exerted control. Across Jharkhand, husbands acted as intermediaries to bureaucracy. Rakhi, a SC representative, explained:

> 'He meets bureaucrats with me, informally. In official meetings, however, only I am present… I consult with him before making decisions because it is difficult to trust others.'
> Currently serving her second term, *Mukhiya*, SC, Garhwa, Jharkhand

Many relationships displayed shared governance based on dialogue. Acknowledging her authority, the husband of a SC *Mukhiya* remarked:

> 'Sometimes she tells me I shouldn't have said something… My work is practical; her work is theory and practice.'
> Rakhi's husband (SC), Garhwa, Jharkhand

Moments of crisis often catalysed shifts in confidence. In Dumka, there was an elephant attack on the *Mukhiya's* first night in office; she organised evacuation, arranged food, and contacted district officials, establishing immediate legitimacy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, another *Mukhiya* mobilised SHG networks to distribute food and manage returning migrants: 'We were told we can use disaster fund money for food grains, so we distributed that too'. Others gained recognition through everyday administrative competence in the monitoring of public works, ensuring welfare benefits, or by travelling independently between hamlets. 'I don't depend on my husband to go to the villages,' one *Santhal* woman said proudly.

Yet across both states, the burden of domestic labour remained immense. Private responsibility shaped public participation, reinforcing the expectation that women remain 'good wives and mothers' even while serving as elected officials. Women described cooking, cleaning, caring for children, and tending livestock before attending block meetings. 'I do all the household work myself,' one said, 'so no one can complain'. Across caste groups and regions and particularly among women from SC and ST backgrounds, however, women's everyday acts, such as convening women's assemblies, questioning officials, filing complaints, or asserting their right to sit in the *Sarpanch's* chair, slowly expanded their legitimacy. As one *Sarpanch* in Amravati reflected, 'In the beginning I would not sit on this chair… Now I feel extremely confident.'

Taken together, the experiences of *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women, and to a certain degree OBC women, across Maharashtra and Jharkhand reveal that political capability was cultivated gradually within the very structures of caste and kinship that constrained them. Proxy operated not as a fixed condition but as a shifting arrangement – sometimes controlling, sometimes enabling – that women negotiated

continually. Their journeys from symbolic presence to substantive leadership unfolded through daily practice, moral labour, crisis response, and incremental assertion.

4.8 Relationships with bureaucracy

Across both Jharkhand and Maharashtra, women's encounters with the local bureaucracy reveal how formal authority remained filtered through layers of institutional and social hierarchy. For most EWRs, interactions with block and district officials were intimidating, marked by condescension. As one *Mukhiya* from Jharkhand remarked:

> 'When we go to the block, the officers talk to men more easily. We have to wait longer or ask someone else to speak for us.'
> Current *Mukhiya*, ST, Dumka, Jharkhand

Still, persistence gradually led to recognition; through repeated attendance at meetings and familiarity with welfare schemes, many described 'becoming confident enough to speak in front of anyone'.

Despite such progress, relationships between EWRs and administrations was largely one-way. Respondents across Jharkhand noted that bureaucrats, particularly BDOs, issued directives, set targets and controlled the flow of funds. 'We can take our issues to them,' one woman said, 'but the final decision is always theirs'. Few mentioned preparing independent development plans, with decision-making remaining overwhelmingly top-down.

The more constant and immediate bureaucracy, however, was that of the *Panchayat* secretaries and *sevaks*,[19] who manage day-to-day administration. Women described learning their work from these permanent functionaries, whose influence often exceeded formal advisory roles. As Uma, a SC *Mukhiya* from Jharkhand explained:

> 'Earlier, when men were in power, secretaries stood up to greet them. Now they don't. They earn ₹75,000, we earn ₹20,000.[20] They are permanent; we are not. They assert their power because we depend on them to make sense of government directives.'
> Currently serving her third term, *Mukhiya*, SC, Garhwa, Jharkhand

Such accounts expose how education, class and bureaucratic tenure combine to undermine the legitimacy of EWRs in their own offices.

Similar hierarchies were evident in Maharashtra, where *Gram Panchayat* secretaries often wield disproportionate influence over inexperienced *Sarpanches*. 'Madam, just sign here, it's a routine report,' one woman was told until she realised the secretary had bypassed her authority. This bureaucratic gatekeeping neutralises elected oversight, particularly for first-time EWRs unfamiliar with administrative procedures. Nonetheless, some interventions aimed to correct these imbalances. In Wardha, a District Collector convened all local officers to ensure women *Sarpanches* were supported and shared his direct contact details for complaints – an encouraging but inconsistent example of institutional accountability.

Tensions also surfaced within the *Panchayat* itself, particularly along gender and caste lines. In a village in Wardha, the authority of a SC woman *Sarpanch* was challenged by an OBC male *Upsarpanch* who claimed leadership due to her 'inexperience'. The conflict polarised the village OBC members

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19 Servants or attendants.
20 Equivalent to $834 and $222.40 (as of 8 January 2026).

who backed the man and the *Dalit* and progressive villagers supporting the woman until block officials intervened. This underscored how women's assertion of administrative authority often unsettles not only patriarchal norms but also caste hierarchies.

Financial governance emerged as another area of vulnerability. Managing development funds exposed women to coercion, collusion and allegations of corruption. Several respondents described being pressured by male colleagues or relatives to sign inflated bills. A woman *Sarpanch* in Nagpur who demanded transparency in road construction faced retaliation through a no-confidence motion orchestrated by contractors and ward members. She survived by mobilising women's groups in her defence, a situation that revealed both the risks of integrity and the power of collective solidarity. However, such instances were rare. One *Santhal Mukhiya* who only started to speak in her second meeting progressed to filing written complaints when officials ignored her calls.

Taken together, these narratives highlight the paradox of women's formal inclusion in local governance. While reservation opened the door to office, real decision-making remained mediated by bureaucratic authority, permanent staff and caste-gender hierarchies. Bureaucracies often tended to reinforce the idea that women, especially those from *Dalit* and *Adivasi* backgrounds, were unfit to govern and needed to be dictated to rather than assuming leadership roles. Upper caste-aligned bureaucracies were also often complicit in machinations to discredit women representatives from *Dalit* and *Adivasi* backgrounds. Bureaucratic gatekeeping increased their dependence on their male relatives to navigate a world where their legitimacy was questioned.

4.9   Relationships with constituents

Across both Jharkhand and Maharashtra, EWRs described their relationship with constituents as mediated, instrumental and deeply shaped by the structural limits of *Panchayat* power. In Jharkhand, *Mukhiyas* noted that villagers often saw them as conduits for access to social benefits rather than as leaders of collective decision-making. Although many women secured electoral endorsement with community funding, their authority remained filtered through intermediaries, usually their husbands who, in turn, represented locally embedded relationships of caste and class. This dynamic reflected a wider political structure where control rested with MLAs and Members of Parliament linked to dominant families, who influenced local elections through networks of male relatives and party operatives. As a result, constituents tended to engage with elected women primarily to maximise their access to welfare schemes rather than to participate in governance decisions.

Caste hierarchies also constrained women's political legitimacy. While overt caste rejection had declined, subtle forms of exclusion persisted. SC and ST women expressed anxiety about being branded 'incompetent' or 'corrupt', a fear reinforced by instances where rival factions sought their removal on fabricated charges. As one ST *Mukhiya* explained, 'They think we cannot handle responsibility; even small mistakes are used against us.' Such experiences show how entrenched prejudices adapt to new institutional settings, undermining the authority of marginalised women in office. Yet, some women learned to navigate this with striking dignity and rhetorical intelligence. Uma, a SC *Mukhiya* from Jharkhand, offered a revealing metaphor:

> 'When the mango tree bears fruit, it bends. I too am bent like that. People may say what they want but if it concerns the *Panchayat's* work, then they must trust me.'
> Currently serving her third term, *Mukhiya* SC, Garhwa, Jharkhand

Her response disarmed critics not through confrontation but through humility that asserted moral authority. 'We want to say so much to the *Mukhiya*,' villagers told her, 'but the kind of reply she gives

leaves us speechless.' Through such exchanges, women reframed political legitimacy as grounded not in control or distance but in responsiveness and composure: the capacity to 'bend without breaking'.

Uma also noted, however, that while upper-caste constituents accepted her help in times of need, social norms of caste persisted. She invited 'everyone from all communities' to her daughter's wedding, where 'some ate, and some said they did not feel like eating,' with upper-caste constituents reluctant to eat food prepared in her house. This invocation of caste-sanctioned norms of commensality elucidates that even with political empowerment of marginalised castes, social norms of caste persisted even if only to a limited extent. Nevertheless, this incident captures a quiet transformation. Without confrontation, her inclusive act tested social boundaries and signalled incremental change in caste relations, with gestures of shared space and hospitality becoming political acts in themselves.

Everyday governance also unfolded within the rhythms of domestic life and local gender norms. Women often met constituents in their courtyards or kitchens, blurring the line between the household and public sphere. 'People come to our house anytime,' one woman said. 'Even if I am cooking or washing clothes or dishes, I stop and listen, because they have come with their problem.' Maintaining this accessibility was both a political strategy and a social expectation: refusal or withdrawal risked reinforcing the belief that women were unfit for public office. The idioms of care and efficiency became, therefore, central to sustaining legitimacy, even as they deepened the double burden of domestic and public labour.

In Maharashtra, similar dynamics unfolded through the moral scrutiny of women's public roles. Women *Sarpanches* were often held personally accountable for every grievance in the village, regardless of whether it fell within their jurisdiction. 'People speak whatever they feel like,' one lamented. 'Even if we work hard, they still blame the madam *Sarpanch*.' These narratives expose the fragility of women's public credibility, perpetually vulnerable to gossip and resentment in ways their male counterparts rarely experience. Yet, as in Jharkhand, women's endurance, their willingness to keep showing up, to respond, and to learn slowly transformed perceptions. In bending under the weight of expectations, they bore the fruit of legitimacy itself.

4.10 Political aspirations and their limits

Across Maharashtra and Jharkhand, women's narratives of political life revealed a delicate interplay between aspiration and constraint. For many EWRs, the experience of serving as *Sarpanch*, *Upsarpanch* or *Mukhiya* ignited new ambitions to recontest, climb higher in the political hierarchy, or deepen their developmental contributions. These aspirations, however, unfolded within tight limits shaped by money, mobility, caste inequality, and gendered expectations. Women's political trajectories were heavily negotiated, in a constant balancing act between public ambition and private responsibility.

In Maharashtra's Vidarbha and Marathwada regions, first-time EWRs described their tenure as a 'learning phase' – an apprenticeship in governance that built their confidence over time. Growing familiarity with bureaucratic procedures, interactions with officials, and exposure to block-level workings often prompted women to consider another term. Many SC and OBC women expressed a desire to contest unreserved seats not because they rejected reservation, but to demonstrate that their capability exceeded the confines of quota-based candidacy. As one former *Sarpanch* noted, 'Now I know how to work the system, next time I want to win on merit.' A smaller but significant number aspired to contest at the PS or *Zilla Parishad* level, while acknowledging that the 'playing field is unequal we cannot match the spending by upper castes and classes'.

Yet these aspirations rarely extended to state or national politics. High-level offices were viewed as distant terrains requiring vast financial resources, networks of patronage, and constant mobility – conditions that were incompatible with their economic constraints and domestic responsibilities. Party politics was described as an arena characterised by clientelism and male dominance, where access depended on long-term investments in patronage rather than demonstrable grassroots leadership. Therefore, the few women who had risen beyond district-level politics were seen as exceptional figures who were supported by political lineage or elite mentorship rather than being representative of a broader pattern.

A similar ambivalence shaped women's political horizon in Jharkhand. Many *Mukhiyas* and ward members gained substantial confidence during their first term, but the leap to higher office felt formidable. Campaigning across multiple villages required vehicles and money, while long hours spent away from home required resources that few possessed independently. As a result, many planned to recontest the same position rather than move upward, viewing a second term as both feasible and desirable and a chance to translate accumulated experience into more effective governance. Political ambition was shaped by pragmatism rather than lack of desire.

Individual narratives from Dumka illuminated this pattern. A young *Santhal Mukhiya* saw the role as a temporary civic responsibility rather than a political future: 'I don't want to remain in politics... I'll prepare for government exams,' she explained. Another OBC PS member aspired to join the police, but her husband insisted she aim for a teaching job 'more suitable' for women. Another ST respondent noted that she valued the recognition attached to her political role but felt invisible within block-level decision-making: 'We raise issues, but no one listens.' Her frustration with middlemen and the misuse of funds reflected a clear understanding of a systemic corruption she felt unable to resolve (see also Annex 1, case study 2).

Across both states, many women channelled their political energy horizontally towards social work, collective organising, or mentoring other elected women rather than vertically. Former representatives who chose not to run again often became leaders in SHG federations or *Mahila Sangathan*, continuing to work on social issues like alcohol abuse, access to schooling or livelihoods. For these women, elected office was a platform for cultivating social legitimacy that extended beyond formal politics. Even those who had entered office through male mediation often described their tenure as an opening that broadened their sense of what they could do.

A recurring aspiration, particularly among older and first-generation EWRs, centred on the next generation. Many spoke with pride of ensuring educational opportunities for their daughters and granddaughters – opportunities they themselves had been denied. 'Now we send girls to school too,' one woman remarked. 'Why marry them early and send them to harvest sugarcane?' While their own empowerment remained constrained, they hoped to secure a different future for younger women, one defined not by early marriage or wage labour but by schooling, vocational training and paid employment.

These aspirations existed alongside formidable barriers, including structural obstacles within political parties. While quotas opened the doors to local governance, progression to higher tiers meant navigating highly masculine patronage networks dominated by wealthier men. Party tickets were often allocated to those who could spend generously, cultivate vote banks or maintain personal loyalty to senior male leaders. *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women, lacking such networks and resources, were often bypassed. Even women given symbolic posts within party structures were expected to work 'under guidance', reaffirming gendered hierarchies. Without transparent pathways linking *Panchayat* experience to higher political careers, sustained investment in long-term political life often appeared futile.

Life-history interviews (LHIs) show that structured civil-society training and everyday governance experience can open pathways into substantive leadership. In both regions, RSCD-trained former *Sarpanches*, including ST and SC women, had moved from navigating *Panchayat* systems with minimal procedural clarity to becoming accredited trainers for *Zilla Parishads*, *Panchayat Samitis*, and state programmes, where they facilitate sessions on budgeting, *Gram Sabha* mobilisation, gender-responsive planning, legal provisions, and rights-based entitlements. Boxes 1 and 2 draw on two LHIs to capture this multiplier effect: when training ecosystems, ideological grounding, and district-level visibility intersect with women's own political agency, PRIs become not merely sites of local administration but pipelines into district, state, national and occasionally international political spaces. This is particularly true for *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women whose access to higher tiers of elected office remains structurally constrained.

Box 1 'I will not take money for work': integrity, mobilisation and upward ambition

Lalita Asaram Bethekar, 41, ST, Melghat, Maharashtra

Born and raised in Katkumbh, Lalita Bethekar's early life combined hard agricultural labour, long episodes of economic hardship, and a family culture that valued education despite poverty. As a teenager she worked as an agricultural labourer on the farms of upper-caste communities and supported her siblings' schooling. Later she funded her Master's degree by working in SHG mobilisation and the *Panchayat Samiti*.

Her political entry was unintentional: family members placed her on a village 'panel' to secure community-majority seats. Her first *Upsarpanch* election was marked by intense factional pressure, attempted vote-buying, rumours of kidnapping, and coercion from dominant upper-caste families. Yet she emerged as a decisive leader, leveraging her position to ensure zero leakage in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), reduced domestic-violence cases linked to alcohol, resisted bribes, and took action against land encroachment and liquor shops, even when the local police intimidated village women for supporting her.

As *Sarpanch* (2022–present), she expanded school infrastructure, guaranteed household water supply, improved sanitation, secured affordable government housing for 70–80 families, deepened irrigation facilities, and linked farmers to schemes to plant fruit-bearing trees. She continues to fight illegal landfills, resist caste-based interference in governance files, and enforce transparency despite bureaucratic resistance.

Lalita's political visibility grew when she led protests calling for electricity in remote hamlets and represented Melghat at Rashtrapati Bhavan,[21] where she spoke on energy access. She organised *morchas*, including a six-hour highway blockade, which earned her district-wide recognition. She has trained *Sarpanches* through RSCD programmes and is now preparing to contest the *Zilla Parishad* seat and may contest the legislative assembly elections later. Her journey shows how ST women leaders build legitimacy through integrity, confrontating corruption, and public mobilisation, rather than through proxy arrangements.

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21 The official residence of the President of India.

> **Box 2 'I travel alone to Rwanda': administrative fluency and movement-based leadership**
>
> *Sujata Taksande, 35, SC, Sewagram, Wardha, Maharashtra*
>
> The leadership of Sujata Taksande is rooted in a Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite[22] household, where her childhood was shaped by political discussion, women's public speaking, and everyday anti-caste critique. Wanting initially to enter the judiciary, she won the *Sarpanch* election when the constituency was reserved for women.
>
> Upon election, she rapidly developed a reputation for hands-on administrative competence. Her landmark achievement was resolving a decades-long drinking-water crisis by securing a ₹32-crore (equivalent to 32 million rupees, or approximately $356,000[23]) regional water-supply project through persistent follow-ups with MLAs, MPs, engineers, and the district bureaucracy. She is known for working independently, riding her own scooter late at night for emergencies, attending every meeting herself, and refusing proxy control even when male bureaucrats or political actors attempted to sideline her. Her legal education and prior training gave her confidence in routine paperwork and procedures. She said, 'I already had knowledge of these processes, so I never needed anyone's help...'
>
> Through the RSCD's BOSS course (Budget, Orders, Services and Schemes), she deepened her understanding of *Panchayat* financial procedures, statutory rules, and gender-responsive planning. A RSCD and Commonwealth local self-government forum nominated her to represent India at a global conference in Rwanda; the first time she travelled on her own, let alone to a foreign country. The recognition transformed her into one of Wardha's most visible SC women leaders, often consulted by district officials.
>
> Sujata's political understanding reflects a sharp awareness of caste, gender and community dynamics. She notes that while some questioned 'how a SC woman *Sarpanch* is working', they also recognised that 'nothing will work against her', acknowledging her competence. She distinguishes caste-based and gender-based discrimination: 'Caste discrimination happens with outsiders, but gender discrimination happens within our own community'. Her reflections also situate SC women as movement-shaped political actors: 'SC women are intelligent here... they are inspired by Phule, Shahu and Ambedkar's thoughts. They know education is very important'.
>
> Sujata's trajectory also demonstrates how reserved seats can provide an initial entry point rather than a ceiling. As she prepares to contest again from a now-general seat, she reflects: 'This time the seat is general, but I will stand for election again... I am preparing for it, and my performance has been good'.
>
> Her confidence illustrates a broader pattern among Ambedkarite women leaders who, armed with movement-based political consciousness, education and administrative fluency, imagine political futures that extend beyond the reserved category.

As noted, domestic responsibilities were another major limitation, with women primarily responsible for cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare across both states, and political work having to fit around these routines. Many representatives did not recontest because children were in critical school years, because pregnancy or ill-health demanded rest, or because the double burden had become exhausting. Family support was common but conditional on the woman not compromising her domestic obligations. Only a handful of husbands shared household duties, and such arrangements were viewed as exceptional.

Financial dependence further constrained ambition, with most women lacking independent assets and relying on family or sponsors for campaign funding. This often translated into political indebtedness and reduced autonomy. One district-level leader captured the ethical discomfort and structural exclusion resulting from this monetised political culture:'The party says you must spend a lot of money, but I don't agree. You can honour someone with a single flower.' Caste discrimination added yet another layer of limitation. While *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women could win reserved seats, their

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22 'Phule' refers to Jyotirao Phule. 'Shahu' signifies leadership and integrity and originates with Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, the Maharaja of Kolhapur. Both men, like B.R. Ambedkar, were prominent social reformers.

23 As of 8 January 2026.

authority in mixed councils was often contested. Their inputs were dismissed, their knowledge questioned, and their presence subtly undermined. *Adivasi* women, particularly in remote blocks, faced infrastructural exclusion, poor roads, weak schools and delayed fund flows, which reduced their visibility and influence. The emotional strain of fighting both gendered and caste-based hierarchies led many to leave after a single term.

Finally, psychological and normative barriers persisted. Despite growing competence, many women viewed higher-level politics as a 'rough game' requiring behaviours coded as masculine, such as aggression, strong networking, and attending late-night meetings. Families who accepted their local leadership often opposed more visible political roles, citing safety or propriety. While local leadership had become increasingly normalised, ambitious leadership remained selectively discouraged.

4.11 Discussion: understanding women's engagement in *Panchayati Raj* politics

As the findings in this section have shown, women's entry into *Panchayati Raj* politics in Maharashtra and Jharkhand unfolded within layered social and institutional contexts where caste, region, history, and household relations combined to shape opportunities and impose limits. Although experiences varied across localities and social groups, common patterns emerged, with gender norms, familial expectations and entrenched hierarchies mediating how women accessed political office, exercised authority and translated formal inclusion into everyday practice.

Contests in *Panchayati Raj* elections have been described by scholars (George, 2025) as the most competitive formal political field in India, with competition decreasing as politicians move to the upper levels. This is understandable, because reservations at PRI level have allowed for a deepening of democracy among a section of the rural underclasses from to *Dalit*-OBC backgrounds (George, 2025). This deepening has been aided by the post-independence social and economic mobility that some marginalised castes have been able to carve out for themselves, even if only to a limited extent. However, such deepening is not without contradictions.

The politicisation of inequalities and a language of constitutional rights have fuelled the emergence of a constituency that desires power and that can mobilise ranks to attain it (George 2025). Yet, such desire and mobilisation require the chosen candidates to possess 'consciousness, capacity, and experience' (George, 2025). Our research indicates that being able to access and utilise such resources in a deeply fragmented context often entailed making pragmatic choices. Marginally mobile families often pooled their resources to augment their capacities, even when this had a gendered cost.

The political empowerment of women in Indian PRIs must, therefore, be understood as integrally shaped by caste and class locations. An understanding of political empowerment in such contexts means broadening our conception of the 'political' (Anandhi and Kapadia, 2017). Politics here lies not in the direct, autonomous decision-making by women but in the space and legitimacy they can carve out for themselves within in the local fields of political competition. It also lies in the normative shifts in gendered organisation within the household that women were able to create by using such space and legitimacy. Rakhi's concluding thoughts capture this:

> 'Earlier, women would ask before doing things, but gradually a sense of coordination between the husband and wife has developed... It is primarily men's responsibility to ensure such coordination. For example, in our family my husband does not stop me from working outside. I am the *Mukhiya* but I also go and work in the fields; and I do whatever needs to be done. There is no difficulty or hesitation in that. He never questions, "Why are you doing this?" A family functions well only when there are no hierarchies between its members...'
> Rakhi, currently serving her second term, *Mukhiya*, Garhwa, Jharkhand

Once *Dalit*, *Adivasi* (and to a large extent OBC women) across both Maharashtra and Jharkhand gained legitimacy for public roles and political participation, they seldom retreated into the shadows. One was particularly emphatic about this:

> 'Once we have stepped outside the home, we will never stop going out, not even until our last breath. It is a man's seat by default but if it becomes reserved for women then we will claim the seat. We will support women — what does matter if the seat is reserved or not? With women, we will remain active; we will work, no matter what. We are involved in other areas as well... And anyway, even if we accept that we lost the election, who will look after the people? It will still be us, won't it?'
> Currently serving her second term, *Mukhiya*, Garhwa, Jharkhand

These dynamics signalled a quiet, yet incremental and contested deepening of democratic processes, rather than a process that was linear or uniformly emancipatory. Expectations about gender, household authority and caste identity continued to frame what counted as legitimate action, who could speak in public, and whose labour was recognised as political. Interviews with EWRs reveal that their political work was embedded in daily negotiations: within families, with bureaucrats and party functionaries, and across caste hierarchies that continued to determine their visibility and voice. However, these negotiations produced openings as well as constraints; they shaped strategies through which women learned to govern, from quiet brokerage to public assertion.

Our findings suggest that autonomy in governance is not a binary attribute, but a capacity cultivated through friction, repetition and strategic use of available resources. The proxy figure is neither a static emblem of subordination nor a simple failure of India's reservation policy; it is a site where structural power and women's agency coexist, producing hybrid authorities. Equally, legal mandates may have opened doors, but they rarely transformed household power or caste privilege. Proxy arrangements, therefore, reflected persistent hierarchies while providing a terrain where those hierarchies could be subtly contested.

Regional histories mattered. In Maharashtra, the legacies of reform movements and Ambedkarite mobilisation provided *Dalit* women with ideological repertoires and networks that legitimised public assertion. Vidarbha's Ambedkarite culture normalised claims to equality and offered peer support, yet agrarian distress and tribal marginality constrained mobility and time for governance. Education conferred advantages but did not dissolve patriarchal brokerage; literate SC women in Wardha could sustain their PRI presence, yet their authority remained negotiated and vulnerable when they acted decisively. Melghat's ST women, facing early marriage, limited schooling and infrastructural deprivation, entered office with minimal bureaucratic familiarity; their learning required trial and error, and mediation by officials or male kin. In Marathwada, the afterlife of princely rule, uneven land reforms, and recurring agrarian crises sustained caste-based patronage; *Dalit* and OBC women often reached office via quotas or brokers, and their legitimacy often depended on delivering visible public goods or convening women's spaces that translated care into political recognition.

Jharkhand presented contrasting but equally constraining legacies. *Adivasi* assertions, histories of resource extraction, feudal dominance, and the weak institutionalisation of local governance shaped the conditions of women's entry. While reservations brought many SC and ST women into office, norms of early marriage, domestic responsibility, respectability, and moral surveillance curtailed their mobility and public exposure. In districts like Garhwa, the absence of a strong anti-caste movement allowed upper castes to retain political and economic control, and Brahmanical gender norms continued to shape acceptable femininity. Lower-caste women often negotiated these constraints by adopting forms of 'respectable Brahmanical femininity' rather than openly challenging prevailing norms; upper-caste women, even when better educated, often reproduced those norms.

Across caste groups, education and training improved procedural competence but did not erase expectations of respectability or male mediation.

These regional variations provide a broader insight: empowerment in these contexts rarely emerged in opposition to family structures; it developed through negotiation within them. Women's political strategies rested on securing reciprocity in settings where their labour adds value only when aligned with norms of modesty and respectability. Such negotiated recognition enabled constrained yet meaningful agency: women could inhabit public authority without fully destabilising private hierarchies (Rao, 2023). Familial involvement in political life, therefore, cannot be reduced to the presence or absence of a proxy; it is part of a continuum in which dependence, negotiation and assertion coexist and mutually shape women's political journeys (see also Annex 1, case study 3).

Taken together, these narratives reveal a pattern in which women's aspirations expanded within existing social boundaries rather than transcending them entirely. Reservation opened doors, while the daily negotiation of kinship, caste and bureaucracy gradually transformed their formal inclusion into practical authority. The result is a plural, uneven politics of women's empowerment – one that demands a focus on household dynamics, caste-based power, and regional histories as much as on institutional reform.

5 Implications for policy and practice

The policy implications below reflect recurring patterns observed across field sites and are informed, where relevant, by practitioner insights, senior political interviews and women's life-history accounts. Together, they illustrate why uniform, technocratic responses to proxy participation are insufficient, and why caste- and context-responsive institutional design is crucial to strengthen women's political authority.

Building capacity and leadership pipelines: Women's effectiveness as elected representatives develops incrementally through routine administrative engagement. Initially, many first-term women rely on informal or kin-based support because of their lack of familiarity with procedures, underscoring the limits of short, compliance-oriented training. Capability-building, therefore, requires continuous, practice-oriented support that combines digital learning, on-ground accompaniment and structured opportunities to engage with budgeting, planning and procedural tasks in real time.

Peer-learning networks, particularly those embedded in SHGs or community forums, reduce isolation and support re-contestation. Practitioner insights suggest that long-term, relationship-based accompaniment models, such as RSCD's horizontal learning approach, are particularly effective for women from marginalised communities, as their confidence and competence grow through repeated exposure and reassurance. State-level initiatives experimenting with immersive training formats, such as residential programmes offered by the Bihar Institute of Public Administration and Rural Development (BIPARD), also illustrate the value of iterative learning.

Ensuring safety, mobility and institutional dignity: Women's participation is constrained by mobility restrictions, harassment and bureaucratic gatekeeping, making safety and mobility vital for political infrastructure. Context-appropriate mobility support, such as travel allowances or transport arrangements, can enhance women's capacity to perform routine administrative and supervisory functions. Maharashtra's existing provisions under the Zilla Parishads and Panchayat Samitis Act (1961) illustrate how such measures can be institutionalised (Government of Maharashtra, 1961).

Small administrative adjustments at block and district levels, such as accessible facilitation desks, trained contact points and functional complaint pathways, can reduce everyday barriers. Recognising and streamlining informal civil-society support in low-capacity districts can also create more inclusive institutional environments for EWRs.

Reducing the double burden of work and expanding political trajectories: Domestic labour continues to constrain women's political engagement and re-contestation. Addressing this means recognising care work as a structural barrier to political participation. Childcare or eldercare support during training and meetings can widen participation, while sustained engagement between election cycles has strong links to upward political mobility. Modest mentorship and re-contestation support may help expand pathways to higher tiers of local governance.

Strengthening fiscal and institutional autonomy of the PRIs: Women's authority in PRIs is tied to their access to, and control over, *Panchayat* finances. Fieldwork across Jharkhand and Maharashtra shows that financial processes are often mediated by clerks, contractors or male relatives, reinforcing dependence and proxy arrangements. Delayed honoraria, irregular fund flows and complex accounting systems also discourage women from assuming financial responsibilities.

To strengthen fiscal autonomy, the state and union governments need to improve the usability and predictability of existing systems: simplified formats in local languages, transparent fund-release

calendars, and simple, accessible summary tools that clearly show funds released, spent, and remaining under each *Panchayat* scheme. Authorising women *Sarpanches* to approve small routine expenditures, subject to ex-post verification, can expand procedural confidence. Evidence shows that even limited financial control enhances women's engagement with line departments and shifts spending priorities towards water, health and social protection (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004).

Addressing the caste-based political economy of local elections: Electoral finance remains a structural barrier to fair competition in both Maharashtra and Jharkhand, operating in caste-differentiated ways. While there are statutory expenditure limits, weak enforcement and the normalisation of informal spending gives the advantage to candidates with inherited wealth, strong caste networks and access to credit. As a result, SC and ST candidates are largely confined to reserved constituencies. The rotation of these seats also prevents marginalised representatives from consolidating electoral capital, fundraising networks or constituency presence, while dominant-caste candidates build cumulative advantage across unreserved seats.

For many marginalised women, reservations serve less as a gateway than as a protective enclosure. Campaign costs for transport, mobilisation and informal payments routinely exceed official ceilings, tying participation to household resources and male intermediaries. This dependence sustains proxy arrangements and constrains autonomy even after women are elected. Policy reform must, therefore, move beyond formal expenditure ceilings to address unequal access to resources and enforcement gaps. Recommended measures include targeted public financing or reimbursements for SC/ST candidates at the PRI level, stronger monitoring through audits and randomised verification, and the explicit scrutiny of informal expenditures that shape outcomes but evade regulation.

Supporting autonomy in proxy relationships: Proxyhood operates along a spectrum shaped by caste location, kinship norms and local political risk. The findings suggest that punitive or legalistic interventions are unlikely to transform these arrangements. Women's autonomy strengthens when institutional visibility is combined with clearly documented roles, structured speaking opportunities and consistent inclusion in *Panchayat* procedures, rather than through sanctions alone.

Recent calls to penalise proxy representatives risk flattening these relational dynamics.[24] As documented elsewhere, proxy practices are embedded in patriarchal norms, low literacy, restricted mobility, and bureaucratic gatekeeping, all of which affect first-time *Dalit* and *Adivasi* representatives in particular (Development Alternatives and UN Women 2017; Kumar and Ghosh 2024; Singh et al., 2025). Institutional interfaces that help to build confidence and accessible, non-confrontational grievance mechanisms are, therefore, more effective than sanctions in strengthening women's political agency.

Introducing institutional safeguards against caste-based political obstruction: Caste hierarchies continue to constrain elected authority in PRIs, particularly for SC and ST women. Obstruction often takes indirect and informal forms – including social and bureaucratic intimidation, community-level boycott, reputational attacks, selective scrutiny, and bureaucratic non-cooperation – typically framed as administrative or performance concerns. These practices, though formally neutral, function as institutionalised caste sanctions that undermine women's authority systematically.

Field evidence shows that allegations of incompetence or corruption are mobilised disproportionately against marginalised women, enabled by bureaucratic gatekeeping such as delayed files, withheld information and reliance on intermediaries aligned with dominant caste actors. The rotation of reserved seats intensifies this vulnerability: with offices widely understood as single-term positions,

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24 See *Report of the Advisory Committee on Transforming Women's Representation and Role in Panchayati Raj Institutions: Efforts to Eliminate Proxy Participation* (Advisory Committee on Women Pradhans, 2025) for recent policy debates on proxy participation. This study extends those discussions by foregrounding caste-differentiated political constraints and institutional design beyond technocratic compliance measures.

dominant actors have little incentive to cooperate, and obstruction is calibrated to outlast an elected woman's term through procedural stalling rather than direct confrontation.

Policy responses must treat caste-based obstruction as an accountability issue. Recommended measures include district-level protocols for grievance redress, operational linkages with legal protections against caste intimidation, administrative accountability for bureaucratic delays, and independent reviews of corruption or incompetence complaints with safeguards against misuse.

Providing sustained ecosystem support through civil society and donor engagement: Leadership pipelines are strengthened through ecosystem-level support beyond formal state training. Field evidence, particularly from Maharashtra, highlights the role of sustained accompaniment, caste–gender sensitisation, and community mobilisation by local organisations such as RSCD. Practitioner interviews reinforce that long-term, place-based support enables women to navigate administrative systems and negotiate restrictive norms more effectively than short-term training.

For donors and NGOs, this underscores the importance of multi-year, context-specific investments grounded in local political histories and caste–class dynamics. Such ecosystem-oriented approaches align with findings that women's political capability develops through sustained engagement rather than discrete skill-building interventions.

Strengthening the structural environment for women's long-term political participation: Creating an enabling environment for women's political leadership requires a focus on broader structural levers. Enforcing election expenditure limits can reduce informal pressures on first-time or less-resourced women candidates. Similarly, operationalising the Women's Reservation Bill with clearer vertical pathways across PRI tiers can strengthen longer-term political trajectories. Normalising women's public visibility and treating mobility and safety as routine components of governance infrastructure are critical for their sustained participation across electoral cycles.

Implications for future research

Future research could examine transitions from proxy-supported participation to autonomous leadership across successive terms, paying specific attention to caste, kinship and institutional design. Comparative ethnographies and action-research pilots that test innovations such as digital facilitation hubs, mobility support or simplified fiscal systems could generate actionable insights into sustaining women's political authority and leadership trajectories.

6 Conclusion

Three decades of institutional reform have placed India at the forefront of global experiments in gender-inclusive local governance. The scale of women's presence in PRIs is without precedent, and yet mediated authority and constrained mobility persist. This study demonstrates that the central question is no longer whether women enter political office, but how political authority is produced and sustained within deeply stratified social orders.

By examining women's governance trajectories in two distinct regional contexts, the analysis reframes proxy leadership not as an aberration or failure of democratisation, but as a relational feature of political institutions that operate within caste- and kinship-structured societies. Authority in such settings is rarely exercised through formal office alone; it is negotiated through social relations, institutional interfaces and the everyday practices of governance. Women's political agency, therefore, emerges as a contingent and processual accomplishment shaped by access to learning environments, organisational support and the capacity to navigate mediation over time.

The findings underscore a broader insight that is relevant beyond India: gender quotas can democratise access to political space without dismantling the social architectures that regulate women's legitimacy and leadership. Where institutional pathways to higher office remain narrow and party systems reproduce existing hierarchies, local government becomes a site of both political possibilities and of ceilings. In this context, local institutions function less as pipelines to elite power and more as arenas where political skills, public authority and civic recognition are forged incrementally.

For global debates on women's political participation, this study cautions against binary evaluations of empowerment and exclusion. It highlights the need to move beyond measuring representation toward analysing how governance systems enable or constrain learning, authority and political continuity. Interventions to strengthen women's political leadership must, therefore, extend beyond electoral design to encompass the social and institutional conditions under which authority is exercised in practice.

Ultimately, democratic deepening depends not only on who occupies office, but on whether political systems create sustained opportunities for marginalised actors to convert their presence into durable authority. Recognising the negotiated nature of political agency offers a more realistic and analytically robust framework for understanding women's leadership in contexts marked by entrenched inequality, and for designing governance reforms that move beyond symbolic inclusion toward meaningful participation.

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Annex 1: case studies

Case study 1 SC (Ambedkarite): proxy enables accompaniment; authority is earned through procedure

Procedural literacy generates authority

Pradnya Chahande (SC, *Mahar*–Buddhist)
Former Upsarpanch, Nalwadi Gram Panchayat, Wardha district, Maharashtra (2014–2019); currently Master Trainer, YASHADA

Pradnya Chahande's life history shows that the reservation of seats and posts for SC women does not guarantee political authority. That authority only becomes usable when they acquire procedural literacy, establish their credibility with bureaucratic institutions, and learn to navigate everyday patriarchal resistance within *Panchayati* structures. Pradnya's case clarifies a key analytic distinction in this study: male involvement can be an enabler rather than a form of substitutive proxy and treating all male presence as being proxy obscures the ways in which authority is learned and exercised in caste- and region-specific contexts.

As an Ambedkarite *Mahar*–Buddhist woman in Wardha, Pradnya entered public life with her civic confidence shaped by histories of *Dalit* mobilisation, despite monetised open-category politics that constrained her upward mobility. Her entry into office was mediated through local networks, but her authority expanded through practice. Structured, rule-based training rather than symbolic inclusion proved decisive in converting her holding of a formal office into enforceable power.

Raised in a household committed to education and public engagement, Pradnya had been exposed to institutional interaction in a way that is not common among SC women in agrarian contexts. In 2014, she campaigned for, and won, a ward seat reserved for SC women. She was later selected as *Upsarpanch*, even though that post was unreserved, prompting resistance from male members who argued that women should not hold both of the top positions, given that the *Sarpanch* seat was reserved for a ST woman.

At first, both she as the *Sarpanch* faced routine delegitimisation: male members bypassed the women and interacted directly with the *Panchayat* Secretary, framing the women's authority as symbolic and reservation-driven. Pradnya responded by negotiating cooperation pragmatically: managing egos, distributing recognition and asserting her authority incrementally rather than through direct confrontation.

Pradnya also found that holding office meant major financial costs. In addition to her governance responsibilities, she had to deal with unpaid care work and her tuition classes. As a result of the heavy workload, she stopped her tuition work, resulting in income loss. Her experience highlights how women's political participation often relies on personal sacrifice rather than institutional support.

A turning point came through her enrolment in RSCD's BOSS course, which provided applied knowledge of budgets, orders, and procedures. As Pradnya noted, as she learned the rules, she understood her responsibility. Procedural literacy reduced her dependence on intermediaries and enabled her to engage officials in bureaucratic language. Officials who had earlier dismissed women leaders began to respond once she demonstrated her command over files and entitlements.

She links this competence to concrete outcomes: resolving long-pending housing cases; expanding scheme access among SC and ST households; and confronting illegal fee extraction despite intimidation. Authority, in her view, became visible through delivery rather than symbolism.

Following her husband's death during the COVID-19 pandemic, Pradnya's cross-caste public legitimacy enabled her transition into a training role at YASHADA. From this position, she critiques blanket criminalisation of 'sarpanch pati' practices as punitive without addressing structural constraints such as safety, transport and institutional access.

What this case study shows: It underscores the enduring power of caste. SC women, Pradnya notes, rarely occupy *Sarpanch* positions in unreserved seats because of monetised competition and upper-caste default claims. Political mobility depends less on competence than on money, networks and party backing, while political authority is not guaranteed through the holding of office alone.

Case study 2 ST (*Adivasi*): authority gained through movement, but breaking through the ceiling takes money

From women's meetings to mass mobilisation

Munni Hansda (ST, *Santhal*)
Former Zilla Parishad Member, Dumka district, Jharkhand (2010–2015)

Munni Hansda's life history represents a pathway into political authority that precedes formal office. Her leadership emerged through decades of collective organising, rights literacy and the confrontation of extraction and corruption. At the same time, her trajectory reveals a central structural constraint: credibility produces authority, but money and party infrastructure shape political mobility, particularly beyond the village level.

Born into poverty in Bandarpani village, Munni's childhood involved daily wage labour, forest work and early responsibility after the death of her father. Despite having only fragile schooling, she continued her education beyond marriage, completing Class 12. Her husband, a graduate engaged in the social sector, supported her mobility: support that expanded her exposure without undermining her authority.

Munni's public work began through NGOs in the late 1980s, initially around livelihoods and skills. Over time, it deepened into organising spaces where women could meet and speak collectively in contexts where even gathering was contested. The backlash for the women participants included routine ridicule, domestic violence and attempts to shut down their meetings. Women responded collectively, reframing participation as a shared right rather than individual defiance.

Across 20–25 villages, sustained mobilisation created organisational legitimacy long before state programmes arrived. Munni argues that later SHG expansion relied on this earlier groundwork. Her authority extended into governance through rights literacy, the Right to Information Act, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), pensions and administrative confrontation. Crucially, authority preceded office: she learned to document violations, escalate complaints and compel state response before contesting elections.

Her leadership became politically consequential during resistance to coal mining. Framing mobilisation through *jal–jungle–zameen*, she insisted on *Gram Sabha* consent. Protests escalated; Munni was jailed and vilified, yet land transfers were blocked for years. In her account, legitimacy was earned by standing with communities during moments of risk.

In 2010, villagers urged her to contest for *Zilla Parishad* to prevent elite capture and, despite her limited resources, she won. As an elected representative, she emphasised accessibility, rapid response, and escalation through written complaints, intervening in welfare exclusions and corruption.

Her later electoral defeats, however, illustrate the strength of the existing ceiling. She lost narrowly to a dynasty-backed candidate with greater spending power. Her credibility could not offset booth-level mobilisation and cash distribution. Subsequent attempts reproduced this pattern, shaped by party gatekeeping and financial asymmetries.

Munni views the reservation of seats and posts as necessary but insufficient. Without addressing money and party control, movement-based women leaders have limited political horizons.

What this case study shows: For Adivasi women, authority can be built through collective struggle, and rights work outside formal institutions. Political mobility, however, remains constrained by monetised electoral economies rather than household proxies.

Case study 3 SC (non-Ambedkarite): proxy as continuum; SHGs as political infrastructure

Learning leadership within the family, negotiating power in public

Kumari Rekha (SC, *Chamar/Ravidas*)
Mukhiya, Kustandi Panchayat, Nagar Utari block, Garhwa district, Jharkhand (elected 2022)

Kumari Rekha's life history illustrates a hybrid pathway into political leadership: reservation-enabled entry mediated through household strategy, followed by a gradual expansion of agency through governance practice and women's collectives. Her case shows why proxy persists not only as a result of male control, but because mobility, legitimacy and reputational risk continue to regulate women's public authority.

Rekha completed her BA after marriage with family support. Her first electoral attempt in 2010 failed, which she believes was because her village was not yet ready for a young SC woman leader. Political capital at the time lay largely with her husband. Legitimacy, in this context, was cultivated over time rather than delivered through education alone.

From 2016 onward, Rekha's apprenticeship deepened through SHGs. As a cluster-level leader coordinating 20–30 groups, she gained visibility, voice and non-party networks across hamlets. The SHGs functioned as political infrastructure, creating legitimacy beyond kinship and caste. Villagers increasingly addressed her directly as the authority-holder, even when her husband was present.

When the *Mukhiya* seat was reserved for SC women in 2022, Rekha's household strategy shaped her entry, but her electoral success rested on her accumulated networks. Governance involved welfare delivery, dispute mediation and sustained administrative follow-up. Her integrity was emphasised as political capital in a context where corruption is assumed.

Yet proxy dynamics remain visible. Her husband continues to interpret party politics and caste arithmetic, while Rekha increasingly performs day-to-day governance. At first, accompaniment facilitated learning and protected her reputation. Over time, however, she reports greater independent engagement with officials. This reflects movement along a continuum from dependence to supported autonomy rather than a complete exit from proxy.

Her mobility constraints remain moral as well as physical. Night travel and unaccompanied movement invite scrutiny, making accompaniment a signal of respectability that allows her governance work to proceed.

What this case study shows: For SC women in Jharkhand, proxy operates as a continuum. SHGs enable legitimacy and voice beyond kinship, but money, party gatekeeping and moral surveillance continue to limit upward mobility.

Case study 4 Upper caste: respectability, normalised proxy, and constrained voice

Learning to speak out

Jayashree Birajdar (General/unreserved category)
Former Gram Panchayat Member, Jevali village, Dharashiv district, Maharashtra (2012–2016); later Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) worker

Jayashree Birajdar's life history captures a caste-inflected paradox: upper-caste women often possess material security and education yet face tighter regulation of their mobility and voice through respectability norms. Her account shows how proxy governance is most socially acceptable and least contested within dominant-caste contexts.

Jayashree's public engagement began through a women's organisation addressing alcoholism and violence. At first, speaking publicly felt transgressive in male-dominated spaces. Organisational backing allowed her to move gradually from listening to questioning and public confrontation. Authority emerged through repetition rather than formal designation.

Her organising focused on alcoholism, domestic violence and women's health, with trust built through sustained engagement and patient persuasion. The backlash included explicit mockery, moral accusations, and threats that she dealt with through a mix of persuasion and formal complaints. While alcohol consumption reportedly declined, Jayashree emphasises that the deeper change was women learning to speak collectively about private suffering.

Jayashree draws a sharp caste contrast. SC women often joined collective action more readily once trust was established, while general-category women hesitated despite their higher education. For them, honour and respectability norms rendered public visibility morally risky.

Her own mobility required household consent. When journalists approached her, they first sought her husband's permission. His support enabled participation, illustrating how women's authority in dominant-caste households is still mediated through family sanction.

Elected in 2012 as a *Gram Panchayat* member, Jayashree attributes her success to trust built through social work. In office, however, decision-making remained male-dominated. Procedural training enabled her to question missing earmarked funds but also provoked backlash.

Her account provides a clear description of normalised proxy governance. The *Sarpanch* was a woman from the general category, yet her husband controlled the functioning of the *Panchayat* without stigma. Male substitution was treated as legitimate within respectability regimes.

After her term, Jayashree became an ASHA worker, framing this as continued public service. While this role involves less formal power, it has enabled sustained relational change, with women now seeking her support privately.

What this case study shows: In upper-caste contexts, proxy governance is normalised through honour regimes that penalise women's public challenge. Authority is produced slowly through organising and procedural knowledge but remains tightly constrained by respectability norms even when formal representation exists.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms.

ALIGN Programme

ODI Global
4 Millbank
London SW1P 3JA
United Kingdom
Email: **align@odi.org.uk**
Web: **www.alignplatform.org**

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