



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Political Science

EMPOWERING WOMEN IN PANCHAYATS: STRENGTHENING INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE IN NAMSAI DISTRICT, ARUNACHAL PRADESH

KEY WORDS: *Political Participation, Women's Representation, Grassroots Governance, PRIs, Inclusive Governance.*

Dr. Chow Ananda Chiring

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Venerable Uktara Bethany College, Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh-792103.

Oyi Tali

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Mahabodhi Lord Buddha College, Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh, 792103

ABSTRACT

Political participation is essential for democratic decentralisation, enabling citizens to engage in governance and policymaking. Despite their significant presence, women often face barriers to political involvement, limiting their representation. Historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu championed women's contributions, yet leadership challenges persist. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), rooted in India's traditional governance, evolved through British-era modifications and post-independence reforms, leading to a three-tier system in 1958. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 reinforced decentralisation by reserving seats for women, promoting greater engagement. Arunachal Pradesh's traditional village councils have long ensured governance while maintaining cultural harmony, with the Dying Ering Committee's 1965 recommendations influencing PRI structures. Initially, a four-tier system, PRIs transitioned to three tiers in 1972, and the 73rd Amendment strengthened inclusivity by reserving seats for Scheduled Tribes and women, fostering transparency and broader participation. The 2018 Panchayati Raj Amendment streamlined PRIs into a two-tier system, with the 2020 elections marking a milestone in local governance. Namsai district, established in 2014, exemplifies tribal integration into grassroots governance, with its first PRI election in 2020 showcasing increased political participation, particularly among women. Despite ongoing challenges, tribal women play a crucial socio-economic role, contributing to sustainable development. This paper examines women's participation in Panchayats, identifies barriers to empowerment, analyses political involvement, and emphasizes PRIs' role in advancing gender equality in Namsai district.

INTRODUCTION

Political participation is vital for fostering inclusive and equitable governance within a framework of democratic decentralisation. It involves diverse forms of citizen engagement in electoral processes and policy-making, ensuring their voices and aspirations are adequately represented. Often termed "political involvement," it encompasses voluntary actions through which individuals contribute to selecting leaders and influencing public policies, either directly or indirectly (Biswas, 2015). Similarly, the participation and representation of women in the political arena are widely acknowledged as crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in modern society. Despite women constituting 48.9 per cent of India's population, their involvement and representation within the country's democratic framework face persistent challenges in attaining equitable political engagement. Opportunities for women in administration and decision-making remain limited. While progress has been made, significant barriers to leadership roles persist. Mahatma Gandhi notably highlighted the invaluable contributions of women during the freedom movement.

After independence, figures like Sarojini Naidu played pivotal roles in shaping the Constitution. However, despite constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity for all, including women, a gap remains between these aspirations and their realization (Hoque, 2020). To begin with, the concept of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is deeply rooted in India's traditional governance system, where village councils, or Panchayats, historically played a vital role in local administration. The formal establishment of Panchayati Raj during British rule marked the beginning of a structured approach to local self-governance. Over time, PRIs have become a cornerstone of India's democratic framework, emphasizing the importance of local participation in governance. The tradition of self-governance in Indian villages dates back to the Vedic era, with historical records attesting to its longevity. In modern India, political development initially operated on a two-tier system comprising the Central and State governments, but the need for decentralization became apparent. The Balwant Rai Mehta

Committee's recommendation for the decentralization of power and responsibilities was approved by the National Development Council in January 1958, leading to the introduction of a three-tier system of rural local governance, formally inaugurated on October 2, 1959, in Nagaur, Rajasthan, by Prime Minister Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1977, the Ashok Mehta Committee was established to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), recommending a shift from the three-tier system to a more efficient two-tier structure. However, these suggestions were not widely adopted by the states. Throughout the 1980s, various initiatives were undertaken to reinforce and empower PRIs, with the goal of improving local governance and encouraging public participation. A pivotal moment arrived in 1992 under the Narasimha Rao Government, when the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was introduced, reserving one-third of seats in PRIs for women. This move was aligned with Article 15(3) of the Indian Constitution, which allows the state to make special provisions for women, emphasizing their vital role in promoting active involvement in social, economic, and political spheres across the nation (Swain, 2012).

The Development of Local Self-Governance in Arunachal Pradesh

Before the Panchayati Raj system was introduced in Arunachal Pradesh, governance within communities relied heavily on Traditional Village Councils. These councils, guided by customary laws, played a vital role in overseeing social, economic, and political development, ensuring the well-being and harmony of the community. These councils functioned not only as administrative entities but also as guardians of local customs and traditions, ensuring governance remained deeply rooted in the community's cultural heritage. They played a vital role in local governance and decision-making by offering a platform for collective discussion and action, while also nurturing a strong sense of shared accountability within the community. In 1964, the Dying Ering Committee was established and played a pivotal role in advocating for democratic decentralization in Arunachal Pradesh. In its report submitted in January 1965, the Committee proposed implementing the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) system to strengthen local governance and

empower rural communities. It suggested a four-tier structure comprising the Gram Panchayat at the village level, Anchal Samiti at the circle level, Zila Parishad at the district level, and Agency Parishad at the agency level. The government accepted these recommendations, with certain modifications, in 1967, marking a significant milestone toward a more inclusive and decentralized governance framework in the state. In 1969, Arunachal Pradesh witnessed the establishment of Panchayat bodies, marking the creation of its first modern political institutions within the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). This landmark development played a crucial role in connecting isolated tribal communities to grassroots political processes. The Panchayati Raj system was introduced to unify and streamline the region's diverse political practices, fostering integration with the broader Indian polity. By decentralizing power from the central government to the local level, this initiative not only strengthened governance at the grassroots but also gave Arunachal Pradesh a unique political identity, shaping its contemporary political landscape. With the transition to Union Territory status in 1972, NEFA was renamed Arunachal Pradesh, and the governance structure shifted from a Four-Tier to a Three-Tier system by removing the Agency Parishad level. The introduction of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 brought a new framework for participatory village-level development, effectively mobilising tribal communities and fostering political awareness. Article 243(D) provided for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and women; however, since Arunachal Pradesh has no SC population, the reserved seats are allocated to STs and women. This inclusive approach has empowered local communities, with a particular focus on women, to actively engage in governance and contribute to development initiatives. By promoting decentralised decision-making, it has strengthened transparency and accountability, fostering a sense of ownership within communities. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have played a vital role in driving sustainable development and cultivating a democratic and inclusive political culture. This approach not only fortifies the democratic framework but ensures that development efforts are attuned to the collective aspirations and needs of the community, advancing unity and progress (Siga, 2015). To enhance local governance through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Arunachal Pradesh introduced a two-tier Panchayati Raj structure by passing the Panchayati Raj Amendment Bill of 2018. This move complies with the provision permitting states with a population of less than 20 lakhs to adopt a two-tier system for their PRIs (Gyati, 2011).

Women In Panchayati Raj Institutions

Article 243(D) of the Indian Constitution provides for the reservation of one-third of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and one-third of Chairperson positions at all levels for women. Many states, such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tripura, and Uttarakhand, have expanded this reservation to 50 percent. The government has approved a proposal to further enhance women's reservation in Panchayats to 50 per cent, with a constitutional amendment bill introduced in Parliament. The Parliamentary Standing Committee has suggested that reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) should align with their proportion within the rural population rather than the overall population. A proposed amendment to the pending bill seeks to incorporate this recommendation. However, there are currently no plans to introduce quotas for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) or minority women within the enhanced reservation. Additionally, Article 243(D)(6) specifies that state legislatures are responsible for determining reservation for backward classes of citizens. Since Part IX of the Constitution does not provide for religion-based reservations for women, such measures cannot be implemented through constitutional amendments. (PIB, 2011).

Review Of Literature

Biswas (2017) examined the political participation of women in Gram Panchayats, focusing on Silinda 1 No. Gram Panchayat. The study found that although reservations increased women's representation, many entered politics due to external pressure rather than personal ambition. Women leaders contributed to local governance, engaging in economic planning, agriculture, health monitoring, and education. However, systemic challenges persisted, requiring broader societal support for effective participation. The research concluded that constitutional provisions alone were insufficient, and a more inclusive environment was necessary for decentralized development.

M. Kaye, (2021) examined the role of Panchayati Raj institutions in empowering women in East Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. It highlighted the historical evolution of local self-governance, the impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, and the challenges faced by women in political participation. The research underscored that while reservations for women had facilitated their entry into governance, decision-making remained largely influenced by male counterparts. The findings suggested the need for continuous training, awareness programs, and policy interventions to strengthen women's role in Panchayati Raj institutions.

Komow, Chiring, and Deb (2024) studied women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Lohit and Namsai districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Their research found that female political participation had increased over the years, with Lohit district witnessing women surpass men in Gram Panchayat seats by 2013. Despite this progress, structural barriers such as gender roles, economic dependence, and societal norms continued to limit women's advancement in higher governance positions. The authors recommended targeted interventions, including leadership training and economic empowerment, to further enhance gender equality in governance.

Chiring and Komow (2024) examined women's empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Namsai District, Arunachal Pradesh. The study highlighted the impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), which reserved 33% of seats for women in PRIs, encouraging their political participation. Findings indicated that women's representation in PRIs exceeded the reserved quota, and their involvement positively influenced social and political activities. However, socio-cultural barriers persisted, necessitating training programs, gender-specific policies, and financial support. The authors concluded that women's growing presence in PRIs enhanced their socio-political standing, though continued efforts in policy and education were required for genuine empowerment.

Chiring and Komow (2024) examined the awareness and participation of Gram Sabha members in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Namsai District, Arunachal Pradesh. Their research found that most members were aware of PRI functions, voted regularly in elections, and believed the elections were fair. However, they noted that political parties influenced outcomes more than individual candidates. While Gram Sabha meetings were held whenever necessary, active participation and suggestion-giving varied among members. The study recommended awareness campaigns, voter education, and reducing political influence to enhance grassroots governance.

Inference From The Literature Review

While reservations have increased women's political participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), many still enter politics due to external pressure rather than personal ambition, and decision-making remains largely male-dominated. Persistent structural barriers such as gender

roles, economic dependence, and societal norms continue to limit women's political advancement, despite some regions surpassing reserved quotas. Women's presence in governance has had a positive impact, yet socio-cultural challenges necessitate targeted interventions like leadership training, gender-specific policies, and financial support to ensure genuine empowerment. Additionally, Gram Sabha members actively participate in elections, but political parties often exert greater influence than individual candidates, highlighting the need for voter education and awareness campaigns. Overall, while progress is evident, constitutional provisions alone are insufficient broader societal support, continuous training, and inclusive policies are essential for meaningful empowerment and decentralized development.

Objectives:

- i). To assess the extent and nature of women's participation in Panchayats.
- ii). To identify social, cultural, and structural challenges limiting genuine empowerment.
- iii). To analyse Women's Political Participation.
- iv). Emphasise the role of Panchayats in achieving broader gender equality goals.

Profile Of The Study Area

Namsai officially became a separate district from Lohit in 2014, with its headquarters located in Namsai. The district consists of five administrative circles: Lekang, Namsai, Piyong, Lathao, and Chongkham. It is primarily inhabited by the Tai-Khamti and Singpho tribes, along with communities such as Adi, Galo, Mishing, Adivasis, Deories, Kacharies, and Morans. As per the 2011 Census of India, Namsai had a population of 95,950, with 14.85% living in urban areas and 85.15 per cent in rural regions. In terms of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Namsai District is divided into five Gram Panchayat Blocks: Lekang, Upper Lekang, Nigroo, Namsai, and Chongkham. With a voter base of 38,033, the district held its first PRI election as an independent entity in 2020. This election followed the enactment of the Arunachal Panchayati Raj Amendment Act of 2018, which introduced a two-tier governance system. (About District, n.d.)

Table 1.1: Demographic Overview of Namsai Circle (2011 Census)

Circle	Population				Literacy Rate		
	Male	Female	Total	Sex ratio	Male	Female	Total
Lekang	14264	13955	28219	978	67.53	53.05	72.40
Namsai	14079	12786	26865	908	65.44	53.18	71.69
Piyong	5444	5037	10481	925	45.19	33.08	49.86
Lathao	4353	4037	8390	927	48.63	38.25	53.97
Chongkham	11,716	10,279	21,995	877	59.98	43.25	62.97

Source: Retrieved from <https://www.censusindia.co.in/subdistricts/circle-lohit-district-arunachal-pradesh-259> Accessed on 22/08/2024.

The 2011 Census data for Namsai Circle, Arunachal Pradesh, highlights significant demographic and literacy trends across different areas. Lekang, the most populous region, had 28,219 residents and a sex ratio of 978 females per 1,000 males, showing a more balanced gender distribution than Chongkham, which had the lowest sex ratio at 877 females per 1,000 males. Namsai, the district headquarters, recorded 26,865 people, with a lower sex ratio of 908 females per 1,000 males. In terms of literacy, Lekang led with 72.40 per cent, followed by Namsai at 71.69 per cent, while Piyong (49.86 per cent) and Lathao (53.97 per cent) lagged, reflecting educational challenges. Across all circles, male literacy rates were consistently higher than female literacy rates, signalling a gender gap in education. This data highlights the need for targeted educational initiatives, particularly in Piyong and

Lathao, to improve literacy and bridge gender disparities.

Table 1.2: Gram Panchayat Profile Of Namsai District (2020)

Sl. No	Name of Gram Panchayat	Total No. of Gram Panchayat	Number of Gram Panchayat Segments	Number of Women GPM	No. of Women GPC
1	Lekang	21	96	33	07
2	Upper Lekang	22	117	37	09
3	Nigroo	20	82	28	13
4	Namsai	34	164	55	25
5	Chongkham	19	114	48	09
Total		116	573 Men - 307 (53.8) Women - 264 (46.2)	254 (56.0 %)	63 (54.0%)

Note: Gram Panchayat Members (GPM) and Gram Panchayat Chairperson (GPC). *2 GPM seats vacant Source: As per latest data 2024 from Official Data of Panchayati Raj Department, DC Office, Namsai.

The Gram Panchayat Profile of Namsai District (2020) highlights the distribution of Panchayats and gender representation in governance. The district has 116 Gram Panchayats, with a total of 573 segments. Among them, men constitute 307 members (53.8 per cent), while women make up 264 members (46.2 per cent), reflecting a fairly balanced representation. Notably, 254 women (56.0 per cent) hold Gram Panchayat Member (GPMs) positions, and 63 women (54.0 per cent) serve as Gram Panchayat Chairpersons (GPCs), emphasising progress toward women's leadership in local governance. The largest Gram Panchayat, Namsai, comprises 34 Panchayats and 164 segments, with 55 women GPMs and 25 women GPCs, showcasing strong female participation. Lekang and Upper Lekang also exhibit considerable representation, while Nigroo and Chongkham maintain a moderate presence. This data suggests a growing role for women in local governance, potentially influencing decision-making and community development.

Women In Panchayati Raj Institutions In Arunachal Pradesh

Tribal women in the northeastern region of India enjoy equal privileges with men and play vital roles in socio-economic activities throughout their lives. Although their understanding of gender equality differs from other regions, they face challenges, as men often retain authority and make key decisions, despite the significant contributions of women (Komow, Chiring & Deb, 2024). In Arunachal Pradesh, the NEFA Panchayati Raj Regulation of 1967 governed seven elections held between 1969 and 1992, during which women's representation remained notably low, with only one woman elected in 1987 and three in 1992 at the Anchal Samiti level. Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, the Arunachal Government introduced the Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Ordinance in 1994, later renamed the Arunachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act in 1997, which came into effect on November 14, 2001. This Act marked a significant milestone by reserving 33 percent of seats for women, leading to Panchayat elections in 2003, 2008, and 2013 under its framework. In 2018, the governance structure was further revised with the adoption of a two-tier Panchayat system, replacing the previous three-tier model, and the 2020 elections were conducted under this new structure (Yadav, 2017).

Research Methodology

This study utilised both primary and secondary data, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive and balanced analysis, thereby enabling a thorough exploration of the subject matter. For primary data,

the researcher employed simple random sampling along with stratified sampling techniques to gather direct insights. A total of 50 samples were collected from women representatives, evenly distributed across five Panchayat blocks, with 10 participants from each block. This approach ensured a representative and diverse set of perspectives. Secondary data was sourced from official records, academic journals, and other credible publications, providing valuable context and reinforcing the findings derived from primary data. This comprehensive approach facilitated a thorough exploration of the research topic.

Table 1.3: Do Women Representatives Receive Equal Treatment To Men In Your Society?

Yes	No
34 (68.0 %)	16 (32.0%)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

The data indicates that 68 per cent of respondents believe women receive equal treatment to men in society, whereas 32 per cent feel that there is still disparity. This suggests that, while a majority recognise progress toward gender equality in representation, a significant portion still perceives challenges and inequalities. The 32 per cent who responded No highlight areas where systemic biases, societal norms, or institutional barriers may still exist.

Table 1.4: Do You Advocate For Greater Women's Empowerment In Society?

Yes	No
50 (100.0%)	00

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

The data shows unanimous support for greater women's empowerment in society, with 100 per cent of respondents advocating for it. This indicates a strong collective recognition of the importance of gender equality and the need for women to have equal opportunities in social, economic, and political spheres.

Table 1.5: Has Education Empowered Women To Participate In Panchayat Elections Actively?

Yes	No
50 (100.0%)	00

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

The data indicates unanimous agreement that education has empowered women to actively participate in Panchayat elections, with 100 per cent of respondents affirming this. This strong consensus highlights the critical role education plays in enabling women to engage in local governance and decision-making processes.

Table 1.6: Does Electing A Representative Depend More On The Political Party Than On The Candidate's Capability?

Yes	No
14 (28.0%)	36 (72.0%)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

The data suggests that 72 per cent of respondents believe that electing a representative depends more on the candidate's capability than on the political party. Meanwhile, 28 per cent feel that the political party plays a bigger role in determining election outcomes. This indicates that, for the majority, leadership qualities, experience, and individual merit are more influential factors than party affiliation when selecting a representative. However, the 28 per cent who prioritise the political party suggest that party ideologies, policies, and established networks still hold significant weight in elections.

Table 1.7: Do You Observe An Enhancement In The Inclusion Of Women In The Gram Panchayat?

Yes	No
45 (90.0%)	05 (10.0%)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

The data indicates that 90 per cent of respondents observe an enhancement in the inclusion of women in the Gram Panchayat, while 10 per cent feel that there hasn't been significant progress.

Table 1.8: Does Women's Participation In PRI Encourage Them To Become More Involved In Social, Community, And Political Activities?

Yes	No
50 (100.0)	00

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

The data reveals unanimous agreement among respondents, 100 per cent believe that women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) encourages them to become more engaged in social, community, and political activities

Table 1.9: Do Male Elected Representatives Fully Support You?

Yes	No
39 (78.0%)	11 (22.0%)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

The data reveals that 78 per cent of respondents believe male elected representatives provide full support, while 22 per cent feel that such support is insufficient. The majority suggests that male leaders are largely engaged and cooperative, contributing to a more inclusive governance structure. However, the 22 per cent who feel unsupported indicate that further efforts may be needed to ensure equitable leadership dynamics and sustained progress in representation.

Major Findings From The Data Analysis

The data highlights significant progress in gender equality and women's empowerment, though some challenges remain. Education has been a driving force in increasing women's political participation, while Panchayati Raj Institutions have further encouraged their involvement in governance and community activities. Voters largely prioritise a candidate's competence over party affiliation, and women's representation in Gram Panchayats has seen notable improvement. Male representatives are generally supportive, yet there is room for more balanced leadership dynamics. While progress is evident, sustained efforts are essential to ensure inclusivity and fairness in governance.

Suggestions

The researcher has suggested that to further enhance women's participation in governance and address existing challenges, several key strategies can be implemented. These suggestions focus on promoting gender equality, strengthening leadership opportunities, and fostering inclusive political environments. By prioritising education, equitable representation, and collaborative leadership, meaningful progress can be achieved in empowering women across all levels of governance. Implementing policies that ensure equal treatment, creating mentorship programs to support women in leadership roles, and encouraging male representatives to actively promote gender-inclusive policies are crucial steps toward achieving this goal. Expanding educational access and conducting political literacy programs will also play a significant role in preparing women for active engagement in governance.

CONCLUSION

While progress has been made in advancing gender equality and women's participation in governance, there are still areas that require attention. Education continues to drive women's

empowerment, helping them engage more actively in leadership and decision-making. Panchayati Raj Institutions have played a key role in encouraging broader political and social participation among women. Though most voters prioritise a candidate's competence over party affiliation, party influence remains a factor in electoral outcomes. Women's representation in Gram Panchayats has increased, but further initiatives are needed to ensure sustained inclusion. While male representatives generally offer support, advancing stronger collaboration and equitable leadership remains essential. By strengthening policies, expanding educational and political literacy programs, and promoting inclusive governance, meaningful and lasting progress can be achieved in empowering women across all political and social leadership levels.

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