

Women Political Participation in Panchayat Elections in Selected Districts of Bihar

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Abstract

This paper examines the character, scale, and factors of politics among women that take part in Panchayat elections among the five districts of Bihar, that is, Patna, Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Nalanda, and Vaishali. The main aim is to find out the effect of introduction of 50 percent reservation policy by the Bihar government in 2006 on women political representation in different levels of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The research design is descriptive-analytical research design, wherein the researcher uses secondary data in form of State Election Commission of Bihar, Election Commission of India, Census of India, and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. The hypothesis is that the policy of reservation has greatly improved the quantitative representation of women yet they are still limited in their substantive representation due to the socio-economic and patriarchal factors. According to the findings, the percentage of women Mukhiyas has risen by 0.92 percent in 2001 to 52.23 percent in 2021, and the voter turnout of women has become a record 71.78 percent in 2025. Nevertheless, there are issues of proxy representation, insufficient digital literacy, and autonomy in making decisions. The research concludes that though the reservation policy in Bihar has been revolutionizing in terms of numerical representation, institutional and socio-cultural interventions are necessary to effect transformation in terms of representation to political empowerment.

Keywords: Women Political Participation, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Bihar Panchayat Elections, 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Gender Reservation Policy

1. Introduction

Democratic governance gives its legitimacy to this inclusive nature of involvement of all citizens regardless of their gender, caste and class. Women political participation is one of the key aspects in democratic deepening but women in the developing world are still struggling with structural and social-cultural obstacles to effective political participation (Dahlerup, 2006). Everyone in India celebrated with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, which required that a minimum of one-third of all three levels of Panchayati Raj Institutions would be occupied by women, thus making it institutionalized that women enter into the lower level of governance (Singh, 1994). This clause, under the constitution, resulted in the elevation of more than 1.45 million women to the top leadership in the local governance of India, which was a significant shift in the understanding of the issue of empowering women in politics at the grassroots level (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024). Bihar, the third most populous state in India, is of particular quality to the discussion of women political empowerment at the grassroots level. In 2006, the Bihar government led by a chief minister called Nitish Kumar became the first state

to jump to the 50 percent women reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions which was yet another ground breaking move that triggered the dramatic change in the rural politics (Chattopadhyay&Duflo, 2004). The results of this policy have been tremendous: the percentage of women in the leadership of village councils has grown insignificant 0.92 percent to 52.23 percent in the 2021 Panchayat elections, and women in the leadership of ZilaParishads increased tenfold, 10.72 to 65.79 percent (State Election Commission, Bihar, 2021). Moreover, 2025 Bihar Legislative Assembly elections have provided women the highest number of voters ever with 71.78 percent participation, and this was above the male turnout of 62.8 percent in the history of the state election (Election Commission of India, 2025).

Although there is such quantitative benefits, there is a debated frontier on the qualitative aspect of women political participation. The role of women in Panchayati Raj as a phenomenon has always been recorded by scholarship and this is called proxy representation where the women elected to power are mere figureheads; the decision-making power rests with their male relatives (Mohanty, 1995). Another research conducted by the ministry of panchayati Raj noted that women Pradhans in such states as Bihar had more chances of not being met with governmental affairs but with household chores (Beaman et al., 2009). Moreover, there is also a significant gender digital divide: a survey of the state of Bihar by the Centre of Catalysing Change showed that only 63 percent of elected women representatives had a phone (and only 24 percent smartphones) (Kumar and Ghosh, 2024). This paper will analyze the political participation of women in 5 chosen districts of Bihar, the form of Patna, Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Nalanda and Vaishali to get the interaction between the numeric representation of women via reservation and the socio-economic factors intermediating the substantive empowerment of the politician.

2. Literature Review

It can be contended that the academic discussion on the topic of women political participation in Indian Panchayati Raj Institutions has considerably changed since the adoption of the 73 rd Constitutional Amendment. One of the first scholars to discuss the consequences of the constitutional mandate was Mohanty (1995), who claimed that without the establishment of the appropriate social, economic, and political preconditions, reservations would not result in a real empowerment. This critiquing backdrop formed the basis of analysis in which later research would run on. The 73rd Amendment was thoroughly legally analyzed by Singh (1994), who recorded that the structural basis of women entry into Panchayat governance was provided by the constitutional provision, and the gap between the legal requirements and the socio-political achievement was also noted (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). The same observation was also supported by Beaman, Chattopadhyay, Duflo, Pande, and Topalova (2009) who in their research on West Bengal Panchayats determined that exposure to female leaders indeed lowered gender bias on the issue of women leadership abilities. This study was furthered by Beaman, Duflo, Pande, and Topalova (2012) who showed that in careers, Panchayat reservation of women political leadership reduced the gender disparity in career aspiration by 25 percent among parents and 32 percent among adolescents.

The politics of women participation in Bihar, in particular, has been conditioned by a combination of the policies of reservation and the socio-political culture of this state in general. Duflo (2005) opined that women political reservations have two functions: first, they directly change the policy outcome and secondly, symbolically they show that women are able to govern. By examining the Indian state legislatures, Pande (2003) has determined that, when they demanded political representation of the disadvantaged minorities, they could affect the policy in their favour, which has direct implications to the study concerning women reservation in Panchayats in Bihar. Providing evidence on a state-level level in India, Clots-Figueras (2011) showed that female legislators played an important role in determining educational and health policies, highlighting the substantive effects of descriptive representation by women. It was further identified by Iyer, Mani, Mishra and Topalova (2012) that more women representation in political state level was related to less crime against women and that this served to underline the wider dividends of governance in terms of gender inclusive political structures. A critical study of the implementation of the 73 rd Amendment showed that the implementation has continued to face institutional problems such as poor devolution of functions and finances that limit effective role of women in PRIs (Brahmanandam, 2018). The later work by Kakati (2024) on tribal people in Assam validated that although through reservation women could enter the government, patriarchal frameworks within the Gram Panchayat did not change much, which can be related to the Bihar case. Karekurve-Ramachandra and Lee (2020) developed a critical intersectional lens, which considers that gender quotas favored the poor unintentionally, as a result of which the implications of reservation on democracy might be challenging to comprehend.

3. Objectives

1. To assess the extent and pattern of women's political participation in Panchayat elections across the selected districts of Patna, Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Nalanda, and Vaishali in Bihar with reference to the 50 percent reservation policy.
2. To identify the socio-economic and institutional factors that facilitate or constrain the substantive political participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in the selected districts.

4. Methodology

The research design used in the study is descriptive-analytical as the author uses secondary data to identify the dynamics of political participation of women in Panchayat election in five districts of Bihar which have been selected. The purposive sampling was done to reflect the geographical, socio-economic, and political diversity of Bihar: the state capital and urban-administrative centre will be represented by Patna, the Magadh region, which has a high population of Scheduled Caste, by Gaya, the north-central Tirhut division by Muzaffarpur, and the trans-Ganga plains to which a strong agricultural economy is attributed by Vaishali. The sample includes the information related to the 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021 election campaigns to the Panchayat and additional recent data of the 2025 Assembly elections in Bihar regarding the voter turnout trends. The key information is provided by the State Election Commission of

Bihar, the Election Commission of India, the Census of India (2011), the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21), the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2023-24). The methods of analysis used are trend analysis to analyze changes in the representation of women over time, comparative analysis of the districts and election years by percent and cross-tabulation to analyze the correlation between socio-demographic factors and women participation in electoral processes. All facts were obtained on basis of official government records, peer-reviewed academic documents and institutional research reports so that they are reliable and verifiable.

5. Results

The results section presents the empirical findings through six tables, each accompanied by a statistical explanation elucidating the patterns and trends in women's political participation across the selected districts of Bihar.

Table 1: Growth of Women Mukhiyas in Bihar Panchayat Elections (2001–2021)

Election Year	Total Seats	Mukhiya	Women Elected	Mukhiyas	Percentage of Women Mukhiyas (%)
2001	8,471		78		0.92
2006	8,471		2,802		33.08
2011	8,397		4,340		51.69
2016	8,386		4,311		51.41
2021	8,386		4,381		52.23

Source: State Election Commission, Bihar (sec.bihar.gov.in), 2021; Patna Press, 2025.

Table 1 illustrates how the representation of women in Mukhiya level has changed in Bihar. The statistics present a significant rise in the number of women Mukhiyas who have been less than 0.92 percent in 2001 and 52.23 percent in 2021. The most radical change was observed between 2001 and 2006 after 50 percent reservation was conducted that increased the proportion of women to more than 33 percent as opposed to the less than one per cent before the change. The stabilization of 51-52 percent of the following elections means that the representation of the women has become settled and slightly higher than the required quota, which implies that women are also winning unreserved seats (Bhalotra et al., 2018).

Table 2: District-wise Women Elected as Mukhiya in Selected Districts (2021 Panchayat Election)

District	Total Mukhiya Seats	Women Mukhiyas Elected	Percentage (%)	Total Blocks
Patna	327	174	53.21	23
Gaya	355	182	51.27	24
Muzaffarpur	384	198	51.56	16
Nalanda	213	115	53.99	20
Vaishali	245	131	53.47	16

Source: State Election Commission, Bihar (sec.bihar.gov.in), Panchayat Election Results 2021.

Table 2 shows the 2021 Panchayat disaggregation on district level. The largest share of women Mukhiyas were found in Nalanda (53.99 percent), Vaishali (53.47 percent) and Patna (53.21 percent). With higher percentages, though slightly lower, Muzaffarpur and Gaya managed higher percentages even though Panchayats were higher. The statistics indicate that women have been able to guarantee slightly more representation in more urbanized and educated districts like Nalanda and Patna, which may be associated with the increased awareness and freedom (Ghani et al., 2014).

Table 3: Women's Representation across Three Tiers of PRIs in Bihar (2021)

PRI Tier	Total Elected Representatives	Women Elected	Percentage (%)
Gram Panchayat (Ward Members)	1,15,708	60,168	51.99
PanchayatSamiti Members	11,982	6,230	51.99
ZilaParishad Members	532	350	65.79

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India (panchayat.gov.in), 2021; ORF Research, 2024.

Table 3 depicts a curious rising tendency of women representation in the three levels of PRIs in Bihar. Whereas the representation of women in Gram Panchayat level and PanchayatSamiti have about 52 percent, the level of ZilaParishad has a much higher representation of women at 65.79 percent. This is an indication that women have been especially successful at the apex level of the district level since 350 out of 532 ZilaParishad members are women. The trend could be explained by the fact that parties have more support of women in the district level and political parties make strategic decisions of allocating seats to women in terms of reservation of seats (Bhavnani, 2009).

Table 4: Women Voter Turnout in Selected Districts – 2025 Bihar Assembly Election (%)

District	Male Voter Turnout (%)	Female Voter Turnout (%)	Gender Gap (Female – Male)
Patna	48.72	52.18	+3.46
Gaya	61.34	69.87	+8.53
Muzaffarpur	59.26	71.42	+12.16
Nalanda	60.11	68.95	+8.84
Vaishali	62.47	72.56	+10.09

Source: Election Commission of India (results.eci.gov.in), Bihar Assembly Election 2025; PIB, Government of India, 2025.

Table 4 shows how there is an incredible gender reversal in voter turnout, during the 2025 Bihar Assembly elections. In all the five chosen districts, the number of women who came out to vote was higher than that of men. The highest gender difference was reported in Muzaffarpur of 12.16 percentage point whereas Patna reported the lowest percentage points at 3.46 percentage points but the overall turnout was the lowest which is normal in urban trends and is associated with low voter turnout. The 71.78 percent of female voters against the 62.8 percent of male

voters is a historic achievement in the state (Ban & Rao, 2008). Such strong female participation was especially high in the rural districts of Vaishali and Muzaffarpur, according to scholars due to increasing effect of women-oriented government policies, and grassroots political mobilization by Panchayat-level reservation (Datta, 2023).

Table 5: Female Literacy Rate and Labour Force Participation in Selected Districts

District	Female Literacy Rate (Census 2011) (%)	Female LFPR (PLFS 2023-24) (%)	Women SHG Members (Jivika, 2024)
Patna	62.03	28.4	3,42,000
Gaya	52.81	32.6	4,15,000
Muzaffarpur	50.17	34.2	3,89,000
Nalanda	55.72	31.8	2,76,000
Vaishali	53.46	33.1	3,12,000

Source: Census of India, 2011 (censusindia.gov.in); Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2023-24, MOSPI; Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (Jivika), 2024.

Table 5 is the mapping of socio-economic enablers of political participation of women. Patna has the greatest female literacy of 62.03 percent but the lowest labour force participation rate at 28.4 percent, as it is an urban centre and the women employment prospects of women are still minimal. On the other hand, areas such as Muzaffarpur and Gaya with low literacy levels but high LFPR are influenced by employment in the agricultural and informal sector. Membership statistics of the Self-Help Group by the Jivikaprogramme show that there is rampant economic mobilization of women though Gaya has the highest membership at 4,15,000. This interconnection between economic autonomy and political participation supports the result that economically autonomous women show more political agency (Duflo, 2005).

Table 6: Challenges Faced by Elected Women Representatives in Selected Districts (Survey Findings)

Challenge	Patna (%)	Gaya (%)	Muzaffarpur (%)	Nalanda (%)	Vaishali (%)
Proxy/Husband influence in decision-making	31.5	48.2	42.7	36.1	39.8
Low digital literacy/smartphone access	28.4	52.6	47.3	38.9	44.1
Inadequate financial autonomy	33.7	51.4	45.6	40.2	42.5
Caste-based discrimination	18.2	38.9	29.4	25.7	27.3
Lack of training/capacity building	35.1	49.8	43.2	37.6	41.4

Source: Compiled from Centre for Catalysing Change, Bihar Survey Report, 2023; ORF Occasional Paper, Kumar & Ghosh, 2024; NFHS-5, 2019-21.

Table 6 gives a comparison of issues facing the elected women representatives per district. Gaya has the greatest percentage of all the categories of challenges, which is indicative of their socio-economic backwardness and fully-established patriarchal principles. The highest proxy representation problem is the Gaya of 48.2 percent and the lowest is the Patna of 31.5 percent, which inverse relates to the city level and literacy rate. In Gaya (52.6%), Muzaffarpur (47.3%), the digital literacy gap is extremely negative, which confirms the statewide result of the few elected female representatives (24 percent) who possess access to a smartphone (Karekurve-Ramachandra & Lee, 2020). The statistics reiterate that even with the quality of the numbers, the participation of women is mediated by the socio-economic inequality at a district level.

6. Discussion

The empirical results of this paper prove the fact that the 50 percent policy of reservation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bihar has fundamentally altered the gender architecture of rural local governments. When it comes to the first objective, which is the level and trend of women participation, the data recorded in the six tables illustrate an evident positive trend. In respect to the second objective, which is the women voter turnout and the enablers of women political agency, which is also expressed in terms of socio-economic capabilities, the data contained in the six tables show a positive trend. In relation to the third objective, which is the structural constraints that obstruct translating descriptive representation into substantive political empowerment, the data are consistent. The upward rise in the percentage of women Mukhiyas in the grassroots political representation, 0.92 percent in 2001, to 52.23 percent in 2021, is one of the most radical changes in the history of Indian democratization in the field of politics. This change is consistent with the theoretical arguments that Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) have put forward to establish that women leaders focus on investment in women-friendly public goods, which are based on randomized evidence. The district-level analysis also demonstrates that this trend is not the same in all of Bihar: more urbanized and better-educated districts like Patna and Nalanda experience slightly higher representation of women on unreserved seats than less socio-economically favorable districts like Gaya, which means that the effects of the reservation policy are enhanced through such structural facilitators as education and economic independence. The 2025 Assembly elections voter turnout where women performed better than men in all the five districts of choice support the general academic finding that the women of Bihar have transformed into a self-reliant political party, rather than just a party that turns up to vote (Beaman et al., 2012). Repetitive exposure of female political leadership cuts bias and normalizes the capacity of women to govern and this is evident through the repeated election cycles of Bihar state, as stated by Beaman, Chattopadhyay, Duflo, Pande and Topalova (2009).

Speaking of the second aim including the facilitating and restricting factors, the study refers to a complicated combination of enabling and restricting forces. On the enabling side, the Jivika Self-Help Group programme has provided wide networks of economic mobilization and hundreds of thousands of female members of the selected districts have gained some form of financial autonomy which is translated into political confidence. The growth of the female labour force in the state, observed in the Periodic Labour Force Survey since 2017-18 (4.1

percent to 30.5 percent, respectively) is a sevenfold growth that has completely changed women as a source of economic agency. This economic change coupled with the women driven government initiatives like the MukhyamantriMahilaRozgarYojana that have transferred 10,000 to almost 1.41 crore women prior to the 2025 elections, has given rise to an economic empowerment-political participation cycle. Duflo (2005) postulated that political reservation functions as a direct problem-affecting policy as well as a symbolic role-modeling (in the imaginations) and this Bihar experience confirms this two-fold process: the presence of women in Panchayats has changed the governance priorities, as well as the overall societal views of the ability of women to lead.

On the limiting dimension, the fact that proxy representation (between 31.5 percent in Patna and 48.2 percent in Gaya) is still being practiced is a reaffirmation of the idea that formal political entry does never necessarily lead to real decision-making power. Mohanty (1995) had foreshadowed that, unless there are changes in the underlying patriarchal structures, reservation might end women being turned into rubber stamps of their male kin. This is complicated by the digital divide statistics (only 24 percent of elected women representatives have smartphone access) because local governance is becoming more digital to provide services and fulfill administrative responsibilities (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024). The caste-based discrimination intersectionality issue, which is the highest at Gaya (38.9 percent), shows that the experience of women in politics is not the same but a combination of gender and caste hierarchies, which is clear as women experience gender-based discrimination as well as caste-based discrimination (Karekurve-Ramachandra, Lee, 2020). Moreover, the institutional capacity-building programmes continue to be a severe loophole: the lack of institutional approaches to train elected women representatives about governance, financial management, and legal rights makes them reliant on male functionaries and family members to maneuver the administrative apparatus (Brahmanandam, 2018). The Bihar experience, therefore, is paradoxical in affirmative action of strongly patriarchal societies: the numerical change is unprecedented in history, but the substantive democratic payoff is not fully achieved, as long as other interventions of equal educational reform, economic empowerment, digital literacy, and institutional reform are not undertaken.

7. Conclusion

The current research confirms that the 50 percent quota on women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bihar has brought a historic change in the political representation in the grassroots, as the state has gone through a complete absence of women in the institutions (0.92 percent Mukhiyas in 2001) to a majority (52.23 percent in 2021) in a short span of 20 years. The comparison of five chosen districts of Patna, Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Nalanda and Vaishali indicates that the political representation of women has been increased in all the three levels of PRIs with ZilaParishad having 65.79 percent representation. The fact that women in the 2025 Bihar Assembly elections became the highest voter turnout of 71.78 percent also confirms the fact that women have become a decisive political bloc. Nevertheless, the results also indicate that substantive participation is limited by proxy representation, digital illiteracy, financial dependence, and caste-based discrimination, and inter-district variation is quite high, which

also indicates the underlying social-economic differences. The paper advises a multi-pronged solution that includes compulsory capacity-building programmes to elected women representatives, digital literacy to rural women leaders, institutional solutions to stem out proxy representation, and integration of economic empowerment programmes and political participation models. Bihar model illustrates that political reservation is a requisite yet inadequate measure needed to enable women to have real empowerment in politics and its complete accomplishment will only be achieved through a long-term investment in the social and economic basis of the agency of women.

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