

Importance and challenges of panchayati raj for older women from the scheduled caste (a sociological study of kannauj district, uttar pradesh)

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Abstract:

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represent the foundation of grassroots democracy in India and play a crucial role in strengthening rural governance and social inclusion. The introduction of constitutional provisions through the **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992** granted constitutional status to Panchayati Raj institutions and mandated reservations for women and Scheduled Castes (SCs), thereby ensuring representation of marginalized groups in local governance. 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act established a three-tier structure of local self-government and reserved seats for women and marginalized communities in rural political institutions. This research article examines the **importance and challenges of Panchayati Raj for older women belonging to Scheduled Castes** in rural areas of Kannauj district in Uttar Pradesh. Older women from Scheduled Caste communities occupy a complex social position shaped by gender, caste hierarchy, age, economic deprivation, and social exclusion. Although constitutional reservations have increased their numerical representation in local governance institutions, their effective participation and decision-making power often remain limited due to patriarchal norms, lack of education, economic dependency, and bureaucratic obstacles. The present study adopts both **primary and secondary research methods**. Primary data were collected through structured interviews, questionnaires, and field observations conducted in selected villages of Kannauj district. The study included **120 respondents**, consisting of elected representatives, former women Panchayat members, and elderly women belonging to Scheduled Caste communities. Secondary data were obtained from books, academic journals, government reports, and census statistics. The findings indicate that Panchayati Raj institutions have created significant opportunities for older Scheduled Caste women to participate in local governance, enhance political awareness, and influence rural development programs. Participation in Panchayats has improved their confidence, social recognition, and involvement in welfare schemes such as housing, sanitation, and social security programs. However, several challenges persist. These include proxy representation by male family members, caste discrimination, lack of administrative knowledge, financial constraints, and social pressure from dominant caste groups. The study concludes that while Panchayati Raj institutions have made meaningful progress toward empowering marginalized women, **structural barriers continue to limit their effective leadership**. The research suggests strengthening training programs, improving literacy and political awareness, and ensuring institutional support mechanisms to enhance the active participation of elderly Scheduled Caste women in grassroots democracy.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, Scheduled Caste Women, Rural Governance, Women Empowerment, Kannauj District, Grassroots Democracy.

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1. Introduction:

Panchayati Raj institutions constitute the backbone of rural governance in India. They represent a

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decentralized form of governance that enables people at the grassroots level to participate directly in decision-making processes related to rural development. The concept of Panchayati Raj is deeply rooted in India's historical tradition of village self-government.

The constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj through the **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992)** marked a turning point in India's democratic decentralization. The amendment mandated regular elections, created a three-tier system of local governance (Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad), and ensured reservation for women and marginalized communities including Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The reservation policy created new opportunities for women and socially disadvantaged groups to participate in political processes. As a result, millions of women have entered local governance structures across India. Studies indicate that women's participation in Panchayati Raj has contributed significantly to increasing political awareness and strengthening local democratic institutions.

However, the participation of **older women belonging to Scheduled Castes** remains a complex phenomenon. These women face multiple layers of marginalization including gender discrimination, caste-based exclusion, economic dependency, and limited access to education and political knowledge. In many rural areas, patriarchal structures still dominate political decision-making, which restricts the active participation of women in Panchayat governance.

This study focuses specifically on **Kannauj district of Uttar Pradesh**, a rural region where Panchayati Raj institutions play an important role in implementing development schemes and addressing local issues. The research explores the importance of Panchayati Raj institutions for older Scheduled Caste women and analyzes the challenges they face in exercising their political roles effectively.

2. Objectives of the Study:

The major objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the importance of Panchayati Raj institutions for older Scheduled Caste women in rural areas.
2. To analyse the socio-economic and political status of older Scheduled Caste women participating in Panchayati Raj.
3. To identify the major challenges faced by elderly Scheduled Caste women in Panchayat governance.

4. To assess the impact of Panchayati Raj participation on the empowerment of Scheduled Caste women.

5. To suggest policy measures to improve their participation and leadership in local governance.

3. Review of Literature:

The participation of women, particularly those belonging to marginalized communities such as Scheduled Castes, in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been widely studied by scholars, policymakers, and social scientists. The introduction of democratic decentralization in India has significantly transformed rural governance by encouraging the participation of socially disadvantaged groups. The **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992** marked a major milestone in strengthening local self-government and ensuring representation for women and Scheduled Castes in Panchayati Raj institutions. Various scholars have examined the impact of this constitutional reform on women's empowerment, rural development, and social transformation.

One of the early studies on women's participation in Panchayati Raj was conducted by **Susheela Kaushik (1993)**. In her work on women and Panchayati Raj institutions, Kaushik emphasized that the reservation of seats for women has created opportunities for their political participation at the grassroots level. According to her, women representatives often bring new perspectives to local governance by focusing on issues related to education, health care, sanitation, and welfare programs. However, Kaushik also noted that women from marginalized backgrounds frequently face social barriers such as illiteracy, lack of confidence, and patriarchal control that limit their effective participation in decision-making processes.

Similarly, **Nirmala Buch (2000)** conducted an extensive study on elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions across different states of India. Her research highlighted that although the constitutional provisions have increased the numerical representation of women in local governance, their effective participation is often constrained by socio-cultural factors. Buch observed that many women representatives lack formal education and administrative experience, which creates difficulties in understanding government procedures and policy frameworks. She also pointed out the phenomenon of **"proxy representation,"** where male relatives such as husbands or sons exercise political authority on behalf of elected women representatives.

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The issue of proxy leadership has been widely discussed in the literature on Panchayati Raj. **George Mathew (1994)** emphasized that democratic decentralization in India has opened new avenues for women's participation, but the transformation of traditional power structures is a gradual process. According to Mathew, women representatives often struggle to assert their authority in male-dominated political environments. However, he also argued that over time, exposure to political institutions and governance processes can help women develop leadership skills and confidence.

Another significant contribution to the literature on Panchayati Raj and women's empowerment comes from **B. S. Baviskar and George Mathew (2009)**. Their work on local governance highlights the role of Panchayati Raj institutions in promoting participatory democracy and inclusive development. They argue that the reservation policy has enabled marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes and women to gain representation in decision-making bodies at the village level. However, they also point out that structural inequalities related to caste hierarchy and economic deprivation continue to influence the functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions.

The role of caste in shaping political participation has also been explored by several scholars. **Andre Béteille (1996)** examined the relationship between caste, class, and power in rural India. According to Béteille, the hierarchical structure of caste-based society often limits the opportunities available to marginalized communities. Scheduled Caste women face multiple forms of discrimination based on caste, gender, and economic status. This intersection of social inequalities affects their participation in political and social institutions, including Panchayati Raj.

M. A. Oommen (2004) highlighted the importance of decentralization in strengthening democratic governance and empowering marginalized communities. According to Oommen, Panchayati Raj institutions provide a platform for local communities to participate in planning and implementing development programs. He argued that the participation of women and Scheduled Castes in local governance contributes to more equitable and inclusive development outcomes. However, he also noted that the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj institutions depends on factors such as administrative capacity, financial autonomy, and political awareness among representatives.

Another important study by **K. C. Sivaramakrishnan (2000)** focused on the challenges of democratic

decentralization in India. Sivaramakrishnan pointed out that while constitutional reforms have strengthened local governance structures, the actual functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions often faces institutional and administrative challenges. These challenges include inadequate training for elected representatives, limited financial resources, and bureaucratic control over local decision-making processes. For women representatives, particularly those from Scheduled Castes, these challenges are often compounded by social discrimination and limited access to education.

Research on women's empowerment through Panchayati Raj institutions has also highlighted the positive impact of political participation on social change. **Naila Kabeer (2005)** argued that political participation can play a crucial role in empowering women by increasing their access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes. According to Kabeer, empowerment involves the expansion of women's ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where such ability was previously denied. Participation in local governance can help women develop leadership skills, build networks, and challenge traditional gender roles.

In the Indian context, **Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar (2007)** examined the role of women in social and political development. Their research emphasized that women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions has contributed to greater awareness of social issues and increased attention to the needs of marginalized communities. Women leaders often prioritize issues such as drinking water, sanitation, education, and health services, which directly affect the well-being of rural households.

Studies focusing specifically on Scheduled Caste women have highlighted the intersectional nature of their challenges. **Gopal Guru (1995)** argued that Dalit women experience a "triple burden" of caste, class, and gender discrimination. This layered marginalization often limits their access to political power and social resources. Even when Scheduled Caste women are elected to Panchayati Raj institutions through reservation policies, they may face resistance from dominant caste groups and male community members. Recent research has also examined the role of training and capacity-building programs in improving the effectiveness of women representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions. Several studies suggest that providing education, leadership training, and administrative guidance can significantly enhance the participation and performance of women representatives. Training programs organized by government agencies and non-

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governmental organizations help women understand their rights, responsibilities, and the functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions.

Another important aspect discussed in the literature is the impact of Panchayati Raj institutions on rural development. Scholars have observed that women representatives often bring greater attention to issues related to social welfare and community development. Their involvement in decision-making processes can lead to improved implementation of government schemes related to health, education, sanitation, and poverty alleviation.

Despite these positive developments, many scholars argue that genuine empowerment requires more than formal political representation. Structural inequalities related to caste, gender, and economic status must be addressed to ensure meaningful participation of marginalized women in governance. Access to education, financial resources, and institutional support is essential for strengthening the leadership capacity of women representatives.

Overall, the existing literature indicates that Panchayati Raj institutions have played an important role in promoting democratic participation and social inclusion in rural India. The reservation policy has significantly increased the representation of women and Scheduled Castes in local governance. However, several challenges continue to limit the effective participation of older Scheduled Caste women in Panchayati Raj institutions. These challenges include illiteracy, patriarchal social norms, caste-based discrimination, economic dependency, and lack of administrative knowledge.

Therefore, the present study aims to build upon existing research by examining the **importance and challenges of Panchayati Raj for older Scheduled Caste women in Kannauj district of Uttar Pradesh**. By focusing on the experiences of elderly women representatives and community members, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the opportunities and barriers associated with their participation in grassroots democracy.

4. Research Methodology:

4.1 Research Design:

The present study is based on a **descriptive and analytical research design** to examine the importance and challenges of Panchayati Raj for older women belonging to Scheduled Caste communities in Kannauj district of Uttar Pradesh. The descriptive approach helps in understanding the socio-economic conditions, level of participation, and experiences of elderly

Scheduled Caste women in Panchayati Raj institutions. At the same time, the analytical approach is used to evaluate the factors that influence their participation and to identify the challenges faced by them in local governance.

The study focuses on selected rural areas of Kannauj district where Panchayati Raj institutions play an active role in implementing development programs. Both **qualitative and quantitative methods** have been used to collect and analyze the data. Qualitative information was gathered through interviews and observations, while quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires. This mixed research design helps in providing a comprehensive understanding of the role, participation, and difficulties experienced by older Scheduled Caste women in Panchayati Raj governance.

4.2 Study Area:

The present study was conducted in **Kannauj district of Uttar Pradesh**, which represents an important rural region where Panchayati Raj institutions play a significant role in local governance and community development. Kannauj district is situated in the central part of Uttar Pradesh and is part of the **Kanpur Division**. Geographically, the district is bordered by **Farrukhabad district in the north, Hardoi district in the east, Kanpur Dehat in the south, and Auraiya district in the west**. The district lies near the fertile plains of the **Ganga River**, which supports agriculture as the primary occupation of the rural population. Major crops grown in the region include wheat, rice, potato, and pulses. The district consists of several administrative blocks such as **Kannauj, Chhibramau, Talgram, Jalalabad, and Haseran**, which contain numerous Gram Panchayats and villages.

Historically, Kannauj has held a prominent place in Indian civilization. In ancient times, the region was known as **Kanyakubja**, which became an important political, cultural, and economic center. During the **7th century**, Kannauj gained great importance when it became the capital of the **Pushyabhuti (Vardhana) dynasty under Emperor Harshavardhana**. The city was renowned for its prosperity, learning, and trade. Later, during the early medieval period, Kannauj became the focal point of the famous **Tripartite Struggle** among the **Palas, Gurjara-Pratiharas, and Rashtrakutas**, who competed for control over northern India. This struggle further highlighted the strategic importance of the region.

In the medieval and modern periods, Kannauj continued to maintain its cultural significance. The

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district became widely known for its traditional **attar (perfume) industry**, which has been practiced for centuries and remains one of the unique cultural and economic identities of the region. Kannauj is often referred to as the **“Perfume Capital of India.”**

At present, Kannauj district has a predominantly rural population with diverse social groups, including a considerable proportion of **Scheduled Caste communities**. Agriculture, small-scale industries, and traditional occupations form the basis of the rural economy. Panchayati Raj institutions play a vital role in implementing government welfare schemes, promoting rural development, and encouraging democratic participation at the grassroots level. Therefore, Kannauj district provides an appropriate setting to study the **importance and challenges of Panchayati Raj for older women belonging to Scheduled Caste communities**.

Selected blocks for study:

- Kannauj
- Talgram
- Chhibramau
- Jalalabad

4.3 Sampling:

The present study adopted a **purposive sampling technique** to select respondents from rural areas of Kannauj district, Uttar Pradesh. This method was used to ensure the inclusion of participants who are directly related to the research topic, particularly older women belonging to Scheduled Caste communities involved in Panchayati Raj institutions. A total of **120 respondents** were selected from different Gram Panchayats of selected blocks such as Kannauj, Chhibramau, Talgram, and Jalalabad. The sample included **elected women Panchayat members, former representatives, and elderly Scheduled Caste women villagers**. This sampling approach helped in collecting relevant and reliable information regarding their participation, experiences, and challenges in Panchayati Raj governance.

| Category | Number |
|----------------------------------|--------|
| Older SC women Panchayat members | 40 |
| Former Panchayat representatives | 30 |
| Elderly SC women villagers | 50 |

4.4 Primary Data Collection Techniques:

Primary data for the study were collected through **structured interviews, questionnaires, and field observations** in selected villages of Kannauj district.

In addition, **focus group discussions and informal interactions** with older Scheduled Caste women and Panchayat representatives were conducted to understand their experiences. These techniques helped gather reliable information about their participation, role, and challenges in Panchayati Raj institutions. Primary data were collected through:

1. Structured Interviews
2. Questionnaires
3. Focus Group Discussions
4. Participant Observation
5. Case Studies of elected women representatives.

4.5 Secondary Data Sources:

Secondary data for the study were collected from **books, academic journals, government reports, census publications, and previous research studies** related to Panchayati Raj and women empowerment. These sources provided theoretical background, statistical information, and scholarly perspectives supporting the analysis of the research topic. Secondary data were collected from:

- Government reports on Panchayati Raj
- Census of India
- Academic journals
- Books on rural governance
- Research articles on women empowerment

5. Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents:

The socio-economic profile of respondents includes information about **age, education, occupation, income level, and marital status** of older Scheduled Caste women in the study area. Most respondents belong to rural poor households and are mainly engaged in **agriculture, daily wage labor, or household work**. A significant number of them have **low literacy levels**, which influences their participation in Panchayati Raj institutions and decision-making processes.

Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents-

| Age Group | Respondents | Percentage |
|-----------|-------------|------------|
| 45–50 | 30 | 25% |
| 51–55 | 35 | 29% |
| 56–60 | 28 | 23% |
| Above 60 | 27 | 23% |

Table 1 shows the age distribution of the respondents included in the study. Out of 120 respondents, the highest number, **35 respondents (29%)**, belong to the **51–55 years** age group. The **45–50 years** group includes **30 respondents (25%)**, while **28**

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respondents (23%) fall in the **56–60 years** category. Additionally, **27 respondents (23%)** are **above 60 years**. This indicates that middle-aged and elderly Scheduled Caste women actively participate in Panchayati Raj institutions and community activities. Their participation demonstrates growing awareness and involvement of older women in local governance and rural development activities. The table shows that a large proportion of respondents belong to the age group of **51–55 years**.

Table 2: Educational Status of Respondents-

| Education Level | Number | Percentage |
|---------------------|--------|------------|
| Illiterate | 46 | 38% |
| Primary Education | 34 | 28% |
| Secondary Education | 28 | 23% |
| Higher Education | 12 | 11% |

Table 2 presents the educational status of the respondents. Out of 120 respondents, **46 women (38%) are illiterate**, which forms the largest group. **34 respondents (28%) have primary education**, while **28 respondents (23%) have secondary education**. Only **12 respondents (11%) have higher education**. The table indicates that most older Scheduled Caste women have **low levels of education**, which affects their awareness, confidence, and effective participation in Panchayati Raj institutions and decision-making processes. This indicates that **low literacy remains a major barrier** for older Scheduled Caste women participating in Panchayat governance.

Table 3: Major Challenges Faced by Respondents-

| Challenges | Respondents | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Lack of education | 32 | 27% |
| Caste discrimination | 25 | 21% |
| Male dominance / proxy leadership | 30 | 25% |
| Lack of financial resources | 18 | 15% |
| Administrative complexity | 15 | 12% |

Table 3 highlights the major challenges faced by older Scheduled Caste women in Panchayati Raj institutions. The data show that **lack of education** is the most

significant challenge, reported by **32 respondents (27%)**. **Male dominance or proxy leadership** is faced by **30 respondents (25%)**, indicating the influence of male family members in decision-making. **Caste discrimination** is reported by **25 respondents (21%)**, while **lack of financial resources** affects **18 respondents (15%)**. Additionally, **administrative complexity** is experienced by **15 respondents (12%)**, making it difficult for many women to perform their Panchayat responsibilities effectively.

6. Importance of Panchayati Raj for Older Scheduled Caste Women:

Panchayati Raj institutions provide important opportunities for older Scheduled Caste women to participate in local governance and decision-making processes. Their involvement increases political awareness, social recognition, and confidence. It also enables them to raise community issues, access government welfare schemes, and contribute to rural development and empowerment at the grassroots level.

6.1 Political Empowerment: Participation in Panchayat elections enables marginalized women to enter the political sphere and influence local governance.

6.2 Social Recognition: Elected women representatives gain social respect and recognition within their communities.

6.3 Increased Awareness: Participation in Panchayat meetings improves awareness about government schemes and rights.

6.4 Economic Opportunities: Panchayats provide access to development programs such as housing schemes, pensions, and employment programs.

6.5 Community Development: Women representatives often focus on issues such as drinking water, sanitation, health services, and education.

7. Challenges Faced by Older Scheduled Caste Women:

Older Scheduled Caste women face several challenges in participating effectively in Panchayati Raj institutions. **Patriarchal social norms** often limit their independence and decision-making authority. Many women also experience **caste-based discrimination** from dominant social groups within the village. **Low literacy and lack of administrative knowledge** make it difficult for them to understand government procedures and policies. In addition, **economic dependency and proxy leadership by male family members** reduce their political autonomy. These challenges restrict their active participation and

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influence in Panchayat governance and rural development activities.

7.1 Patriarchal Social Structure: Traditional gender roles limit women's participation in public decision-making.

7.2 Proxy Representation: In many cases, male relatives (known as "Sarpanch Pati") exercise authority on behalf of women representatives.

7.3 Caste-Based Discrimination: Scheduled Caste women often face discrimination from dominant caste groups.

7.4 Lack of Administrative Knowledge: Limited education restricts their ability to understand government procedures and policies.

7.5 Economic Dependency: Financial dependence on family members reduces their autonomy.

8. Findings of the Study:

The present study examined the importance and challenges of Panchayati Raj institutions for older women belonging to Scheduled Caste communities in Kannauj district of Uttar Pradesh. Based on the analysis of primary and secondary data, several important findings have emerged regarding their participation, socio-economic conditions, and the obstacles they face in local governance.

One of the major findings of the study is that Panchayati Raj institutions have created opportunities for older Scheduled Caste women to participate in political and social decision-making processes at the grassroots level. The reservation policy for women and Scheduled Castes has helped increase their representation in Gram Panchayats. Many respondents reported that participation in Panchayat activities improved their confidence, leadership abilities, and awareness about government schemes and community development programs.

The study also reveals that older Scheduled Caste women have contributed to addressing several local issues such as drinking water supply, sanitation, road construction, and welfare schemes for marginalized groups. Their involvement has helped in raising community concerns and improving the implementation of government programs at the village level. Some respondents stated that their participation in Panchayati Raj institutions enhanced their social recognition and respect within the community.

However, the research also identifies several challenges that limit their effective participation in local governance. A large proportion of respondents have low levels of education or are completely illiterate, which affects their ability to understand

administrative procedures, government policies, and financial management related to Panchayat activities. Lack of education also reduces their confidence in participating actively in Panchayat meetings and decision-making processes.

Another important finding is the influence of patriarchal social structures in rural areas. Many respondents reported that male family members often dominate political decision-making, resulting in **proxy representation**, where husbands or male relatives exercise authority on behalf of women representatives. This practice reduces the autonomy of women and limits their actual involvement in governance.

Caste-based discrimination was also reported as a significant barrier by several respondents. Older Scheduled Caste women sometimes face social exclusion or resistance from dominant caste groups when they attempt to exercise authority in Panchayat institutions. In addition, economic dependency and limited access to resources further restrict their independence and leadership capacity.

Overall, the study finds that while Panchayati Raj institutions have made significant progress in promoting the political participation of Scheduled Caste women, several structural barriers still hinder their full empowerment. Addressing issues such as education, training, social discrimination, and institutional support is essential for strengthening their effective participation in grassroots democracy and rural development.

The research findings highlight several important trends:

- Panchayati Raj institutions have increased political participation of Scheduled Caste women.
- Many older women representatives have gained confidence and leadership skills.
- Education and training significantly improve their effectiveness in governance.
- Social barriers such as caste discrimination and patriarchy continue to restrict their authority.

Conclusion:

The Panchayati Raj system has emerged as one of the most significant democratic institutions in India for promoting grassroots governance and inclusive development. With the implementation of the **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992**, Panchayati Raj institutions received constitutional status and provisions were made to ensure representation for women and marginalized communities, including Scheduled Castes. This reform created opportunities for disadvantaged groups to participate in local

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governance and decision-making processes. The present study examined the **importance and challenges of Panchayati Raj for older women belonging to Scheduled Caste communities in Kannauj district of Uttar Pradesh.**

The findings of the study reveal that Panchayati Raj institutions have played an important role in enhancing the political participation of older Scheduled Caste women. Through reservation policies, many women from marginalized communities have gained entry into local governance structures such as Gram Panchayats. Participation in Panchayati Raj has helped these women develop political awareness, leadership skills, and confidence. It has also increased their social recognition and status within their communities. Many respondents reported that their involvement in Panchayat activities has enabled them to raise issues related to drinking water, sanitation, education, health services, and welfare schemes for marginalized groups. Another important outcome of the study is that Panchayati Raj institutions have contributed to strengthening grassroots democracy by giving voice to women who were traditionally excluded from political decision-making. Older Scheduled Caste women who participate in Panchayat governance have become more aware of their rights and responsibilities. Their participation has also encouraged other women in rural areas to become more active in social and political activities. In this way, Panchayati Raj institutions have created new opportunities for social empowerment and community development.

However, the study also highlights several challenges that continue to affect the effective participation of older Scheduled Caste women in Panchayati Raj institutions. One of the most significant challenges is the **low level of education and literacy** among respondents. Many older women lack formal education, which limits their ability to understand administrative procedures, financial management, and government policies. This often makes them dependent on others for guidance in Panchayat activities.

Another major challenge identified in the study is the **patriarchal social structure** prevailing in rural society. In many cases, male family members such as husbands or sons dominate decision-making processes. The phenomenon of **proxy representation**, where male relatives exercise power on behalf of elected women representatives, reduces the autonomy and authority of women leaders. This practice undermines the purpose of reservation policies intended to empower women.

The study also found that **caste-based discrimination** remains a significant barrier for Scheduled Caste women in local governance. In some villages, women belonging to Scheduled Caste communities face resistance from dominant caste groups when they attempt to exercise leadership or authority in Panchayat matters. Such discrimination can limit their participation and influence in decision-making processes.

Economic dependency is another factor that affects the participation of older Scheduled Caste women in Panchayati Raj institutions. Many respondents belong to economically weaker households and rely on agriculture, daily wage labor, or informal work for their livelihood. Limited financial resources reduce their ability to participate fully in political activities and community development initiatives.

Despite these challenges, the study indicates that Panchayati Raj institutions have created a platform for the gradual empowerment of marginalized women. Exposure to political processes, participation in Gram Sabha meetings, and involvement in development programs have helped many women gain confidence and experience in leadership roles.

Based on the findings of the study, several important measures can be suggested to strengthen the participation of older Scheduled Caste women in Panchayati Raj institutions:

- 1. Educational and literacy programs** should be promoted for rural women to improve their awareness and administrative understanding.
- 2. Training and capacity-building programs** should be organized regularly for women representatives to enhance their leadership and governance skills.
- 3. Government institutions** should ensure **strong institutional support and protection against caste discrimination** in Panchayat functioning.
- 4. Efforts** should be made to reduce the practice of **proxy leadership** and encourage independent decision-making by women representatives.
- 5. Economic empowerment programs** and access to financial resources should be promoted to strengthen the independence of Scheduled Caste women.
- 6. Awareness campaigns** should be conducted to change **patriarchal attitudes and social norms** that restrict women's participation in public life.

In conclusion, Panchayati Raj institutions have opened new pathways for political participation and empowerment of older Scheduled Caste women in rural India. Although several structural challenges

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remain, continued efforts in education, training, social awareness, and institutional support can significantly enhance their role in grassroots governance. Strengthening the participation of marginalized women in Panchayati Raj will contribute not only to gender equality but also to inclusive rural development and democratic governance in India.

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