

# Women and Politics in Himachal Pradesh (Special Reference to Panchayati Raj Institutions)

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## Abstract

*India is the largest democracy in the world where the women constitute almost half the population. The politics for centuries has been considered a male prerogative and women were supposed to be incapable of using public power. The Indian Constitution promises security, justice, liberty, equality and fraternity to all the citizens. To realize these goals the Constitution guarantees certain fundamental rights and freedoms. As equal citizens of India, women have been benefited from these rights equally with men. The clause of equality, provided by the Constitution in Articles 16 has helped to ensure a significant position and status to Indian women. Now, the women are increasingly taking part in politics. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is definitely path breaking in this regard. It is the time of globalisation, liberalisation, and women empowerment. In this era, the participation of women is very essential at all level in the process of nation building. In a democratic set up, everybody has a right to participate in shaping the society. Women need to play effective role in the decision making process and it becomes more important to bring them into the mainstream of development. The Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994, in the spirit of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act provides reservation for women in the Panchayat elections held in the year 1995. Since 1995 women participation has increased gradually in Panchayati Raj Institutions. At present, almost 57 per cent women are involved in decision making process in Himachal Pradesh rural political affairs. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to analyse the nature and extent of women's participation in politics in general and Panchayati Raj Institutions in particular in the state of Himachal Pradesh. Further, some measures have also been suggested to bring women to the centre stage of the politics in the hilly State.*

**Key words:** Democracy, Women Empowerment, Globalization.

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## Intriduction

In India, where the literature and art sing praises for women, even our land of birth is symbolized as Bharat Mata and a woman is glorified as a symbol of Shakti, the position of women was quite deplorable till the dawn of independence. However, the deep concern for the upliftment of women in the mind of our national leaders and Constitution makers secured the incorporation of rights

in the Indian Constitution ensuing equality between both the genders. The Constitution of India granted equality to women in various spheres and created the legal framework with which the development of women started functioning and some major policy initiatives were undertaken for women empowerment<sup>1</sup>.

A country which boasts to be the largest democracy on the planet, and where women constitutes half of the population, but ironically the women are languishing behind in all spheres of life and are struggling to gain a place in country's mainstream. India got its first woman Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi about five decades back in 1966 and its first President, Pratibha Devi Singh Patil in 2007. In this respect, we are at least ahead of America, where till date, there has been no woman President in its long history of political democracy. In India, many women have held berths in the Union Council of Ministers and also held important positions of Governors and Chief Ministers in the States.

Our society has never been hesitant to accept women leaders and politicians as the centre of power. But, this is not the story of the common Indian women. Although, the Constitution of India has guaranteed equal opportunities and rights to women at par with men, yet, political power is still a male dominated arena and a distant dream for common Indian women. The active participation of women in governance has remained restricted to a smaller number of elite women and not to the common Indian womenfolk. Women are hardly making any progress into politics and their participation in politics at the state and national levels has been terribly low.

If we look at the representation of women in Parliament, we find that the current 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (2014) has only 61 women members which are mere 11.23 per cent of the total strength of 543.<sup>2</sup> The number of women MPs elected to the 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (2014) is the highest since independence. This figure shames the largest democracy of the world despite the fact that women constitute nearly half of the citizenry and voting strength. It has taken more than five decades for the percentage of women members in the House to move-up partially from a mere 4.9 percent in the first Lok Sabha in

1952 to 10.86 percent in 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha in 2009 and 11.23 per cent in 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha in 2014, a figure that is far below than the average of around 15 percent in the countries which have elected legislatures.

Like the national picture in India, Himachal Pradesh is also not an exception to this sorrow state of affairs of women's participation in politics and their representation in decision making bodies. In Himachal Pradesh there are 68 legislative assembly constituencies. The State has 4 seats in Lok Sabha and 3 seats in the Rajya Sabha.

There is a significant participation of women in various fields like education, banking, etc. especially in the recent few decades in the State. But they are still marginal in politics. Women are not getting adequate representation in the Parliament, State Legislature and other decision-making bodies. A strong women's political activism is still not visible on the part of the Himachali women. After independence, Women's participation in politics has increased and improved in the State. The impact is more visible in voting than in other political activities, but now women are actively participating in the entire field including politics.

### **Women in the State Politics of Himachal Pradesh after Independence**

The history of State politics is evident that women's participation from Himachal Pradesh in Rajya Sabha is very low. Only six women of this State have ever represented the upper house in the Parliament as per the detail given below in Table No. 1.<sup>3</sup> Women representation in the Rajya Sabha from Himachal Pradesh is comparatively better than the Lok Sabha.

**Table-1: Rajya Sabha Women MPs from Himachal Pradesh (1952-2008)**

| SN | Period    | Name of MP in Rajya Sabha | Total |
|----|-----------|---------------------------|-------|
| 1  | 1956-1962 | Smt Leela Devi            | 01    |
| 2  | 1968-1974 | Smt Satya Vati Dang       | 01    |
| 3  | 1978-1984 | Smt Mohinder Kaur         | 01    |
| 4  | 1980-1986 | Smt Usha Malhotra         | 01    |
| 5  | 1996-2002 | Ms Chandresh Kumari       | 01    |
| 6  | 2006-2012 | Smt Viplove Thakur        | 01    |

## Women MPs from Himachal Pradesh in Lok Sabha

From Himachal Pradesh 1952 to till date only five women candidates have been elected to lower house of Parliament. Smt. Chandresh Kumari and Smt. Pratibha Singh have been elected twice.<sup>4</sup> In Lok Sabha the representation of women from Himachal Pradesh is evident from the following Table No-2:

**Table-2: Women MPs from Himachal Pradesh in Lok Sabha**

| SN | Period  | Name of Women MP      | Constituency |
|----|---|-----------------------|--------------|
| 1  | First General Election -1952                  | Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur | Mandi Mahasu |
| 2  | Seventh General Election -1980                | Smt Chandresh Kumari  | Kangra       |
| 3  | Eighth General Election -1985                 | Smt Chandresh Kumari  | Kangra       |
| 4  | 14 <sup>th</sup> General Election (2004-2009) | Smt Pratibha Singh    | Mandi        |
| 5  | 15 <sup>th</sup> By Election (2009-2014)      | Smt Pratibha Singh    | Mandi        |

Source: Election Commission of India

The State Legislative Assembly is the highest decision making body in the Himachal Pradesh. The participation of women in this body since independence and its inception has not been encouraging one. Women participation in politics has increased and improved in the State. But, the impact is more visible in voting. Women's representation in the State Legislative Assembly/Territorial Council remained terribly low before 1972. The representation of women in State Legislative Assembly of Himachal Pradesh after 1972 is given in the Table No.3:

**Table - 3: Women in State Legislative Assembly and their Percentage (1972-2012)**

| Year | Total No of Seats | Total No of Contestants | Total No of Women Contestants | Total No of Women Elected | Percentage of women in HP Legislative Assembly |
|------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| 1972 | 68                | 297                     | 07                            | 05                        | 7.35   |
| 1977 | 68                | 330                     | 09                            | 01                        | 1.47   |
| 1982 | 68                | 441                     | 09                            | 03                        | 4.41   |
| 1985 | 68                | 294                     | 08                            | 03                        | 4.41   |
| 1990 | 68                | 454                     | 17                            | 04                        | 5.88   |
| 1993 | 68                | 416                     | 16                            | 04                        | 5.88   |
| 1998 | 68                | 369                     | 25                            | 07                        | 10.29  |
| 2003 | 68                | 408                     | 31                            | 04                        | 5.88   |
| 2007 | 68                | 336                     | 25                            | 05                        | 7.35   |
| 2012 | 68                | 459                     | 34                            | 03                        | 4.41   |

Source: Report on General Elections to Himachal; Pradesh State Legislative Assembly from 1972 to 2012.

Table-3 shows that the representation of women in the State Legislative Assembly has been very small in comparison to men. Their number never exceeded 7 (10.29 percent) and that was in 1998. In 1972, soon after Himachal Pradesh attained Statehood, 5 (7.35 percent) women entered the Legislative Assembly.

The statistics present a very disappointing picture of women's representation in the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly from the statehood to current Vidhan Sabha. Some women representatives have been elected more than once. Vidya Stockes have been for eight times and Asha kumari for five times. It is crystal clear that the women's participation from Himachal Pradesh in the Lok Sabha , Rajya Sabha and State Legislative Assembly is not encouraging in spite the fact numbers of constitutional provision, policies and programmes in existence for women empowerment

### **Women in Panchayat Raj Institutions in Himachal Pradesh**

Panchayats have been the backbone of the Indian villages since the beginning of the recorded history. Gandhi's dream of every village being a republic has been translated into reality with the introduction of three tiers Panchayati Raj system to enlist people's participation in rural reconstruction. 24<sup>th</sup> April 1993 is the landmark day in the history of Panchayati Raj in India, as on this day the Constitution (73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment) Act, 1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj.<sup>5</sup> Before Independence non-formal Panchayati Raj system was in existence in India. The institutions of Panchayati Raj have a hoary history, though it is truly democratic in its essential spirit and origin.

The institution of Panchayat was given space in the Indian Constitution after the Independence. Article 40 of the Directive Principle of the State Policy laid down that the State shall create village Panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as enable them to function as institutions of self-governments. In Himachal Pradesh the majority of the population is still residing in the rural areas hence the significance and relevance of Panchayati Raj is of prime importance. The success of any democratic system



depends upon the involvement, dedication, awareness and participation of masses at the grass-root level<sup>6</sup>.

One of the striking measures for empowering women has been operational in the form of 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments for the two decade. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 provides reservations for women in PRIs set up in two ways; for the office of the members and for that of the Chairpersons. As per the clause (2) and (3) of Article 243(d), not less than one third of the seats meant for direct elections of members at each tier of the Panchayats are to be reserved for the women. The act is indeed a long awaited measure and should have come much earlier. The act is definitely a major move towards strengthening the position of rural women and requires many supportive forces like literacy, respect for women, socio-cultural enlightenment and others in the socio-economic and political milieu.

After the enactment of 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act & Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994, three tiers Panchayati Raj system has been set up at grass root level in the State. Presently, there are 3243 Gram Panchayats, 77 Panchayat Samitis and 12 Zila Parishads in the State. Since its inception in 1994 the Himachal Pradesh State Election Commission has conducted four general elections to the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the year 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2010.<sup>7</sup>

Women involvement in PRIs was dominated by two interrelated themes; representation of women in these bodies and effectiveness and outcomes of their participation. Co-option of few women was the only available option for women to participate and it was a travesty for it could not produce the desired result and no result at all until the passage of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution.

The position of women representatives is far better in Himachal Pradesh, unlike the Panchayati Raj Institutions in many States. The Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994, in the spirit of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment provides that whenever a woman Pradhan is removed by no confidence motion; she shall be replaced only by a woman Pradhan and not by her deputy. It has also been observed

that though male representatives play somewhat dominating role in PRIs, the female representatives have got workable freedom and sufficient say in the developmental programmes. They are not at all helpless to sign on dotted lines.

Before 1995, women representation in PRIs was maximum up to two women in all the PRIs bodies. After 1995, it has increased to minimum 33 per cent and 50 per cent reservation since 2010 elections to the PRIs. The representation of women in these institutions has shown an increasing trend. In the last four elections to the PRIs, women have been elected even from the unreserved seats and their representation has been more than the fixed quota allotted to them. Out of total representatives, 541 women have been elected from unreserved seats in all three tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions in 2010-11 election<sup>8</sup>. Over all women representation in Himachal Pradesh during 2010-11 election in PRIs is shown in the Table No. 4:

**Table-4: Gender distribution of posts at various levels in PRIs in 2010-2011**

| SN    | Name of Post              | Males | Females | Total | % Women |
|-------|---------------------------|-------|---------|-------|---------|
| 1     | Panchayat Member          | 8096  | 11317   | 19413 | 58.33   |
| 2     | Panchayat Pardhan         | 1604  | 1639    | 3243  | 50.54   |
| 3     | Panchayat Samiti Member   | 819   | 863     | 1682  | 51.31   |
| 4     | Panchayat Samiti Chairman | 35    | 42      | 77    | 54.55   |
| 5     | Zila Parishad Member      | 123   | 128     | 251   | 51.00   |
| 6     | Zila Parishad Chairman    | 6     | 6       | 12    | 50.00   |
| Total |                           | 10683 | 13995   | 24678 | 56.71   |

**Source:** Department of Panchayat Raj, Government of Himachal Pradesh, Shimla, 2012.

## Comparative Analysis of Panchayati Raj Institutions elections since 1995.

**Table- 5: Comparative analysis of women performance in all Panchayati Raj Institutions elections after 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act in Himachal Pradesh**

| Post                     | 1995        |         | 2000        |         | 2005        |         | 2010-11     |         |
|--------------------------|-------------|---------|-------------|---------|-------------|---------|-------------|---------|
|                          | Total Women | Women % | Total Women | Women % | Total Women | Women % | Total Women | Women % |
| Pradhans                 | 970         | 33.19   | 1037        | 34.14   | 1112        | 34.28   | 1639        | 50.54   |
| Ward Members             | 6013        | 32.92   | 6712        | 36.18   | 7462        | 38.43   | 11317       | 58.33   |
| Chairpersons P.Samiti    | 23          | 31.94   | 26          | 34.66   | 34          | 45.33   | 42          | 54.55   |
| Members P.Samiti         | 558         | 33.19   | 562         | 33.89   | 579         | 34.54   | 863         | 51.55   |
| Chairpersons Z. Parishad | 4           | 33.33   | 4           | 33.33   | 7           | 58.33   | 06          | 50.00   |
| Members Z. Parishad      | 84          | 33.33   | 79          | 31.47   | 85          | 33.86   | 128         | 51.00   |
| Total                    | 7652        | 33.00   | 8420        | 35.70   | 9279        | 37.61   | 13995       | 56.71   |

**Source:** Directorate of Panchayati Raj and State Election Commission Report-2005, Himachal Pradesh, Shimla.

It is evident from the analysis of the comparative Tables that after the introduction of the historical Act, the first elections were held in 1995. In these elections, women contributed 33 per cent. Since 1995 women participation has increased gradually. After the introduction of HPPR Amendment Act, 2008, women reservation has increased from 33 per cent to 50 per cent. At present, more than 50 per cent women are involved in decision making process in Himachal Pradesh rural political affairs.

### Hurdles in the way of political participation of women in Himachal Pradesh

There are many factors which are responsible for the low participation of women in the politics of the State:

- Himachali women have to encounter many obstacles because of traditions, inequality and social conditions of the hill society. Social traditions look women as a part of the household, not as a part of the public life.
- Politics is still regarded as men's affairs and political life is generally considered to be a male activity.



- The mindset of the people as well as of the politicians still wants to see women at the lowest level in the society as well as in politics.
- Most women themselves are also unwilling to join politics.
- The political parties are also hesitant to field the women candidates in the elections because of their perception that women have less prospects of winning the seats.
- Surprisingly, about 50 percent of women's populations also do not compel the political parties to field more women candidates from their side. The political parties make excuse of win ability criteria while allotting tickets to women.
- Further, it is also interesting to note that while all the political parties in principle support the Constitutional Amendments for 33 percent reservation for women in the Parliament and State Legislatures but no party has so far come forward to nominate this percentage of women for elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies

### **Suggestions to improve political participation of women in Himachal Pradesh**

- The spread of education among women can play a very vital role in bringing about desirable behavioural changes among the women and make them well equipped in terms of knowledge, awareness, skill, self-confidence and capacity to deal with different problems.
- Provision of reservation can only be fruitful for the women, SC, ST, if they are aware of their rights. So government should sensitize them in this regard by way of awareness campaigns.
- The women, who secured prestigious position in the society, must help those women who are in marginalized position.
- No efforts of the government for the political equality and empowerment of women can be either effective or adequate unless women themselves become more conscious and aware about their political rights and duties.
- Women, on their own should also develop a positive attitude towards politics.

- Family support and co-operation is necessary for enhancing participation of women in politics.
- Political parties must encourage women to take part in political activities by providing them important offices in the party hierarchies,
- Reservation of seats for women in the Parliament, State legislatures and various other decision making bodies as in the case of PRIs should be effectively adopted and implemented.
- In our male dominated patriarchal society, sometimes, it has been seen that women political activists and even the elected women representatives become the victim of sexual abuse, exploitation, violence and harassment. The women should feel themselves secure and safe in all spheres including the politics.

To sum up, it may be said that women's equal participation in politics as voters, candidates, representatives and decision-makers is essential not only for the success of a democratic political system but it can also play a vital role in their advancement as well as in the transformation of the society. The political empowerment of women is a must for their all-round development.

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