

The Status and Role of Tribal Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of Nashik District, Maharashtra

Dr. Sunil Laxman Gawande^{1*}, Prof. Nagarjun Wadekar².

¹Assistant Professor (Public Administration), School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University. Maharashtra

²Director, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University. Maharashtra

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Sunil Laxman Gawande, Assistant Professor (Public Administration), School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University. Maharashtra

Abstract: The foundation of Indian democracy rests on grassroots self-governance, and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment granted constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions. This system provided women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes with opportunities for political representation through reservations. To strengthen traditional self-governance practices in Scheduled Areas, the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA Act) was enacted, which recognizes the Gram Sabha as the supreme decision-making body and ensures women's constitutional right to participate. However, in practice, the participation of tribal women is often found to be limited and largely symbolic. Despite the implementation of the PESA Act in Nashik district, women's influence in decision-making processes remains below expectations. The present study analyses the status, role, leadership development, and socio-economic transformation of tribal women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Nashik district. The findings highlight certain positive aspects of women's leadership development and transformation, while also revealing major obstacles such as social pressure, lack of education, and economic vulnerability. Therefore, the study emphasizes the urgent need for training, social support, and administrative cooperation to enhance the effective participation of tribal women.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj System, Tribal Women Empowerment, PESA Act, Gram Sabha and Participation, Leadership Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The foundation of India's democratic structure lies in grassroots self-governance. With the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were accorded constitutional status, and a system of governance based on local representation and autonomy in rural areas formally came into existence (India, The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992, 1992). This framework ensured representation for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes through reservations, thereby opening avenues for the empowerment of marginalized sections of society. However, mere representation is not sufficient; active participation and decision-making empowerment constitute the true essence of democracy. To provide constitutional recognition to the traditional self-governance practices of tribal communities in Scheduled Areas, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA Act) was enacted (India, 1996). Under this Act, the Gram Sabha is recognized as the supreme decision-making body and is vested with authority over local resources. The PESA Act also grants women the constitutional right to participate in the Gram Sabha and take part in decision-making processes. In practice, however, women's participation remains limited and often merely formal in nature (Kusugal, 2013).

Nashik district is one of the major tribal-dominated regions of Maharashtra, inhabited by prominent tribes such as the Bhil, Kokna, Warli, and Katkari (Dhum, 2020). The talukas of Nashik, Peth, Trimbakeshwar, and Surgana fall under Scheduled Areas. Although the PESA Act has been implemented in these areas, the actual participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system remains relatively low. Many women are elected as Sarpanch or members; however, their influence in the decision-making process is limited. Against this backdrop, an objective analysis of the implementation of the PESA Act, women's participation in Gram Sabhas, and their empowerment

becomes essential. Inclusiveness, representation, and empowerment are regarded as the core principles of Indian democracy. In this context, the representation and participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system emerge as a significant area of study. Women belonging to Scheduled Tribes constitute one of the most marginalized sections of society. Ensuring their effective participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions represents the true realization of democratic ideals. This study enables an assessment of the level of their social inclusion. Although the PESA Act is applicable in the Scheduled Areas of Nashik district, the question remains whether it has been implemented in a genuine and effective manner, particularly with respect to women. An objective analysis is therefore necessary. The present study seeks to determine whether women representatives are merely nominal or truly empowered in practice. At the policy level, this study can be valuable for departments concerned with women's development, tribal development, and Panchayati Raj in formulating effective strategies. It can also offer suggestions for enhancing women's active participation in local self-governance institutions. Nashik district is geographically, socially, and culturally diverse. Consequently, an examination of the ground realities in this district may serve not only as a localized study but also as a guiding reference for other tribal regions. This study has significant implications for women's empowerment, tribal development, transparency in village governance, and the effective implementation of the PESA Act. If women emerge as decisive actors within the Panchayati Raj system, local development can become more effective, inclusive, and sustainable.

1.1. Research Objectives:

1. To examine women's awareness regarding leadership, rights, and responsibilities.
2. To study the position and role of tribal women in Panchayati Raj Institutions.
3. To understand the impact of social, economic and political factors on their participation.

1.2. Hypotheses:

1. Leadership development among tribal women is taking place in Panchayati Raj Institutions.
2. Tribal women are experiencing social and economic transformation.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The present research paper adopts a mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. A descriptive and analytical approach has been used to study the participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system in Nashik district. Seventy-two women respondents from selected Gram Panchayats in the tribal-dominated talukas of Nashik, Peth, and Surgana were selected using purposive and convenience sampling methods. Data were collected through primary sources such as questionnaires, interviews, and observation, as well as secondary sources including books, reports, and government documents. The collected data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide an in-depth analysis of trends, constraints, and outcomes related to women's participation

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several scholars have conducted in-depth studies on Panchayati Raj and women's empowerment. Aman Kumar (2011), through an analysis of women's socio-economic status, microfinance, and contributions to the agricultural sector, observed that although reservations have increased women's participation, their influence in decision-making remains limited. Rajaraman (2003) highlighted the lack of financial autonomy of local institutions as a major obstacle to the effectiveness of Panchayats. Sandeep Joshi (2000) elaborated on the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in poverty alleviation and rural development. Chandrashekhar (1999), in his report, presented a comparative analysis of Panchayati Raj Institutions across different states and highlighted the social challenges faced by tribal women in terms of representation.

V. B. Patil (1999) emphasized the concept, structure, and historical development of Panchayati Raj and village self-governance. Nirmala Buch (2000), based on the experiences of women sarpanchs, pointed out the growth of self-confidence and leadership qualities among rural and tribal women. Rajeshwari Deshpande (2005) provided a qualitative analysis of women's political empowerment after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and raised concerns regarding their actual decision-making power. Beena Sharma (2014)

Reports by the United Nations, particularly UNIFEM, have highlighted at the global level the increased transparency and accountability resulting from women’s participation in Panchayats. Jatti Rajendra (2023), in a study based on the experiences of tribal women in Telangana, demonstrated that training, awareness, and institutional support are essential for effective participation. Overall, the collective findings of these studies clearly indicate that Panchayati Raj Institutions serve as an effective platform for the political, social, and economic empowerment of women; however, this requires the support of education, training, financial autonomy, and social backing to be truly effective.

4. POSITION AND ROLE OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

Nashik district is one of the important tribal-dominated districts of Maharashtra, where many villages fall under Scheduled Areas as per the provisions of the PESA Act. The participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system is extremely significant for making the democratic process of local governance more inclusive (Rajendar, 2023). Considering the district in this context, the involvement of tribal women in Nashik emerges as an important area of research. This is because the district is geographically and culturally distinctive and helps illuminate the nature and patterns of tribal women’s participation in Maharashtra. Against this backdrop, studying the participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system in Nashik district is important not only from a local perspective but also from broader sociological, political, and administrative viewpoints.

Table 1. Leadership Development of Tribal Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions

Sr. No.	Leadership Development	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
1.	Yes	35	48.61	48.61
2.	No	20	27.78	76.39
3.	To some extent	17	23.61	100.00
4.	Total	72	100.00	—

Source: Primary Survey, 2025

The above table clearly indicates that 48.61% of the respondents acknowledged that leadership development among tribal women has taken place, whereas 27.78% believed that leadership development has not occurred. The remaining 23.61% respondents stated that leadership development has occurred only “to some extent.” These findings suggest that leadership development of tribal women within Panchayati Raj Institutions remains limited and incomplete. Although nearly half of the respondents recognized some level of leadership development, the remaining group reflects a lack of training, guidance, and social support. Therefore, this analysis highlights the need for continuous training, awareness-building initiatives, and supportive policies to strengthen leadership capacities among tribal women.

Table 2. Changes Brought About by the Participation of Tribal Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. (Multiple choice)

Sr. No.	Type of Change	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
1.	Social change	30	41.67	41.67
2.	Economic change	25	34.72	76.39
3.	Political change	18	25.00	101.39
4.	Resolution of women’s problems	20	27.78	129.17
5.	No change	12	16.67	145.84
Total		105	—	—

Source: Primary Survey, 2025.

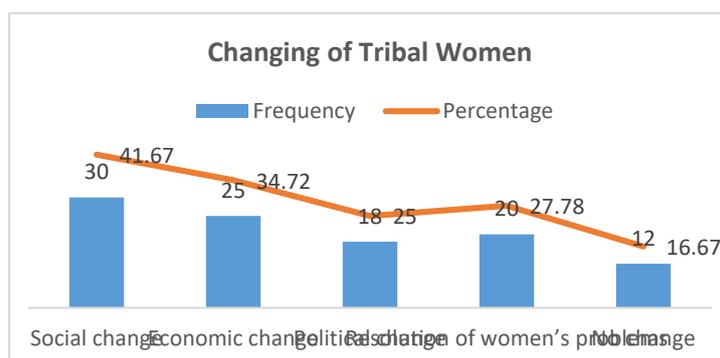


Figure 1. Changing of Tribal Women

The analysis of the above table indicates that the participation of tribal women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has resulted in positive changes at the social (41.67%), economic (34.72%), and political (25%) levels. Additionally, 27.78% of the respondents reported that the resolution of women’s issues has become easier. However, 16.67% of the respondents stated that no change has occurred. These findings clearly show that while women’s participation has contributed to social transformation, further efforts are required to strengthen leadership development and bring about broader and more sustainable social change. Bottom of Form

Table 3. Barriers to the Participation of Tribal Women in the Panchayati Raj System

Sr. No.	Barriers	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
1.	Social pressure	25	34.72	34.72
2.	Lack of education	18	25.00	59.72
3.	Family opposition	15	20.83	80.55
4.	Economic weakness	14	19.45	100.00
Total		72	100.00	—

Source: Primary Survey, 2025

The above table clearly shows that the major barrier to the participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system is social pressure (34.72%). Traditional customs, social norms, and restrictions significantly limit their participation. This is followed by lack of education (25%), family opposition (20.83%), and economic weakness (19.45%) as other important barriers. These factors reduce women’s self-confidence, decision-making capacity, and political participation. Therefore, the study emphasizes that social awareness, educational empowerment, economic strengthening, and family support are essential to make the participation of tribal women more effective.

Table 4. Factors Promoting Participation in the Panchayati Raj System (Multiple choice)

Sr. No.	Factors Promoting Participation	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
1.	Family support	58	80.56	80.56
2.	Social organizations	50	69.44	150.00
3.	Training	45	62.50	212.50
4.	Administrative support	40	55.56	268.06
5.	Reservation	60	83.33	351.39
Total		253	—	—

Source: Primary Survey, 2025

The analysis of Table No. 4 shows that reservation (83.33%) and family support (80.56%) are the most influential factors promoting the participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system. Social organizations (69.44%), training (62.50%), and administrative support (55.56%) also play a significant role in enhancing women’s participation. The data clearly indicates that while reservation provides women with opportunities, encouragement from family members, guidance from social organizations, and training programs enhance their self-confidence and capacity for participation. Therefore, sustaining and strengthening the participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system requires a coordinated approach involving structural support, training, social backing, and administrative cooperation.

2.2. Hypotheses Verification

H₁: Leadership development among tribal women is taking place in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

This hypothesis is accepted. Survey responses clearly indicate that leadership development among tribal women in Panchayati Raj Institutions is occurring. A combined total of 72.22% of respondents expressed a positive view by selecting “Yes” or “To some extent” regarding leadership development. Therefore, the hypothesis proposed by the researcher is accepted.

H₂: Tribal women are experiencing social and economic transformation.

This hypothesis is also accepted. According to the survey data, a total of 76.39% of tribal women reported experiencing either social transformation (41.67%) or economic transformation (34.72%). In contrast, only 16.67% of respondents stated that no change had occurred. Hence, based on the available

empirical evidence, it is evident that tribal women are undergoing clear social as well as economic transformation.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study clearly indicate that although the participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system has increased, its impact remains partial and limited. While reservation has enabled women to gain political representation, substantial progress is still required in terms of leadership development, participation in decision-making, and autonomous roles.

1. **Leadership Development:** According to the survey, 48.61% of tribal women reported experiencing leadership development after participating in Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, 27.78% felt that no such development had taken place. This clearly suggests that leadership development is limited and highlights the need for continuous training and guidance.
2. **Socio-Economic Transformation:** The participation of tribal women has led to positive changes at the social (41.67%), economic (34.72%), and political (25%) levels. Although there has been improvement in addressing women's issues, greater efforts are required to achieve broader and more comprehensive social transformation.
3. **Barriers to Participation:** The major barriers to the participation of tribal women include social pressure (34.72%), lack of education (25%), family opposition (20.83%), and economic weakness (19.45%). These factors reduce women's self-confidence, decision-making ability, and political engagement.
4. **Factors Promoting Participation:** Reservation (83.33%) and family support (80.56%) emerged as the most significant factors encouraging tribal women's participation in the Panchayati Raj system. Social organizations (69.44%), training (62.50%), and administrative support (55.56%) also play an important role.

Overall, while the participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system is increasing, it remains qualitatively incomplete and constrained. Deficiencies in leadership training, capacity building, and social support persist. Although reservations have enhanced representation, effective participation in decision-making requires socio-cultural transformation and comprehensive empowerment strategies. The study underscores that tribal women have secured a place within Panchayati Raj Institutions; however, their role continues to be limited and largely symbolic. To empower them in a meaningful way, multi-pronged efforts are needed at the social, educational, and economic levels. Enhanced decision-making and effective participation by women can make rural democracy more inclusive and sustainable.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study reveals that although the participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system has increased, it remains limited and inadequate. To make their participation more effective, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Awareness campaigns should be conducted in rural and tribal communities to foster a positive attitude toward women's leadership and participation.
2. The lack of education constrains women's leadership abilities; therefore, initiatives aimed at promoting literacy, technical skills, and administrative knowledge should be implemented.
3. The economic base of women should be strengthened by expanding Self-Help Groups (SHGs), microfinance schemes, and entrepreneurship development programs.
4. Non-governmental organizations, social organizations, and women's groups should play an active role in training, mentoring, and problem-solving processes.
5. Since family support is crucial for women's participation, efforts should be made from a sociological perspective to create a positive outlook toward women's empowerment among male family members as well.
6. Effective utilization of reservations: Although reservations have provided women with opportunities, they should not remain limited to symbolic representation. Capacity-building

programs must be integrated with reservation policies to enhance women's decision-making abilities.

7. Administrative and institutional support: Local self-government institutions should provide necessary guidance, follow-up, and administrative support to ensure women members' active participation in decision-making processes.
8. Regular training programs should be organized for women representatives on the functioning of Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zilla Parishads, including planning, financial management, and decision-making processes.

If all these recommendations are effectively implemented, the participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system will move beyond mere representation and become effective, empowered, and transformative. Consequently, local self-government institutions will be strengthened in terms of social justice and equality.

REFERENCES

- [1] Dhum, K. (2020, September 30). An Introduction to the Life and History of the Tribal Community in Nashik District. Retrieved from https://amhiadivasi.blogspot.com/2020/09/blog-post_30.html
- [2] India, G. o. (1992). The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992. New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice.
- [3] India, G. o. (1996). The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA). New Delhi: Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
- [4] Kusugal, P. N. (2013, Dec). Empowerment of Scheduled Tribe Women and Panchayat Raj Institution: A case study. *Paripex- Indian Journal of Research*, 37-46.
- [5] Rajendar, J. (2023). Tribal Women experiencing Panchayati Raj Institution in India with Special reference to Telangana. *International Education and Research Journal*, 17-19.

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY



Dr. Sunil Laxman Gawande is an Academic Coordinator (Assistant Professor) in Public Administration at Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik, India. He holds a Ph.D. in Public Administration from SRTM University, Nanded, and completed his Post-Doctoral Fellowship at ICSSR, New Delhi. His research expertise includes the Right to Information Act, Digital Administration, Governance, and Public Policy. He has been awarded prestigious fellowships such as UGC-JRF, UGC-SRF, ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellowship, and the Lok Sabha Research Fellowship. Dr. Gawande has authored books including *Bhartiya Prashasan*, *Lokprashan Sidhant ani Vyavhar*, and *Mahiticha Adhikar ani Sushasan*. He has contributed numerous research papers to reputed journals such as *YOJANA*, *Vidyawarta*, and *Drishtikon (UGC Care)*. With over a decade of teaching and research experience, he has worked in various colleges and universities across Maharashtra.



Prof. Nagarjun Maruti Wadekar is an Associate Professor of English and Director I/C of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at YCMOU, where he also serves as the Head of the Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Chair. He has over twenty-one years of teaching experience at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. His research interests include Indian Writing in English Translation, Dalit Literature, English Language and Literature, and Human Rights Education. He has coordinated several academic programmes, developed course materials in English and Marathi, delivered lectures on multiple platforms, and contributed papers to numerous national and international seminars and conferences.

Citation: Dr. Sunil Laxman Gawande & Prof. Nagarjun Wadekar. "The Status and Role of Tribal Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of Nashik District, Maharashtra" *International Journal of Political Science (IJPS)*, vol 12, no 1, 2026, pp. 1-6. doi: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2454-9452.1201001>.

Copyright: © 2026 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.