

# WOMEN PANCHAYAT MEMBERS IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR: A PROFILE

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## Abstract

Panchayats have been in existence since long in the country. Women, however, have not been an integral part of this system before 73rd Amendment provides reservation to women. The provisions of 73rd Amendment were not extended to the State of Jammu and Kashmir owing to the special status of State under Article 370. In Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj institutions are constituted under Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989. However, the provision of 33 per cent reservation for women in halqa panchayats for panch constituencies was made only in 2003 by Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Act, 2003. The panchayat elections in Jammu and Kashmir under this provision were held in 2011. For the first time large number of women have entered into halqa panchayats due to reservation. The present paper has made an attempt to study the socio-economic and political profile of these newly elected women panchayat members.

**Keywords:** *Panchayat; Women; Jammu and Kashmir*

## Introduction

Women's presence in rural governance institutions has remained marginal. Rural self-governing bodies i.e., Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) had been dominated by men until 73rd Amendment was passed in 1993 to ensure 33 per cent reservation to women. In the case of Jammu and Kashmir, institutions of rural governance (PRIs) too remained men's monopoly until State provides reservation to women in 2003.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was a significant step towards opening up the space for women's political participation and in acknowledging their role in the development of their village. For the first time, in the history of this country, one million women were elected to the various tiers of panchayats. Women who have been elected to power in the Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) represent various backgrounds - rich and poor, dominant classes and oppressed social classes, educated and illiterate.

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an integral part of this system before 73rd Amendment. Whatever local self-government existed before 73rd Amendment had little effect on gender relations. In India, a handful of women, usually one in each village, were nominated as members of the panchayat. Yet, their participation remained nominal and most didn't even bother to attend the meetings but simply gave their thumb print as signature to whatever decisions were taken.

The Panchayati Raj Act, 1992-popularly known as 73rd Amendment-was enacted in the country to revitalise the Panchayati Raj institutions besides providing for reservation to women. The provisions of 73rd Amendment were not extended to the State of Jammu and Kashmir owing to the special status of State under article 370. However, some of its provisions were incorporated through amendments in the State Act. Still these provisions do not bring the State Panchayat Act at par with the 73rd Amendment.

The State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has introduced various Acts regarding rural local self-governing bodies, the most important being Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989. This Act provides for a three-tier system consisting of halqa panchayats, Block Development Council and District Planning and Development Board. In addition, the Act provides for a Panchayati Adalat for every halqa. In the original Act, it was also mentioned that if the prescribed authority is of the opinion that women are not adequately represented in the halqa panchayat, it may nominate such number of women to be members thereof, as it may deem fit (Provided further that their number does not exceed 33 per cent of the total number of panchayat members). However, this provision was replaced by Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Act, 2003 that provides for 33 per cent reservation to women in halqa panchayats. But this amendment does not talk about reservation of seats for the post of sarpanch like the 73rd Amendment Act, which seems to be a flaw and retrogressive step in this case.

The panchayat elections in Jammu and Kashmir were held in 2011 after a gap of 10 years. The last panchayat elections were conducted in the State in 2001-02 after a gap of 23 years. The panchayat elections were held for election of 4130 sarpanches and 29,719 panches (Directorate of Rural Development, Srinagar/Jammu). For the first time, 33 per cent panch constituencies were reserved for women. Out of 28248 panchs elected (1471 seats remained vacant) across the state, 9424 are women i.e., 33.3 per cent of elected panches are women. But in case of sarpanch posts, the fairer sex in Jammu and Kashmir has failed to break into male-dominated politics of the State. Out of 4,113 sarpanch posts in the 22 districts of the state, only 28 women managed to win the elections- a dismal success rate of 0.68 percent (Directorate of Rural Development, Srinagar/Jammu).

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Constitutional experts feel that non-application of the 73rd Amendment in Jammu and Kashmir was the main reason for such a small number of women standing in the elections. They maintained that in the absence of reservations for women for sarpanch posts, it will always be difficult for them to break into the male bastion.

The present paper has made an attempt to examine the profile of newly elected women panchayat members in halqa panchayats of Jammu and Kashmir. The study has been carried out in the halqa panchayats of Jammu, Samba and Kathua districts of Jammu region. There are 296 halqa panchayats in Jammu district, 244 halqa panchayats in Kathua district and 100 halqa panchayats in Samba district. Overall 1568 women panches and seven sarpanches have been elected from these three districts.

Multi-stage purposeful sampling method is used to select the area of study. Multi-stage purposeful sampling involves selecting a sample in two or more stages. Out of 10 districts of Jammu region, three districts namely Jammu, Samba and Kathua districts were selected purposively for research. From each district, two Blocks were selected and from each Block, five halqa panchayats were selected purposively.

Thus the study was carried out in the 30 selected halqa panchayats of six Blocks of Jammu, Samba and Kathua districts. Blocks and halqa panchayats have been selected in such a way so that all the women headed panchayats from the selected districts would be covered. Further all the women representatives from the selected 30 halqa panchayats are covered. Thus the sample comprised of 83 women panchayat representatives that includes 7 sarpanches and 76 panches. The structured interview with the help of interview schedule was carried out with these 83 women representatives to examine their profile.

### **Profile of Women Panchayat Members**

Socio-economic and political background of women has direct or indirect bearing on their political participation and nomination to various posts of panchayats. Participation of elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions cannot be studied in isolation, as it is dependent on their socio-economic and political conditions.

Various studies have been conducted to study the profile of newly elected women in Panchayati Raj institutions. The study on women and Panchayati Raj institutions has shown that a large number of women came from dominant, land owning and political influential families. Hazel D'Lima (1983) has noted in her study that the largest number of women representatives (69 per cent) in Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad in Maharashtra were from the dominant Maratha castes, 50 per cent came from families owning more than 20

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acres of land and 76 per cent of women belonged to politically active families. The mean age of women representative was 45 years.

A study of elected women representatives in Karnataka Panchayati Raj institutions between 1987-96 reveals that women from the dominant castes- the Lingayats and Vokkaligas- formed 60 per cent of the elected members in the Zila Parishad. They were often relatives of political leaders. The Karnataka study shows that women have social handicaps and constraints of various kinds in functioning effectively but with experience their effectiveness has improved and it was hoped that with every election this will further enhance (Mathew, 1995).

The Centre for Women's Development Studies' (CWDS) study of women in panchayats of three States – Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and U.P. – shows that a majority of respondents were illiterate and below poverty line. Most of them were first time entrants. Only 3 per cent women had previous experience of panchayat and 6.2 per cent had family members with such experience. Their socio-economic and political background depicts a qualitative difference from earlier representatives showing wider representation of castes and classes (CWDS, 1999).

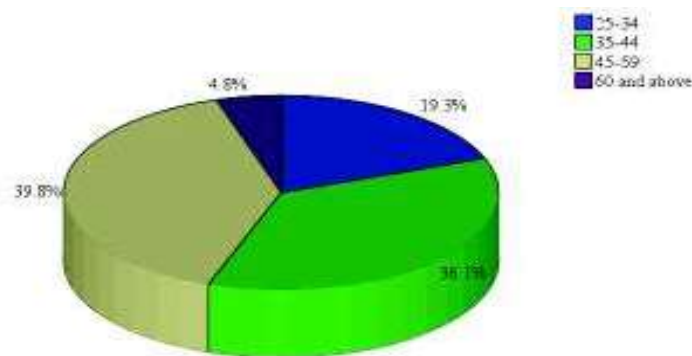
Buch (2010) conducted a study on women's experience in new panchayats of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. She observed that women who have come to the panchayats after the reservations show a wider representation of socio-economic groups in view of the reservation given to the social groups in proportion to their population and within them to women to the extent of one-third. Majority of women across social groups, caste and class are younger and in the reproductive age group of below 45 years. Majority of women representatives were agriculturists and they were predominantly married. The study also found the entry of a large number of women from families without any land or from small land holdings, who had low assets holding and whose family incomes were also quite low.

The study of socio-economic and political background of women representatives in halqa panchayats in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) presents a real picture of their participation. Due to the absence of 73rd Amendment, there is very less representation of women in sarpanch positions but reservation for panch constituencies leads to entry of many women in halqa panchayats as rural people's representatives. Their mere election in halqa panchayats marks a dent in the male dominated political structure of the rural society.

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**Social Profile**

**Age-wise Distribution:** An important change in the new Panchayati Raj institutions as different from the traditional Panchayats is the shift in the age-composition of the panchayat body. The study reveals that most of the elected women belong to the younger and reproductive age group of below 45 years with mean age of 43.89 years i.e. 44 years. About 55.4 per cent of women representatives were below 45 years of age. There is also a substantial representation of women from middle age group of 45-59 years as about 39.8 per cent of elected women were in the 45-59 age-group (Fig. 1). The predominance of women from the middle age group can be attributed to the fact that by this age the rural women are relatively free from child caring, are in a position to assume responsibilities outside the home, are not expected to conform to the social norms of being behind the veil, and command greater respect and authority at both village and family.



**Fig. 1: Age-wise Distribution**

**Marital Status:** Marital status also decides the participation of women candidates in election. Sometimes their partner may be supportive. In the present study, it has been found that all the women representatives are married. It shows that the chances for married women to enter into political structures are brighter than the unmarried women. This could be due to the acceptance of married women as representatives of society or due to social sanctions preventing unmarried young girls to participate in public sphere.

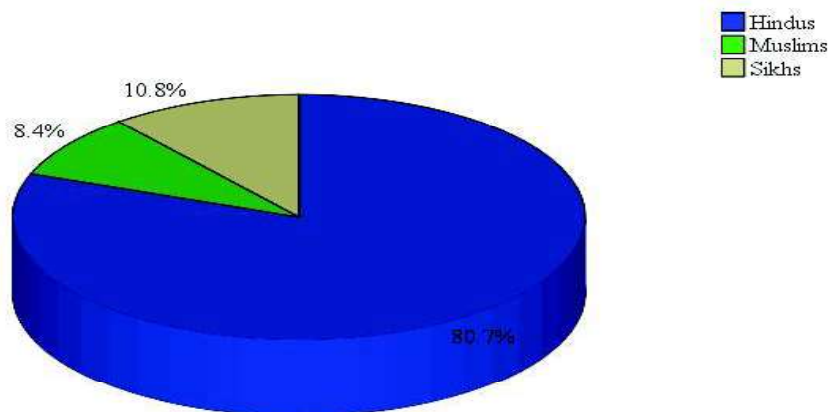
**Educational Status:** Education is an important index of modernization and rational thinking. Education is considered to be one of the most important independent variables for participation and effectiveness in politics. It has been found, as shown in Table 1, that only 24.1 per cent of elected women are illiterate. The rest of the women panchayat representatives have at least education up to primary level. Among the literates, large number of them had education up to matriculation (30.1 per cent) and 8<sup>th</sup> standard (22.9 per cent).

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**Table 1: Educational level of Women Panchayat Representatives**

Education	Number	Percent
Illiterate	20	24.1
Primary	6	7.2
Middle	19	22.9
Matriculation	25	30.1
Higher Secondary	7	8.4
Graduate and Above	6	7.2
Total	83	100.0

**Religion:** Religion is an important parameter, which illuminates the religious composition of leadership and its reflection on the political preference of the society. It is very pertinent in our State where multi-communal plural society exists. In the present study, it has been found that most of the elected women were Hindus (80.7 per cent) followed by Sikhs (10.8 per cent) and Muslims (8.4 per cent). The representation of Muslims and Sikhs is in small proportion to Hindus because the selected areas had lesser population of these communities (Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2: Religion Wise- Distribution**

**Social Category:** The social category of elected women presents a mixed picture. It has been found, as shown in Fig. 3, that majority of the women panchayat members belong to general category (47 per cent) and Scheduled Castes (33.7 per cent).

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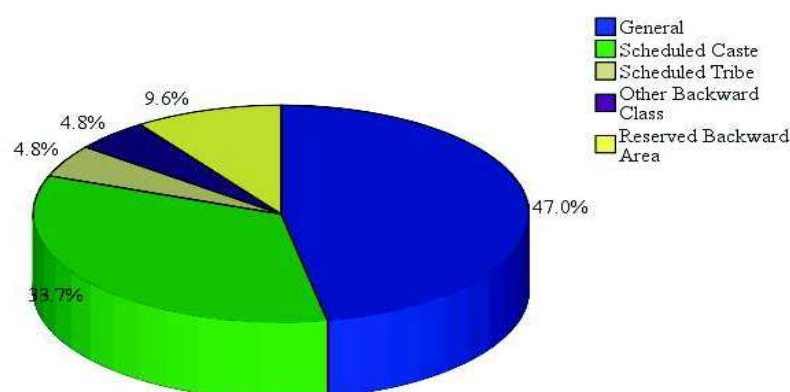


Fig. 3: Social Category-wise Distribution

### Economic Profile

The economic status of women representatives was studied with the help of number of parameters like their occupation, their reported household income, family landholdings, household assets, etc.

**Occupation:** Occupation is a vital parameter for measuring social background of the leaders because it builds up one's attitude, preference pattern and political outlook. The study reveals that that 77.1 per cent of women representatives are housewives and hence have no economic earnings of their own making them dependent on their husband/father (Table 2). It may be due to the economic security as well as active support of their husbands. A higher concentration of housewives also showed that they had come from comparatively better off sections and caste groups where women's outside mobility is limited by socio-cultural restrictions.

Table 2: Occupational Classification of Women Panchayat Representatives

Occupation	Number	Percent
Housewife	64	77.1
Cultivators	10	12.0
Cultivation and Labour	4	4.8
Business	2	2.4
Full Time Politician	1	1.2
Ex-servicewomen	2	2.4
Total	83	100.0

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**Household Income:** It has been found that women panchayat members had sound economic background. Only 21.7 per cent of them had monthly family income less than Rs. 5000. There is substantial number of women representatives, i.e., 35 per cent, whose family income is more than Rs. 20,000 per month. It more or less corroborates with the economic condition of people of Jammu and Kashmir in general as it has the least number of Below Poverty Line people (Table 3).

**Table 3: Household Income of Women Panchayat Representatives**

Monthly Income (in Rs.)	Number	Percent
Less Than 5000	18	21.7
5000-10000	16	19.3
10000-15000	10	12.0
15000-20000	10	12.0
20000-25000	14	16.9
More Than 25000	15	18.1
Total	83	100.0

**Landed Property:** Land holding also indirectly states the economic condition of the respondents. It has been found that only 24.1 per cent of women panchayat representatives' households didn't have land holdings. Women representatives with large landholdings are in small number as only 8.4 per cent of them have landholdings more than 4 acres. It need to be mentioned that due to land reforms carried out under the leadership of Sheikh Abdullah, the average size of landholdings in Jammu and Kashmir as well as number of landless people is far less than many other States in India.

**Household Assets:** Household assets with the households of women representatives confirmed the trends seen in the income levels. In the present study, it has been found that most of the women panchayat members possessed common household assets like Television, Refrigerator and Scooter/Motor-cycle. Only 10.8 per cent of elected women didn't possess any household assets. Even there are substantial number of women panchayat members who had expensive household assets like car, AC and Computer.

### Political Profile

The political profile of the women panchayat representatives has been analyzed by relating it with their previous panchayat experience, political party affiliation, involvement in village affairs before elections, political experience of their affinal and natal family members, etc (Table 4).



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**Table 4: Political Profile of Women Panchayat Representatives**

Political Profile		Number	Percent
Previous Panchayat Experience	Yes	3	3.6
	No	80	96.4
Affiliation with Political Party	Yes	31	37.3
	No	52	62.7
Participation in Village Affairs	Yes	20	24.1
	No	63	75.9
Affinal Family's Panchayat Experience	Yes	15	18.1
	No	68	81.9
Affinal Family in Politics	Yes	8	9.6
	No	75	90.4
Natal Family's Panchayat Experience	Yes	11	13.3
	No	72	86.7
Natal Family in Politics	Yes	7	8.4
	No	76	91.6
Husband in Politics	Yes	6	7.2
	No	77	92.8

The political profile of women panchayat members is summarized in the above table. In this study it has been seen that majority of women panchayat members were first time entrants in panchayats. Women with previous panchayat experience constitute only 3.6 percent of them. Further it has been found that 62.7 per cent of women panchayat representatives did not have affiliation to any political party and 75.9 per cent have not been involved in village affairs before panchayat elections.

The study also reveals that only 18.1 per cent women representatives' affinal family members had previous panchayat experience and also majority of the women panchayat members, i.e., 75 out of 83 (90.4 per cent), come from non-political affinal families. As far as their natal families are concerned, it has been found that only 13.3 per cent women representatives' natal family members had previous panchayat experience and majority of the women panchayat members, i.e., 76 out of 83 (91.6 per cent), come from non-political natal families. Also it was observed that the husbands of about 92.8 per cent women panchayat members were not in active politics.

### Conclusion

Thus the socio-economic and political profile of elected women representatives of halqa panchayats presents a mixed picture. The study reveals that the majority of the women

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panchayat representatives are in between 25-59 years. Substantial number of younger women have come to bear the risk and responsibility of panchayats instead of older, though they are coming due to reservation at the earlier age without any experience and exposure. It is a clear indication of the shift in the traditional pattern of leadership in rural areas. Thus it can be said that people now prefer active and dynamic leaders.

Most of the women panchayat representatives are literates and also all of them are married. Majority of the elected women members' families are nuclear. Religion-wise Hindus constituted the largest group. Majority of women representatives are from general and Scheduled Castes categories while on caste basis, Brahmans followed by Bhagats are the main social groups in the sample of respondents. It is because of the large population of these groups in the area of study.

Economic condition of majority of women panchayat representatives is good. Most of them are housewives and monthly income of most of the elected women representatives is more than 5,000 rupees. Most of them had small and medium sized land holdings although land is mostly in the name of their husbands. Large proportion of elected women households possessed the common household assets like TV, Refrigerator and Scooter/Motor-cycle but small proportion of respondents possessed agricultural assets because of the small size of landholdings.

The political background of the respondents supported the point that most of the women panchayat members had no political background. The myth that only the kinswomen of the privileged have entered panchayats is not borne out if we look at the previous political experience and political affiliations of women representatives' affinal and natal family members. Only 18.1 and 13.3 per cent elected women had family members on the natal and affinal family side who had any previous experience in panchayats. Even in their family members, as against the common perception of only women from those families coming to panchayats who had been in politics, it has been found that only 9.6 per cent and 8.4 per cent of the representatives had their family members in natal or affinal family been in politics.

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