

Empowering Dalit Women in Panchayati Raj: Insights from Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

This study explores the political participation of Dalit women in Panchayati Raj Institutions with a specific focus on Ghazipur district in Uttar Pradesh. While the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act mandated reservations for women in local governance, its implementation has revealed persistent barriers shaped by caste, gender, and entrenched power structures. Drawing on secondary sources and contextual analysis, the paper examines the extent to which Dalit women engage meaningfully in Panchayat elections and governance processes. It highlights critical issues such as proxy leadership, limited political awareness, and the double marginalization experienced by Dalit women. The review also considers the impact of capacity-building initiatives and the evolving role of PRIs in addressing rural development. The findings suggest that although reservation policies have facilitated increased representation, real empowerment remains contingent on structural changes, sustained training programs, and shifts in community attitudes. The study calls for localized interventions and inclusive policy frameworks to ensure that the democratic potential of PRIs translates into substantive participation and leadership for Dalit women in rural India.

Keywords: Dalit Women; Panchayati Raj Institutions; Political Participation; Gender Equality, Caste; Rural Governance; Decentralisation

1. Introduction

The enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 marked a transformative moment in India's democratic framework, institutionalising decentralised governance through the Panchayati Raj system. Among its key contributions was the mandatory reservation of seats for women, including those from Scheduled Castes (SCs), in local self-governance institutions. This landmark reform sought to democratise power, ensure representation for historically marginalised communities, and decentralise planning and development. However, the mere numerical presence of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has not guaranteed substantive political participation, especially for Dalit women who face the dual burden of caste and gender discrimination. This research critically explores the political participation of Dalit women in

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Published: 23 September 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i9.45931>

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PRIs, focusing specifically on Ghazipur district in Uttar Pradesh, a region emblematic of both entrenched hierarchies and shifting governance landscapes.

Dalit women's participation in political spaces represents one of the most complex intersections of identity in contemporary India. As members of the Scheduled Castes, they contend with systemic social exclusion and economic marginalisation. As women, they navigate patriarchal norms that restrict their mobility, voice, and autonomy. When these identities converge in the arena of local governance, they often result in what has been termed "double marginalisation." Although reservations have made it possible for Dalit women to occupy elected positions such as Sarpanch or Ward Member, the question remains whether they exercise real decision-making power or serve as proxies for male relatives or dominant caste actors.

Ghazipur, a district in eastern Uttar Pradesh, presents a compelling case for investigating these dynamics. Despite the formal structures of decentralised democracy being in place, the lived experiences of Dalit women representatives reveal persistent barriers to meaningful participation. The district is characterised by a high proportion of rural population, caste-based ownership patterns, and limited institutional support for first-time elected women leaders (Malik, 2019). At the same time, it has seen increasing involvement of women in public welfare activities, awareness campaigns, and self-help groups, offering a mixed terrain of both challenge and potential. The selection of Ghazipur is thus strategic; it enables the research to ground its inquiry in a real-world setting where policy, identity, and local power politics collide.

The current study builds upon a growing body of literature that critiques the gap between representation and empowerment in Indian democracy. Scholars have pointed out that while the reservation policy has succeeded in bringing marginalised voices into the formal political domain, it has failed to dismantle the social and institutional hierarchies that restrict those voices from being heard. For Dalit women, this often translates into being elected to office without access to decision-making, budgetary control, or institutional support. In many cases, their husbands or other male relatives operate as the *de facto* representatives—a phenomenon widely described as "proxy leadership." This undermines not only the spirit of the constitutional amendment but also the broader project of democratisation and gender justice.

The study investigates the promise and pitfalls of the reservation regime for Dalit women in local governance. It asserts that while legislative mandates are essential, they are only the first step in a much longer process of political empowerment. Real change will depend on dismantling social hierarchies, redistributing knowledge and resources, and reimagining leadership as inclusive, participatory, and just. The findings from Ghazipur, though local, may offer valuable lessons for policy and practice across India.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Dalit Women's Participation in Politics

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment was a landmark moment in India's democratic decentralization, mandating reserved seats for women and Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes in Panchayati Raj Institutions (Government of India, 1992; Ahmed & Jameel, 2018). This has

enabled formal entry for Dalit women into local governance. However, their substantive political participation remains constrained by systemic casteism and patriarchy (Prakash & Kumar, 2023).

Studies from different regions affirm that while political reservations have led to the inclusion of Dalit women in PRIs, they often face institutional and cultural barriers that limit their influence (Singh, 2013), (Mahajan, 2021).

In some cases, Dalit women have demonstrated effective leadership, particularly when supported by community-based organizations or federations (Aruna, 2018), but such instances remain exceptions rather than the norm.

2.2 Gender and Caste in Decentralized Governance

Intersectionality is critical to understanding Dalit women's political experience. Their social positioning at the bottom of both caste and gender hierarchies subjects them to "double marginalization" (Pandey, 2024; Nanjunda, 2012).

This is compounded by region-specific barriers. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, caste rigidity and male dominance severely limit Dalit women's access to decision-making roles despite holding office (Kumar, 2021; Malik & Shrivastava, 2011).

2.3 Proxy Leadership and Political Tokenism

One of the most widely acknowledged barriers is the prevalence of proxy leadership, where elected women representatives (EWRs), particularly from Dalit backgrounds, are often controlled by male relatives or local elites (Chakraborty & Mukhopadhyay, 2014).

The symbolic use of women as placeholders, without real power, is a form of legal tokenism, offering visibility without autonomy (Choudhury, 2024; Dwibedi & Aptapraava, 2023).

The dichotomy between "formal power" and "effective power" is especially pronounced for Dalit women, as gendered socialization and illiteracy often prevent independent functioning (Ahmad & Kundu, 2009).

2.4 Gaps in Literature and Need for this Study

Much of the literature is regionally fragmented, with detailed studies from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Haryana, but limited analysis of eastern UP, especially Ghazipur. Moreover, while proxy leadership and tokenism are acknowledged, few works have critically examined their structural roots or intersectional dynamics in high-caste-dominated regions.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on Dalit women in Ghazipur, examining how caste, gender, and power intersect to shape their political experiences, and whether decentralization has truly enabled participatory democracy for them.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Intersectionality: Caste, Gender & Power

The concept of intersectionality provides the most robust lens to understand the layered discrimination faced by Dalit women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality highlights how multiple social identities, such as caste and gender,

interact to create specific modes of marginalization (Crenshaw, 2013). In India, Dalit women are uniquely positioned at the intersection of caste-based and patriarchal oppression, limiting both their political agency and access to institutional resources (Pandey, 2024; Nanjunda, 2012).

This double burden of marginalization is especially visible in rural governance structures, where dominant caste groups maintain power hierarchies, and women are often relegated to symbolic roles. Without addressing this intersectional disadvantage, policies that focus solely on gender or caste fail to empower Dalit women meaningfully (Mahajan, 2021; Singh, 2013).

3.2 Feminist Critiques of Representation

Feminist political theory critically questions the difference between descriptive and substantive representation. While reservation policies (such as those under the 73rd Amendment) provide descriptive representation by ensuring a numerical presence of women, they often fail to guarantee substantive representation, where women have actual influence over policy and decision-making (Choudhury, 2024; Chakraborty & Mukhopadhyay, 2014).

This is especially true in cases where women are installed as proxy leaders, manipulated by male relatives or local elites (Ahmad & Kundu, 2009). Feminist critiques urge a rethinking of empowerment not as mere presence in governance, but as the ability to exercise autonomy, voice dissent, and shape outcomes in the political sphere (Aruna, 2018).

3.3 Decentralization and Participatory Democracy

Decentralization theory posits that devolving power to local bodies enhances democratic participation, accountability, and responsiveness. The 73rd Amendment is rooted in this belief, aiming to create inclusive grassroots governance (Ahmed & Jameel, 2018). However, in practice, decentralization has not always translated into participatory democracy, especially for the most marginalized groups (Dwivedi & Aptapra, 2023).

The case of Dalit women in PRIs exemplifies this disconnect. While decentralization creates formal space for political participation, entrenched caste hierarchies and patriarchal norms often subvert its egalitarian potential (Prakash & Kumar, 2023; Kumar, 2021). Therefore, theories of decentralization must be critically examined through the lens of intersectionality and feminist political thought to understand how democratic ideals are experienced, or denied, by Dalit women on the ground.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to examine the intersectional experiences of Dalit women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh. The aim is not to generalize findings across all regions, but to gain an in-depth understanding of how caste, gender, and power interact to shape political participation in a specific socio-cultural context.

The case study method has been chosen for its ability to explore complex, real-world dynamics in a bounded setting. As Stake (1995) notes, case studies are particularly useful when "how" and "why" questions are posed and when the researcher has little control over events. This

aligns with the study's focus on exploring the lived realities of representation versus participation.

Ghazipur district, located in eastern Uttar Pradesh, offers a compelling site for analysis due to its unique caste composition, persistent rural poverty, and active PRI structures. The choice of Ghazipur allows for an exploration of how Dalit women's political roles are shaped by local power dynamics in a region that has both high political activity and entrenched caste hierarchies.

The case study also enables the contextualization of broader debates, such as proxy leadership and symbolic representation, within a grounded local reality. This is critical, as national-level studies often overlook micro-level variations in empowerment and exclusion (Malik & Shrivastava, 2011; Prakash & Kumar, 2023).

Thematic analysis is used to organize and interpret the data. Key themes, such as proxy leadership, double marginalization, capacity building, and symbolic vs substantive representation, are identified based on the research questions and theoretical framework. This process includes coding recurring patterns across sources and examining how they align or conflict with existing theories of decentralization and intersectionality.

5. Background: Panchayati Raj in Uttar Pradesh

5.1 Structure and Functions of PRIs in the State

Panchayati Raj Institutions in Uttar Pradesh function under a three-tier system established by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment: Gram Panchayat (village level), Kshetra Panchayat (block level), and Zila Panchayat (district level). These bodies are tasked with decentralized governance and rural development, including implementation of schemes related to sanitation, health, education, and social justice (Prakash & Kumar, 2023).

Each level comprises elected representatives, with elections conducted every five years. Although endowed with significant responsibilities on paper, in practice, the efficiency and autonomy of these bodies vary considerably across districts due to political interference, capacity constraints, and entrenched social hierarchies (Dwibedi & Aptapraava, 2023; Singh, 2013).

5.2 Reservation Policy for Dalit Women and Its Operationalization

The 73rd Amendment mandated reservation of one-third of all PRI seats for women, with proportional quotas for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). This translated into reserved seats for Dalit women, a policy seen as a progressive step towards inclusive democracy (Ahmad & Kundu, 2009).

Uttar Pradesh has implemented this reservation framework, but the operationalization remains uneven. In many cases, Dalit women candidates are nominated or pressured by dominant caste actors or male family members and serve only as “proxy leaders” (Choudhury, 2024; Chakraborty & Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Their actual control over policy decisions or financial matters is often negligible.

Research shows that while Dalit women's numerical presence has increased, this hasn't always

translated into substantive empowerment, especially in regions where caste-based discrimination is acute (Kumar, 2021; Singh, 2013).

5.3 Socio-Political Context of Ghazipur District

Ghazipur, situated in eastern Uttar Pradesh, is a predominantly agrarian district with significant Scheduled Caste population. As per the 2011 Census, Ghazipur district in Uttar Pradesh had a population of 36.2 lakh, out of which around 20% belonged to Scheduled Castes. The district has seen consistent electoral participation at the panchayat level but is also marked by entrenched caste hierarchies and gender-based exclusion.

Educational attainment and literacy rates among Dalit women in the district remain low, which limits their awareness of governance processes and rights (Pandey, 2024). While the district has active PRIs, field studies reveal that Dalit women often lack autonomy, with many serving as symbolic representatives under the influence of dominant caste actors or male kin (Malik & Shrivastava, 2011).

A micro-study of Ghazipur and neighboring Mau district found that Dalit women elected representatives experienced significant limitations in accessing resources and influencing decision-making, despite holding formal office (Malik & Shrivastava, 2011). These patterns are indicative of a broader disconnect between constitutional ideals and everyday governance.

6. Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Political Participation of Dalit Women

The political participation of Dalit women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has witnessed a significant numerical increase following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. However, this rise in representation often masks deeper structural barriers that continue to limit their effective political engagement.

Candidature and Electoral Success: Across India, Dalit women have utilized the space created by reservations to contest elections and gain access to public office. In states like Uttar Pradesh, this has led to increased visibility of Scheduled Caste women in Gram Panchayats and block-level governance structures (Prakash & Kumar, 2023). Data from various districts, including Ghazipur, show that many Dalit women candidates win elections, especially in reserved constituencies. However, this visibility does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation.

Roles Held and Nature of Engagement: Despite holding office, Dalit women often struggle to exercise real authority. In many instances, they are appointed to less influential committees or are kept away from financial decision-making processes (Malik & Shrivastava, 2011). Their roles remain largely ceremonial, and they often lack control over budgets, planning, or developmental programs. This marginalization is particularly severe in regions with rigid caste hierarchies like eastern Uttar Pradesh.

Research from Haryana and Tamil Nadu supports this observation, noting that while reservation ensures Dalit women's presence, the scope of their influence remains curtailed due to entrenched patriarchal and caste structures (Kumar, 2021; Aruna, 2018).

Factors Affecting Participation: Several factors significantly influence the quality of participation among Dalit women leaders in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Caste-based discrimination remains a persistent challenge, often manifesting within panchayat meetings and broader community interactions, thereby limiting their agency and acceptance as legitimate decision-makers (Nanjunda, 2012). Additionally, low levels of literacy and the absence of structured political education hinder their confidence and ability to engage effectively with governance procedures (Ahmad & Kundu, 2009). Compounding these challenges is the lack of support from male colleagues and family members, which frequently results in proxy participation, where male relatives make decisions on their behalf (Chakraborty & Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Together, these structural and social barriers continue to constrain the substantive political empowerment of Dalit women.

However, in some cases, social capital and institutional support, such as participation in Dalit women's federations or training from NGOs, can enhance the ability of elected Dalit women to participate more effectively (Aruna, 2018; Choudhury, 2024).

Evidence from Ghazipur: In Ghazipur district specifically, participation trends mirror the national pattern. While Dalit women are elected to office, they rarely control agenda-setting or financial resources. (Malik and Shrivastava, 2011) found that most elected Dalit women representatives in Ghazipur and Mau faced multiple barriers, including caste-based hostility, exclusion from meetings, and pressure from male relatives who acted as de facto decision-makers.

6.2 Proxy Representation and Political Tokenism

One of the most persistent challenges to genuine political empowerment of Dalit women in Panchayati Raj Institutions is the prevalence of proxy representation, where elected women representatives (EWRs), particularly from marginalized communities, serve merely as figureheads while male relatives or local power brokers exercise real authority.

Prevalence of Proxy Leadership: Numerous studies have found that Dalit women in PRIs often do not wield actual decision-making power, despite being officially elected. In many cases, husbands, fathers, or other male family members dominate governance processes on their behalf. This pattern has been documented in both northern and southern Indian states, reflecting its systemic nature rather than regional anomaly (Chakraborty & Mukhopadhyay, 2014; Ahmad & Kundu, 2009).

In a qualitative study of Haryana, it was revealed that even a rise in Dalit women's numerical representation was not the result of active participation but rather default positioning due to reservation rules, where real power was retained by others (Kumar, 2021). Similarly, research from Rajasthan and Karnataka shows that EWRs are often reduced to symbolic presence, with signatures, approvals, and interactions managed by male intermediaries (Pandey, 2024; Nanjunda, 2012).

Impact on Autonomy and Decision-Making: Proxy leadership significantly undermines the autonomy of Dalit women in governance. Their inability to control meetings, influence budgets, or lead planning processes makes their presence functionally hollow. This not only

violates the spirit of democratic decentralization but also reinforces patriarchal norms that perceive women as incapable of leadership (Choudhury, 2024).

Choudhury (2024) argues that this is a classic case of “legal tokenism”, where state-driven inclusion mechanisms such as reservations offer symbolic equality without substantive transformation. Tokenistic inclusion keeps the status quo intact by granting visibility without voice, office without power, and leadership without legitimacy.

This contradiction is most evident in Ghazipur and similar districts, where Dalit women are technically in power but are excluded from policy forums, financial authority, and agenda-setting (Malik & Shrivastava, 2011). Often, these women lack training or education to challenge these dynamics, making them more vulnerable to control.

Institutional Tolerance of Tokenism: The absence of institutional safeguards enables such practices to persist. Panchayat oversight mechanisms rarely track whether EWRs are exercising their roles independently. There is no formal inquiry into proxy behavior, and community-level Gram Sabhas often remain unaware or indifferent to the substitution of women’s voices (Dwibedi & Aptaprava, 2023).

Without institutional accountability or community awareness, proxy politics thrives as a normalized practice, particularly when it intersects with caste hierarchies and gender norms.

6.3 Awareness, Agency, and Capacity

The effectiveness of Dalit women in Panchayati Raj Institutions is deeply influenced by their levels of political awareness, individual agency, and capacity to engage in governance processes. While reservations may secure their entry into political office, meaningful participation hinges on the interplay of knowledge, skills, and empowerment structures.

Literacy and Education: Low literacy rates among Dalit women remain a significant obstacle to effective participation. In many districts of Uttar Pradesh, including Ghazipur, Dalit women elected representatives often lack basic reading and writing skills, which hinders their ability to understand policy documents, budgets, and administrative protocols (Prakash & Kumar, 2023). This educational gap directly affects their confidence and limits their ability to assert themselves in Panchayat meetings (Ahmad & Kundu, 2009).

Moreover, the lack of functional education contributes to dependency on male intermediaries, increasing the risk of proxy representation and weakening their agency (Chakraborty & Mukhopadhyay, 2014).

Training Access and Institutional Capacity Building: Several states and NGOs have introduced training and orientation programs to build capacity among elected women representatives. However, the accessibility, frequency, and quality of such programs vary significantly. Dalit women, particularly from remote or conservative communities, often face additional barriers to participation in training due to caste exclusion, mobility restrictions, or household responsibilities (Pandey, 2024).

When training is available, it often focuses on procedural aspects rather than critical thinking, leadership, or legal rights awareness, failing to empower women to challenge the structural constraints they face (Nanjunda, 2012).

In contrast, when Dalit women are exposed to intensive training and peer networking, they are more likely to act autonomously, resist domination, and perform their governance roles effectively (Aruna, 2018). Social capital derived from collective action, such as membership in self-help groups or Dalit federations, also strengthens agency and resilience.

Exposure to Governance Processes: Direct exposure to decision-making spaces, such as district-level planning meetings, Gram Sabha deliberations, or interactions with bureaucrats, can increase the confidence and political literacy of Dalit women. However, these experiences are often denied to them due to informal exclusions or hostile environments (Malik & Shrivastava, 2011).

Even when present in meetings, many Dalit women report being ignored, interrupted, or discouraged from speaking, especially in the presence of dominant caste members. Such experiences reinforce internalized inferiority and contribute to self-censorship (Choudhury, 2024).

Role of NGOs and Civil Society: Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Dalit rights groups have played a critical role in enhancing the agency of Dalit women leaders. Through rights-based training, legal literacy programs, and leadership workshops, these organizations provide both knowledge and solidarity that help women resist co-option and marginalization (Aruna, 2018; Dwibedi & Aptaprava, 2023).

For example, in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, elected Dalit women supported by NGOs have shown greater involvement in budgeting, monitoring of government schemes, and public speaking (Nanjunda, 2012). This highlights the transformative potential of sustained, community-rooted support systems.

6.4 Double Marginalization

The concept of double marginalization refers to the simultaneous oppression experienced by individuals belonging to multiple disadvantaged groups (Monika & Bhandari, 2025). Dalit women who are marginalized both as women in a patriarchal society and as Dalits in a caste-based hierarchy is one such case. In the context of Panchayati Raj Institutions, this intersectionality severely limits both symbolic and substantive representation.

Discrimination from Dominant Castes: Caste-based exclusion remains a pervasive feature of local governance in many parts of rural India. Dalit women elected to PRIs often encounter overt discrimination from dominant caste panchayat members, including being denied seating, excluded from key meetings, or having their opinions dismissed (Nanjunda, 2012; Malik & Shrivastava, 2011). These exclusions are not incidental but reflect the deep-rooted social order that resists power-sharing with Dalit communities.

In Ghazipur and similar districts, studies reveal that Dalit women are sometimes threatened, harassed, or coerced into silence by dominant caste actors who view their participation as a disruption of traditional hierarchies (Prakash & Kumar, 2023). Such experiences severely constrain their autonomy, despite constitutional guarantees of equality.

Marginalization Within Gender Hierarchies: Alongside caste discrimination, Dalit women also face patriarchal control within their own communities and households. Many are selected

or pressured to run for office not because of political interest or leadership skill, but to fulfill quota requirements, serving as proxies for their husbands or male relatives (Chakraborty & Mukhopadhyay, 2014; Ahmad & Kundu, 2009). This internal marginalization reduces their role to a symbolic one, even when formally in power.

Further, expectations of traditional domestic roles and social norms discouraging assertive behavior inhibit their ability to act as independent decision-makers. For example, in Rajasthan, women were expected to remain veiled and silent even within panchayat offices, reinforcing their symbolic role without agency (Pandey, 2024).

Lived Experiences: Between Symbolism and Substantiveness: Dalit women's experiences in PRIs highlight a fundamental paradox of democratic decentralization: while they gain visibility and are statistically represented, this often does not translate into actual power or influence (Choudhury, 2024). Their participation becomes a symbolic gesture that maintains the appearance of inclusivity, while real power continues to reside with dominant castes and male figures.

Studies show that this disconnect between formal authority and actual practice leads to feelings of alienation, reduced self-worth, and disillusionment among many Dalit women representatives (Aruna, 2018). Those who resist or challenge power structures often face backlash, including social ostracism or even violence.

However, in instances where women are supported through training, peer networks, or civil society interventions, there are signs of resistance and transformation. Some Dalit women have used their position to assert community rights, demand transparency, and question patriarchal practices, though these remain exceptions rather than the rule (Nanjunda, 2012; Aruna, 2018).

7. Policy and Institutional Gaps

Despite constitutional provisions, significant policy and institutional gaps undermine the meaningful participation of Dalit women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. First, there is a lack of legal safeguards to prevent proxy leadership. Although reservation mandates representation, no mechanism ensures that elected women exercise power independently (Chakraborty & Mukhopadhyay, 2014; Choudhury, 2024).

Second, monitoring and accountability frameworks are weak. Panchayat audits or assessments rarely track gender or caste-based participation metrics, enabling symbolic representation to persist unchecked (Pandey, 2024; Malik & Shrivastava, 2011).

Third, training programs for elected women are inconsistent, underfunded, or inaccessible, particularly to Dalit women from rural areas (Nanjunda, 2012). Without continuous support, their ability to participate effectively is compromised.

Lastly, Gram Sabhas and planning bodies often lack inclusive practices, further alienating Dalit women. Dominant caste control of these forums reinforces social exclusion and limits dialogue (Prakash & Kumar, 2023).

Addressing these institutional gaps is crucial to shifting from representation to empowerment and equity in local governance.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Dalit women's entry into Panchayati Raj Institutions marks a significant milestone in democratic inclusion, but their presence alone does not guarantee empowerment. As this study of Ghazipur district illustrates, elected Dalit women often face double marginalization, through caste-based exclusion and gendered subordination. Their roles are frequently symbolic, constrained by proxy leadership, limited capacity, and patriarchal control. To move beyond tokenistic representation, the following policy and institutional recommendations are proposed:

Mandatory Capacity-Building: Implement structured, recurring training tailored for Dalit women representatives focusing on rights, governance processes, and leadership skills (Nanjunda, 2012).

Monitoring and Accountability: Establish systems to audit real participation, not just attendance or formal presence, in panchayat activities (Choudhury, 2024).

Sensitization at the Gram Sabha Level: Conduct community education on gender and caste equity to foster inclusive participation environments (Pandey, 2024).

Inclusion in Higher Planning Bodies: Ensure Dalit women are represented at block and district planning forums, not just village-level institutions.

In conclusion, quotas alone are not enough. Genuine empowerment requires structural change, institutional support, and societal transformation, ensuring that Dalit women are not just elected, but heard, respected, and empowered to lead.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Integral University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India for its support. The manuscript communication number for the publication is IU/R&D/2026-MCN0004964.

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