

GENDER AND GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY: WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR AFTER ARTICLE 370

Prem Singh

Associate Professor
Department of Political Science, MAM College Jammu

Mohinder Kumar

Research Fellow
Department of Political Science, Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar

ABSTRACT

The abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution on 5 August 2019 fundamentally reordered the constitutional and institutional architecture of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), extending to the newly created Union Territory the full ambit of Part IX of the Constitution and, with it, the mandatory guarantees of the Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992. This paper examines what this transformation has meant for women's political participation and empowerment at the grassroots level. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of legislative texts, election data, government notifications, and the existing scholarly literature, the study traces the trajectory of women's engagement with Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in J&K from the pre-reservation elections of 2001, through the partial reforms of 2003–2014, to the post-abrogation District Development Council (DDC) elections of 2020. The analysis shows that the constitutional realignment has produced a substantial descriptive gain: statutory one-third reservation now operates at all three tiers, women chair six of twenty DDCs, and discriminatory permanent-resident rules that penalised women's exogamous marriages have lapsed. At the same time, the paper argues that descriptive presence has not yet matured into substantive empowerment. Proxy representation, patriarchal gatekeeping, security anxieties, weak devolution of funds and functionaries, and the absence of an elected legislature for much of the period continue to constrain women's effective agency. The paper concludes that the post-2019 framework constitutes a necessary but insufficient condition for gendered democratic deepening in J&K and offers directions for policy and future research.

Keywords: Article 370; Jammu and Kashmir; Panchayati Raj Institutions; women's political participation; women's empowerment; District Development Councils; grassroots democracy; gender quotas

1. INTRODUCTION

Democratic decentralisation in India rests on the premise that self-government is most meaningful when it begins in the village. The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992 gave this premise a binding constitutional form by mandating a three-tier structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), regular five-yearly elections, and the reservation of not less than one-third of all seats and chairperson positions for women (Government of India, 1992). The gender quota, in particular, has been described as one of the largest natural experiments in political affirmative action anywhere in the world, bringing well over a million women into elected office in each electoral cycle and generating an extensive body of evidence on how female representation reshapes local public goods provision, policy priorities, and social attitudes (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Beaman et al., 2009; Duflo, 2012).

The erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir stood outside this transformation for more than a quarter of a century. Because Article 370 restricted the application of central constitutional amendments to the State, Part IX of the Constitution and the 73rd Amendment's guarantees never applied there; local self-government was instead regulated by the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989, under which elections were irregular, devolution was shallow, and reservation for women arrived late and only in instalments (Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 1989; Chowdhary, 2001; Kumar, 2014; Chauhan, 2022). Women in J&K therefore entered grassroots politics a full decade after their counterparts in the rest of India, and did so within a political environment marked by armed conflict, electoral boycotts, and pervasive insecurity (Wani, 2011; Khan, 2010).

The abrogation of Article 370 on 5 August 2019 and the enactment of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019 dissolved this constitutional exceptionalism. The former State was reorganised into two Union Territories, all provisions of the Indian Constitution—including Part IX—were extended to J&K, and the local governance framework was progressively aligned with the national model, culminating in the creation of directly elected District Development Councils (DDCs) in October 2020 and the first DDC elections in November–December 2020 (Government of India, 2019; Rai, 2021). Reservation for women was simultaneously extended to the district tier and to chairperson positions.

These developments raise a question of considerable theoretical and practical significance: has the post-Article 370 institutional order actually expanded women's political participation and empowerment in J&K, or has it merely reproduced, at a new tier, the familiar gap between formal presence and effective voice? This paper addresses that question. It situates the J&K experience within the broader literature on gender quotas and grassroots democracy in India, reconstructs the pre- and post-2019 institutional trajectories, analyses the available electoral and administrative evidence, and assesses the constraints that continue to mediate the translation of descriptive representation into substantive empowerment. In doing so, the paper contributes to an emerging but still thin body of scholarship on gender and local governance in post-reorganisation J&K, a region where the stakes of inclusive democratic deepening are unusually high.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on representation, empowerment, and gender quotas in Indian local governance, and the specific scholarship on J&K. Sections 3 and 4 state the objectives and methodology. Section 5 reconstructs the position of women in J&K's grassroots institutions before August 2019, while Section 6 maps the institutional reordering that followed the abrogation. Section 7 assesses the post-2019 evidence on participation and empowerment, distinguishing descriptive gains from substantive constraints, and Section 8 concludes with policy suggestions and an agenda for future research.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Representation, Empowerment, and Gender Quotas: Theoretical Foundations

The conceptual vocabulary of this study draws on two intersecting bodies of theory. The first concerns political representation. Pitkin (1967) famously distinguished descriptive representation—the presence in decision-making bodies of persons who resemble the represented—from substantive representation, which requires acting responsively in the interest of the represented. Phillips (1995) subsequently argued that in societies structured by durable group-based exclusion, a “politics of presence” is not merely symbolic: the physical inclusion of historically marginalised groups changes deliberative agendas, disrupts settled

assumptions about who may rule, and creates the preconditions for substantive responsiveness. Gender quotas in local government are the institutional embodiment of this argument.

The second body of theory concerns empowerment. Kabeer (1999) conceptualises empowerment as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where that ability was previously denied, and disaggregates it into three interrelated dimensions: resources (preconditions), agency (process), and achievements (outcomes). This framework is particularly useful for evaluating quota-based inclusion, because it directs attention beyond the resource of a reserved seat to the processes through which elected women exercise—or are prevented from exercising—real decision-making agency, and to the developmental achievements that follow. The present paper uses Kabeer's triad, read alongside the descriptive–substantive distinction, as its evaluative lens.

2.2 Women and Panchayati Raj in India: The Empirical Record

Three decades of research on the 73rd Amendment have produced a nuanced empirical record. Exploiting the random rotation of reserved seats, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) demonstrated that female *pradhans* invest more in the public goods most closely linked to women's expressed concerns, such as drinking water, establishing that who represents matters for what gets provided. Beaman et al. (2009) showed that sustained exposure to female leaders under reservation weakens statistical and taste-based biases against women in leadership, improving perceptions of female leader effectiveness and raising the electoral prospects of women in subsequently unreserved seats. Duflo (2012) situates these findings within a broader argument that political empowerment and economic development are mutually reinforcing but that neither automatically produces the other, so that sustained policy commitment to women's agency remains necessary.

Other strands of the literature caution against reading numerical presence as accomplished empowerment. Ban and Rao (2008), studying village democracies in South India, found that women leaders in reserved seats perform broadly comparably to men once village and personal characteristics are accounted for, but that reservation by itself does not transform deliberative dynamics dominated by local elites. Jayal (2006) argues that quotas have engendered local democracy in form while leaving intact the social structures—caste, kinship, and patriarchal household authority—through which political power is actually exercised, producing the well-documented phenomena of proxy representation, including the colloquial “*sarpanch pati*.” Buch (2010), drawing on extensive field research across Indian states, documents both the assertion of new leadership identities among elected women and the persistent constraints of illiteracy, domestic workload, and institutional condescension. Baviskar and Mathew (2009) similarly emphasise that inclusion through reservation coexists with everyday exclusion inside panchayat institutions, and that the quality of devolution funds, functions, and functionaries—conditions what elected women can achieve.

2.3 Women, Conflict, and Local Governance in Jammu and Kashmir

Scholarship on J&K adds a distinctive regional layer to this national picture. Chowdhary (2001) characterised the 2001 panchayat elections in the Kashmir Valley as largely a “paper exercise,” conducted amid boycott calls, militant threats, and mass withdrawals by candidates, with negligible female candidacy in the absence of any reservation. Shekhawat and Chowdhary (2004) documented the near-total exclusion of women from J&K's formal political institutions, noting that all of the State's parliamentary seats had historically been held by men and that women's presence in the State Assembly rarely rose above token levels.

Khan (2010) situates this exclusion within the gendered dynamics of the conflict itself, showing how militarisation and militancy narrowed women's public space even as women bore disproportionate social costs of violence. Chowdhary (2016) provides the broader account of J&K's politics of identity and separatism within which local-body elections were repeatedly instrumentalised, deferred, or contested.

Studies of the post-2003 reservation era record real but circumscribed gains. Kumar (2012) analysed the 2011 panchayat elections—the first held with one-third reservation at the panch level—and found that although women filled the reserved constituencies, their awareness of statutory powers was limited and their functioning was heavily mediated by male relatives. Kumar (2014) extended this critique to the institutional design of the 1989 Act itself, highlighting nomination-based tiers, weak fiscal devolution, and irregular elections as structural impediments. Wani (2011) read the high-turnout 2011 elections as evidence of a popular appetite for democratic decentralisation in Kashmir despite the conflict. Most directly relevant to the present study, Chauhan (2022) traces the evolution of women's "negotiation for space" in J&K's panchayats from 1935 to the post-abrogation period, arguing that reservation has been the indispensable lever of women's entry and that the post-2019 alignment with the 73rd Amendment framework opens, without guaranteeing, a new phase of empowerment. The present paper builds on this literature but focuses squarely on the post-Article 370 conjuncture, integrating the 2020 DDC elections and subsequent institutional developments into a gendered assessment of grassroots democracy in the Union Territory.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study pursues four objectives. First, to trace the historical trajectory of women's participation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions of Jammu and Kashmir prior to August 2019. Second, to map the institutional and legal changes affecting women's political participation at the grassroots level following the abrogation of Article 370 and the enactment of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019. Third, to analyse the extent and nature of women's participation and empowerment in post-2019 local governance, with particular reference to the 2018 panchayat elections and the 2020 District Development Council elections. Fourth, to identify the persistent barriers that constrain the translation of descriptive representation into substantive empowerment and to suggest policy measures for gendered democratic deepening in the Union Territory.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative, descriptive, and analytical in design, and rests entirely on secondary sources. Three categories of material were examined. The first comprises legal and constitutional texts: the Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992; the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989 together with its successive amendments; and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019 (Government of India, 1992, 2019; Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 1989). The second comprises electoral and administrative data on the panchayat elections of 2001, 2011, and 2018 and the District Development Council elections of 2020, as reported in official notifications and in the published scholarly literature (Kumar, 2012; Wani, 2011; Chauhan, 2022; Rai, 2021). The third comprises the peer-reviewed and institutional literature on gender quotas, Panchayati Raj, and the politics of J&K reviewed above. The material was analysed thematically, using Kabeer's (1999) resources–agency–achievements framework and the descriptive–substantive representation distinction (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995) as sensitising concepts. The study's limitations follow from its design: in the absence of primary field data from elected women representatives, inferences about agency and empowerment are drawn from documented institutional behaviour and prior

empirical studies, and should be read as provisional pending fresh fieldwork in the Union Territory.

5. WOMEN AND GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR BEFORE AUGUST 2019

5.1 A Delayed and Truncated Panchayati Raj

Local self-government in J&K has a long statutory lineage, beginning with the Panchayat Regulation of 1935 under Maharaja Hari Singh and passing through the Acts of 1951 and 1958 before the enactment of the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989, which envisaged a three-tier structure of Halqa Panchayats, Block Development Councils, and a District Planning and Development Board (Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 1989; Chauhan, 2022). The promise of the 1989 Act, however, was persistently unrealised. Because Article 370 insulated the State from Part IX of the Constitution, none of the 73rd Amendment's binding guarantees—five-yearly elections, mandatory reservation, State Finance and Election Commissions, or genuine devolution—applied of their own force (Kumar, 2014). Direct election operated only at the Halqa level, higher tiers were constituted by indirection or nomination, and elections themselves were extraordinary events: after 1978, panchayat polls were held only in 2001, 2011, and 2018 (Chauhan, 2022). The onset of militancy in 1989 further hollowed out local institutions, and in the Valley the 2001 elections were conducted under boycott calls and intimidation, with polling possible in only a fraction of constituencies and many elected or nominated members publicly disowning their own candidature (Chowdhary, 2001).

5.2 Women's Exclusion and Late Entry

Women's position within this truncated system was doubly marginal. At the apex, J&K's parliamentary delegation was historically an all-male preserve, and women's presence in the State Assembly remained negligible across decades (Shekhawat & Chowdhary, 2004). At the base, the 2001 panchayat elections were held without any reservation for women, and women constituted barely two and a half per cent of candidates; even in the relatively more peaceful Jammu region, only a small number of women were elected as panches and a mere handful as sarpanches (Shekhawat & Chowdhary, 2004; Kumar, 2014). The conflict compounded this exclusion: as Khan (2010) argues, the militarised environment reconstituted the public sphere as a masculine and dangerous domain, imposing on women both direct insecurity and an intensified politics of honour and seclusion that made electoral candidacy socially costly.

Gender-discriminatory features of the special-status regime reached beyond politics. Under the permanent-resident rules that Article 35A shielded, a woman who married outside the State stood to forfeit her state-subject rights to property, government employment, and political participation, a disability captured in the notorious endorsement "valid till marriage" on women's permanent resident certificates; the entitlement was secured through litigation only in 2002, and legislative attempts to reverse the court's ruling were defeated as late as 2004 and 2010 (Chauhan, 2022). The episode illustrates how constitutional exceptionalism, whatever its other justifications, carried a specifically gendered cost.

5.3 Partial Reform, 2003–2018

Reform arrived incrementally. The Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Act, passed in December 2003 and effective from 2004, introduced one-third reservation for women in panch constituencies at the Halqa level, replacing the earlier discretionary power of nomination (Chauhan, 2022). Its effects became visible in the 2011 elections, which were held in sixteen phases amid turnout of roughly eighty per cent: of the

29,719 panches elected, 9,424—almost exactly one-third—were women, marking the first collective entry of women into rural governance in J&K (Kumar, 2012; Wani, 2011). Yet the same elections exposed the limits of partial reservation: because sarpanch positions carried no quota, only twenty-eight women were elected sarpanch out of more than four thousand posts, and half the districts returned none at all (Kumar, 2012; Chauhan, 2022). The Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Act of 2014 extended one-third reservation to the office of sarpanch, and in the 2018 elections—boycotted by the major regional parties and marked by uneven participation in the Valley—women secured 7,806 of the panch and sarpanch positions, slightly over one-quarter of the total (Chauhan, 2022). On the eve of the abrogation, then, J&K presented a picture of formally expanding but institutionally shallow and regionally uneven female presence in grassroots bodies: reservation existed at the village tier alone, the higher tiers remained unelected, and the empirical studies of the period consistently reported proxy functioning, limited awareness of statutory powers, and dependence on male kin among elected women (Kumar, 2012; Kumar, 2014).

6. THE INSTITUTIONAL REORDERING AFTER ARTICLE 370

6.1 Constitutional Alignment

The Presidential Orders of 5–6 August 2019 and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019 ended the State’s special constitutional position, reorganised it into the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, and extended the entire Constitution of India—including Part IX and the 73rd Amendment—to the new Union Territory (Government of India, 2019). For grassroots democracy, the consequences were immediate and structural. The guarantees that the rest of rural India had enjoyed since 1993 now applied in J&K as a matter of constitutional right rather than legislative grace: mandatory periodic elections, reservation of not less than one-third of seats and chairperson offices for women, reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to population, and the institutional apparatus of State Election and Finance Commissions (Government of India, 1992, 2019). The lapse of the permanent-resident regime simultaneously removed the marriage-linked disabilities that had attached to women’s property and participation rights (Chauhan, 2022).

6.2 Completing the Third Tier: The District Development Councils

In October 2020 the Union Government amended the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989 to replace the old, unelected District Planning and Development Boards with directly elected District Development Councils, each comprising fourteen territorial constituencies, thereby completing for the first time a fully elected three-tier structure in J&K (Rai, 2021). Contemporaneous amendments to the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Rules, 1996 provided reservation for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes in the new councils, and the State Election Commission subsequently reserved six of the twenty DDC chairperson positions for women—Baramulla, Ganderbal, and Shopian in the Kashmir division and Ramban and Kishtwar in the Jammu division, with Poonch reserved for a Scheduled Tribe woman (Rai, 2021; Chauhan, 2022). The first DDC elections were conducted in eight phases between 28 November and 19 December 2020 across 280 constituencies, the first territory-wide electoral exercise after the abrogation; the People’s Alliance for Gupkar Declaration emerged as the largest bloc with 110 seats while the Bharatiya Janata Party was the single largest party with 75, and the participation of the major regional parties—in contrast to their boycott of the 2018 panchayat polls—restored a measure of competitive legitimacy to local institutions (Rai, 2021).

The statutory changes were accompanied by administrative measures intended to make local institutions visible and usable. Even before the abrogation, the government had ordered the devolution of powers and functions relating to fourteen departments—including health, education, and agriculture—to the panchayats, and from mid-2019 the “Back to the Village” programme took the administration into each of the more than four thousand panchayat halqas to energise the institutions, gather feedback on service delivery, and assess village-level needs (Chauhan, 2022). For women representatives, such outreach matters in two ways: it supplies direct interfaces with officialdom that do not depend on male intermediaries, and it renders panchayat office consequential enough to be worth contesting. Whether these programmes have in fact functioned in a gender-responsive manner, however, is a question the available material does not yet permit one to answer, and it is flagged here as a priority for field investigation.

Viewed through Kabeer’s (1999) framework, these changes operate principally at the level of resources. Reservation now runs through all three tiers and through chairperson offices; electoral periodicity is constitutionally guaranteed; and the legal disabilities attached to women’s marital choices have been dissolved. The institutional preconditions of women’s grassroots political participation in J&K are, for the first time, formally equivalent to those elsewhere in India.

7. PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT AFTER 2019: AN ASSESSMENT

7.1 Descriptive Gains

The descriptive gains of the post-2019 period are real and measurable. One-third of DDC constituencies were reserved for women, and women contested in substantial numbers even in unreserved seats and in the most difficult security environments of the Valley; in the final phase alone, women accounted for close to one-third of candidates in the Kashmir division constituencies going to polls. Six districts are chaired by women, several of them in the Kashmir division, placing women at the head of district planning for the first time in the region’s history (Rai, 2021). At the village tier, the cohort of women panches and sarpanches elected in 2018 continued in office through the transition, and by-elections and the DDC process added further layers of elected women. Taken together with the roughly 9,400 women elected in 2011 and 7,800 in 2018, the post-abrogation arrangements have consolidated a critical mass of women officeholders across the Union Territory’s rural governance structure (Kumar, 2012; Chauhan, 2022).

The theoretical significance of this presence should not be understated. The national evidence indicates that exposure to women in reserved leadership positions erodes prejudicial beliefs about female leaders and improves women’s subsequent electoral prospects in open seats (Beaman et al., 2009), and that women leaders shift local expenditure toward goods that women prioritise (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). If these mechanisms operate in J&K as they have elsewhere, the present cohort of women panches, sarpanches, and DDC chairpersons constitutes an investment whose attitudinal and developmental returns will accrue over successive electoral cycles. Early accounts of women DDC chairpersons and sarpanches assuming visible public roles—negotiating with line departments, presiding over district planning, and articulating village demands—suggest the beginnings of precisely the demonstration effects that the comparative literature would predict (Chauhan, 2022; Rai, 2021).

7.2 The Persistent Gap between Presence and Power

Against these gains stands a set of continuities that the constitutional realignment has not, by itself, dissolved. The first is proxy representation. The pre-2019 studies of J&K uniformly documented the mediation of elected women's functioning by husbands and male relatives, mirroring the pan-Indian pattern identified by Jayal (2006) and Buch (2010); there is no evidence that the mere extension of reservation to higher tiers has interrupted this practice, and the risk is that it is simply reproduced at the district level (Kumar, 2012; Ban & Rao, 2008). Substantive representation requires that women in office exercise independent agency in deliberation and decision, and this remains the weakest link in the J&K chain.

Closely related is the question of women's participation as citizens, not only as representatives. Grassroots democracy runs through the gram sabha—in J&K, the Halqa Majlis—as much as through elected office, and the Indian experience shows that where women attend and speak in these assemblies, the accountability of representatives to women's priorities improves markedly (Baviskar & Mathew, 2009; Buch, 2010). In J&K, decades of irregular elections meant that the habits of assembly-based deliberation never took root, and there is little evidence that the post-2019 order has yet cultivated them among rural women, whose attendance remains constrained by workload, mobility norms, and the perception that panchayat business is a male affair (Kumar, 2012). Building the demand side of gendered local democracy is therefore as important as reserving its supply side.

The second continuity is the security environment. Elected panchayat representatives in J&K, women included, have faced targeted threats and violence across successive electoral cycles, and the atmosphere of intimidation documented since 2001 has repeatedly pushed representatives—especially those without resources for protection—out of active public functioning (Chowdhary, 2001; Wani, 2011; Khan, 2010). For women, whose candidacy already contravenes gendered norms of seclusion, insecurity operates as a double tax on participation.

The third constraint is institutional. The empowerment of any elected representative depends on the devolution of funds, functions, and functionaries, and the J&K system has historically been weak on all three counts, with line departments and the bureaucracy retaining effective control over planning and expenditure (Kumar, 2014; Baviskar & Mathew, 2009). The DDCs, moreover, were created and first elected during a period in which the Union Territory had no elected Legislative Assembly, so that local bodies functioned under an administrative apparatus answerable to the Centre rather than within a completed representative hierarchy (Rai, 2021). Where the institution itself commands limited powers, the seats reserved for women within it necessarily transmit limited power.

Finally, the social preconditions of agency remain adverse. Female literacy in J&K trails male literacy by some twenty percentage points, the sex ratio is among the lowest of Indian states and territories, and rural women's workloads leave little surplus time for the meetings, paperwork, and liaison that effective officeholding demands (Chauhan, 2022; Buch, 2010). Kabeer's (1999) framework is again instructive: reservation supplies the resource, but agency depends on capabilities—education, mobility, information, confidence—whose distribution reservation does not itself alter, and achievements depend on institutions that convert decisions into outcomes.

7.3 Interpreting the Post-370 Moment

The J&K case thus conforms to, and sharpens, the central finding of the Indian quota literature: descriptive representation is a powerful but insufficient instrument of

empowerment (Jayal, 2006; Ban & Rao, 2008; Duflo, 2012). What is distinctive about the post-Article 370 conjuncture is the compressed sequence in which J&K's women have been asked to traverse it. Institutional stages that unfolded over nearly three decades elsewhere in India—entry through reservation, extension of quotas to chairperson offices, completion of the third tier, and competitive party engagement with local bodies—were telescoped in J&K into barely two years, and within a contested political transition whose legitimacy is itself the subject of deep disagreement between the Union Government's narrative of democratic deepening and regional readings of the DDCs as a substitute for, rather than a complement to, representative statehood (Rai, 2021; Chowdhary, 2016). Women's grassroots participation in J&K is therefore developing simultaneously along two fronts: against patriarchal and security constraints familiar from the wider Indian experience, and within an unresolved constitutional politics that colours the perceived legitimacy of the very institutions through which participation occurs. The restoration of an elected Assembly and the regularisation of the full electoral calendar will be a critical test of whether the gains at the grassroots can be embedded in a stable representative order.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY SUGGESTIONS

This paper set out to assess women's political participation and empowerment in the grassroots democracy of Jammu and Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370. The evidence supports three conclusions. First, the constitutional realignment of 2019–2020 has removed the principal formal barriers that historically excluded J&K's women from local self-government: Part IX now applies in full, one-third reservation operates at every tier and for chairperson offices, the third tier has been completed through directly elected District Development Councils, and the gender-discriminatory permanent-resident regime has lapsed. Second, these changes have produced measurable descriptive gains, most visibly the election of women to a third of DDC constituencies and their chairing of six of twenty district councils, alongside the continuing cohorts of women panches and sarpanches elected since 2011. Third, descriptive presence has not yet matured into substantive empowerment: proxy representation, insecurity, weak devolution, adverse social capabilities, and the incompleteness of the wider representative order continue to constrain elected women's effective agency.

Several policy directions follow. Systematic capacity-building for elected women representatives—covering statutory powers, planning processes, and financial procedures—should be institutionalised rather than episodic, since the national evidence links training and experience to independent functioning (Buch, 2010; Duflo, 2012). Genuine devolution of funds, functions, and functionaries to panchayats and DDCs is a precondition for any representative, and especially for women representatives whose authority is most easily circumvented when real power resides elsewhere (Kumar, 2014). Security protocols for elected representatives must be gender-responsive, and the conduct of gram sabhas should be actively engineered—through timing, location, and facilitation—to enable women's attendance and voice. Consideration should also be given to raising reservation to fifty per cent, as a majority of Indian states have already done for their panchayats (Chauhan, 2022). Finally, the research agenda must move to the field: what is now required is primary, longitudinal evidence on how women panches, sarpanches, and DDC members in the Union Territory actually deliberate, decide, and deliver, so that the distance between presence and power can be measured rather than presumed. The post-Article 370 framework has opened the institutional door to women's grassroots leadership in Jammu and Kashmir; whether women can walk through it on their own terms will depend on the social, administrative, and political scaffolding that is built around it in the coming decade.

REFERENCES

1. Ban, R., & Rao, V. (2008). Tokenism or agency? The impact of women's reservations on village democracies in South India. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 56(3), 501–530. <https://doi.org/10.1086/533551>
2. Baviskar, B. S., & Mathew, G. (Eds.). (2009). *Inclusion and exclusion in local governance: Field studies from rural India*. SAGE Publications.
3. Beaman, L., Chattopadhyay, R., Duflo, E., Pande, R., & Topalova, P. (2009). Powerful women: Does exposure reduce bias? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124(4), 1497–1540. <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2009.124.4.1497>
4. Buch, N. (2010). *From oppression to assertion: Women and panchayats in India*. Routledge.
5. Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E. (2004). Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India. *Econometrica*, 72(5), 1409–1443. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2004.00539.x>
6. Chauhan, A. (2022). Negotiating space for empowerment: Women and Panchayati Raj in Jammu and Kashmir. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 11(6), 978–984. <https://doi.org/10.21275/SR22615081503>
7. Chowdhary, R. (2001). Panchayat elections in Kashmir: A paper exercise. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36(20), 1674–1677.
8. Chowdhary, R. (2016). *Jammu and Kashmir: Politics of identity and separatism*. Routledge.
9. Duflo, E. (2012). Women empowerment and economic development. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50(4), 1051–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.50.4.1051>
10. Government of India. (1992). *The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992*. Ministry of Law and Justice.
11. Government of India. (2019). *The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019 (Act No. 34 of 2019)*. Ministry of Law and Justice.
12. Government of Jammu and Kashmir. (1989). *The Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989 (as amended)*. Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj.
13. Jayal, N. G. (2006). Engendering local democracy: The impact of quotas for women in India's panchayats. *Democratization*, 13(1), 15–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340500378225>
14. Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>
15. Khan, N. A. (2010). *Islam, women, and violence in Kashmir: Between India and Pakistan*. Palgrave Macmillan.
16. Kumar, A. (2012). Participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Jammu and Kashmir. *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, 73(4), 589–600.
17. Kumar, A. (2014). Panchayati Raj Institutions in Jammu and Kashmir: A critical analysis. *Journal of Rural Development*, 33(1), 73–82.
18. Phillips, A. (1995). *The politics of presence*. Oxford University Press.
19. Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The concept of representation*. University of California Press.
20. Rai, V. (2021). District Development Councils: A precursor to assembly elections? (ISAS Insights No. 653). Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/district-development-councils-a-precursor-to-assembly-elections/>
21. Shekhawat, S., & Chowdhary, R. (2004). *Women in J&K – A status report (Working Paper Series No. 6)*. Department of Political Science, University of Jammu.
22. Wani, A. A. (2011). Panchayat elections in Kashmir: A case for democratic de-centralisation. *South Asian Survey*, 18(2), 279–292.