



Women's Political Participation in Rural India: A Study of Jammu and Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

Similar to the situation in other regions of India, the status of women in Jammu and Kashmir was characterized by subservience. However, the challenges faced by women were exacerbated by the prolonged political turmoil that has persisted in the region. The strife in Jammu and Kashmir has spanned nearly a quarter-century, profoundly impacting various aspects of people's lives – from their livelihoods and health to their dietary habits, workplaces, and educational prospects. Notably, among those bearing the brunt of these consequences, it is the women of Kashmir who have endured the greatest hardships. Consequently, they find themselves uniquely vulnerable during times of conflict, facing challenges that extend beyond the direct violence.

Within the realm of political institutions, women were initially devoid of any special privileges. It was only following the enactment of the 73rd Amendment Act that women gained access to a 33 percent reservation. This step towards increased representation materialized through the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Act of 2003, which mandated a 33 percent reservation in halqa panchayats. However, despite these legislative measures, the interplay of factors such as a lack of political awareness and the persistent tensions between India and Pakistan has hindered the adequate participation of women in state politics.

In light of these unfolding dynamics, the present study takes on the task of offering a comprehensive exploration into the participation of women within the political milieu and the concurrently burgeoning political awareness among them. In doing so, the study places a deliberate emphasis on unearthing the underlying reasons contributing to their marginalized presence within the state's political framework. By delving into these intricacies, the research seeks to provide an enhanced comprehension of the complex factors that need addressing to enhance women's participation and impact in the political fabric of Jammu and Kashmir.

KEYWORDS: women, politics, awareness, empowerment, leaders, Jammu and Kashmir

INTRODUCTION

Nestled between the mighty Himalayas and the plains of the Indian subcontinent, Jammu and Kashmir has long been a land of cultural diversity, geopolitical complexities, and ethereal beauty. Its unique geopolitical position has rendered it a territory of contested sovereignty between India and Pakistan, shaping its history and sociopolitical dynamics. For decades, the region has grappled with internal strife and external tensions, resulting in profound repercussions for the lives and aspirations of its inhabitants.

The realm of women's political participation has been a subject of perennial significance in the broader discourse of societal development and gender equality. The Indian subcontinent, marked by its cultural diversity and intricate social fabric, has witnessed a continual struggle to elevate women's presence in politics from the margins to the mainstream. Within this complex landscape, the state of Jammu and Kashmir emerges as a distinct region that offers a unique vantage point to explore the dynamics of women's political engagement.

The last few decades have borne witness to a protracted struggle for autonomy and self-determination in Jammu and Kashmir. While the conflict has undeniably affected the entire population, its impact has been particularly pronounced on women. This nuanced intersection of conflict and gender has magnified the challenges faced by women in the region, exacerbating their vulnerability and shaping their participation in political processes.

OBJECTIVES

- Examine Women's Political Representation
- Identify Barriers and Challenges
- Examine Growing Political Awareness

METHODOLOGY

The research employs a mixed-methods approach to gather and analyze data. Data are collected mainly from available data, reports, surveys, and academic literature related to politics in Jammu and Kashmir. Secondary data are collected from various newspapers articles, research articles, research journals, e-journals, Government websites, family welfare department and department of Economics and Statistics, etc.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

In the traditional tapestry of Kashmiri culture, women were primarily confined within familial boundaries. It wasn't until the year 1934 that the citizens of Jammu and Kashmir were granted the right to vote, albeit with the prerequisite of literacy. The exercise of extending voting rights to women faced administrative reservations, leading to a relatively limited scope of participation, as noted by the Franchise Commission. However, it was under the leadership of S.M. Abdullah in 1944 that women found an opportunity to flourish politically.

Intriguingly, the Jammu and Kashmir constitution contained a segment (section x) dedicated to elections within the state. This section underscored equal rights for both genders, mandating women's inclusion and representation across all forms of institutions without any discriminatory bias based on gender. Notably, the governor was granted the authority to nominate up to two women members of the assembly, should the need arise to rectify underrepresentation. [1]

Despite these provisions, women's attendance in political spheres from Jammu and Kashmir remained conspicuously absent. While economic advancements post the American Revolution brought about changes, political engagement amongst the female populace continued to be meager. Prior to 1972, women's involvement in politics was notably low. In the 1972 elections, only four out of eight female candidates contested, with victory eluding them as male counterparts secured the seats. [5]

Zainab Begum, Hajra Begum, Nirmala Devi, and Shanta Bharti emerged as the pioneering quartet of women who were elected. The subsequent elections in 1977 showcased a similar trend, with just one woman clinching a seat out of the limited female candidates. The year 1983 marked an intriguing scenario where women constituted a significant 70.48 percent of the electorate, yet their representation remained marginalized due to the paucity of female candidates and subsequent victories. [5]

As elections progressed, the figures painted a similar picture. The 1987 and 1996 elections saw an increase in female candidates, yet the victories remained few. The 2002 elections saw a modest turnout of both voters and female candidates, with only a couple managing to secure wins. In contrast, recent elections have marked a substantial rise in women's voter participation.

Despite the constitutional amendments (73rd and 74th) that aimed to empower women, the journey towards gaining confidence within political spheres remained challenging. Changes brought about by these amendments to panchayat raj institutions (PRIs) did yield a 33 percent reservation for women, yet the journey towards substantive political representation remains a complex tapestry influenced by historical norms, evolving ideologies, and the broader context of the region. [5]

Women in J&K Assembly

Year	Total seats	Women candidate	Elected women	Runner up
1962	75	01	00	00
1967	75	01	00	00
1972	75	06	04	00
1977	76	04	01	01
1983	76	07	00	01
1987	76	13	01	01

1996	87	15	02	03
2002	87	30	02	02
2008	87	67	03	04
2014	87	26	02	01
	Total	117	16	13

Source: [http://eci.nic.in/eci-main/1/Election statistics .aspx](http://eci.nic.in/eci-main/1/Election%20statistics.aspx).

In the backdrop of the 2012 Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Elections, a transformative narrative of women's political involvement began to unfurl. At the onset, a modest number of two to four women ventured into the political arena of the state's Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, the subsequent course of these elections exhibited a striking surge in the count of women candidates, an evolution that took root in every panchayat across the region.

As the election process reached its culmination, a groundbreaking outcome emerged. Notably, around 10,000 women ascended to the position of panches, indicating a profound shift in the traditionally male-dominated landscape of political participation. This surge of women into elected roles marked a pivotal juncture in the state's political narrative, echoing a shift from historical norms toward a more inclusive and balanced representation. [5]

Of considerable significance was the statistic that echoed this transformation: women constituted a remarkable 33.3 percent, equating to 9,424 positions out of the total 28,248 elected panches. This statistic, while undeniably reflective of substantial progress, emphasized the pursuit of gender parity within the grassroots governance framework. [5]

However, while the ascent of women as panches showcased substantial progress, the scenario for women aspiring to assume the mantle of sarpanches remained intricate. A mere 28 women secured the coveted position of sarpanches across the 22 districts of the state. This underrepresentation, constituting a mere 0.68 percent of all sarpanch positions, underscored the persisting obstacles that impede women's entry into leadership roles. [5]

Furthermore, this pattern was mirrored in the distribution across districts. Notably, 11 out of the state's 22 districts were devoid of female sarpanches. The dearth of female leadership extended to the majority of districts, with only a couple of exceptions. Baramulla in north Kashmir and Shopian emerged as trailblazers, electing female sarpanches and contributing to a mere three female sarpanches in the entire region. Even in districts where women were expected to be more assertive, such as Leh and Kargil, their absence in the sarpanch role was conspicuous. [5]

Kishtwar, a district in the Jammu division, stood as an exception with no female sarpanch representation. While the option for electing women sarpanches existed in nine other districts of the region, the victories in this regard remained inconsequential in number. Noteworthy instances included five women elected in Udhampur and Rajouri, while Poonch and Kathua each saw the election of four women to the position. [5]

Women voters' turnout in assembly elections of J&K (1962-2014)

Year	Total no. of women voters	Women voters who cast their vote	Total percentage
1962	-	-	-
1967	635181	337052	53.06
1972	1062399	572886	53.92
1977	1253302	756898	60.39
1983	1413017	995824	70.48
1987	1618445	1138744	70.36
1996	2185882	1007249	46.08
2002	2770407	1060143	38.27
2008	3097492	1823212	58.86
2014	3462092	2294469	66.27

Source: http://eci.nic.in/eci-main/1/Election_statistics.aspx.

The above table shows the percentage of the women voters who casted their vote in the assembly elections of Jammu and Kashmir between the years 1962-2014.

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Efforts to enhance women's political participation in Jammu and Kashmir confront a range of intricate barriers and challenges. These obstacles, deeply ingrained within the socio-political context, reflect historical norms, cultural dynamics, and the unique challenges posed by the ongoing conflict.

1. **Lack of Party Support and Resources:** Women aspiring to enter politics often face a dearth of support from political parties, which frequently fail to provide the necessary financial and organizational resources required for effective campaigning. This lack of backing impedes women's ability to establish a credible presence, both politically and economically. Without adequate party support, women struggle to build a robust political and social standing. [6]
2. **Violence against Women:** The enduring conflict in Jammu and Kashmir has led to an environment marked by violence, and women have been disproportionately affected. Instances of violence against women, including threats and intimidation, create an atmosphere of fear and insecurity that deters many women from engaging in political activities. This not only hampers their political participation but also curtails their broader agency and autonomy. [12]
3. **Lack of Decision-Making Authority:** Women continue to be excluded from critical decision-making processes within both political parties and larger governance structures. Their lack of participation in shaping

policies and making key decisions perpetuates the unequal gender dynamics that have historically marginalized them in the political sphere. [12]

4. **Poor Social and Economic Status of Women:** The prevailing socio-economic disparities between men and women further exacerbate the challenges to women's political participation. Women's limited access to resources, education, and economic opportunities hinders their ability to engage actively in politics. Their marginalized social and economic status acts as a formidable barrier to meaningful political involvement. [6]
5. **Lack of Education and Awareness:** A significant portion of women in Jammu and Kashmir face limited educational opportunities, often impeding their understanding of political processes and their potential to engage effectively. Low levels of awareness about their rights and the value of political participation further hinder their ability to navigate the complexities of the political landscape. [12]
6. **Perception of Politics as a 'Dirty' Game:** A prevailing perception of politics as a realm fraught with corruption, manipulation, and power struggles can deter women from entering the political arena. This perception leads to a reluctance to engage, particularly when aspiring women candidates are concerned about compromising their personal integrity. [6]
7. **Media Portrayal of Women:** Mass media can perpetuate gender stereotypes and objectify women, further marginalizing their role in politics. Biased portrayals hinder women's visibility as serious political contenders, impeding their ability to garner public support and credibility. [6]
8. **Lack of Coordination and Support from Organizations:** The absence of effective coordination with women's organizations and NGOs diminishes the potential for collaborative efforts to support women's political participation. A lack of collective advocacy and resource-sharing limits the reach and impact of initiatives aimed at fostering women's political empowerment. [6]
9. **Low Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence:** Historically ingrained gender norms and cultural dynamics can erode women's self-esteem and self-confidence, impacting their perception of their own capability to engage in politics. Low self-esteem contributes to self-doubt and inhibits women from stepping into leadership roles. [6]

GROWING POLITICAL AWARENESS

Efforts to cultivate political awareness among women have emerged as a significant catalyst for empowering their participation in governance and decision-making processes. As historical norms and conflict dynamics gradually shift, the promotion of political awareness serves as a vital bridge connecting women to the realms of policy formulation, representation, and equitable societal transformation.

1. **Constitutional Rights and Duties:** Disseminating information about the constitutional rights and duties of rural women is fundamental. Workshops, seminars, and educational campaigns can shed light on legal provisions that safeguard women's interests and their role as citizens in shaping their communities. [7]

2. **Responsibilities within Panchayati Raj Institutions:** Educating women about the Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 empowers them with an understanding of their potential contributions within local governance structures. Women can gain insight into their eligibility for roles such as panches and sarpanches, facilitating their active participation. [7]
3. **73rd Amendment Act:** Awareness about the 73rd Amendment Act, that aims to empower local self-governance and promote grassroots democracy, is crucial in enabling women to comprehend the importance of their representation within local-level elections. This amendment focuses on strengthening the Panchayati Raj system, which is the decentralized system of governance at the village or rural level. This understanding paves the way for women to seek leadership positions and make meaningful contributions to grassroots governance. [7]
4. **Centrally Sponsored Schemes:** Central government schemes designed for rural development, women's empowerment, and poverty alleviation are instrumental in fostering progress. Increasing awareness about these schemes equips rural women with tools to access resources and benefits that enhance their quality of life. [7]
5. **Community Workshops and Outreach:** Organizing regular workshops and awareness campaigns within rural communities brings the information directly to the women. Engaging discussions and interactive sessions can demystify legal jargon, making the information accessible and relevant. [7]
6. **Collaborative Efforts with NGOs:** Collaborating with non-governmental organizations that specialize in women's empowerment and rural development can bolster awareness campaigns. NGOs often possess tailored approaches and expertise in reaching marginalized communities. [7]

WOMEN POLITICAL LEADERS

Jammu and Kashmir has been home to several remarkable women who have made indelible marks in the realm of politics. Among them are three trailblazing women - Begum Abdullah, Mehbooba Mufti, and Shameem Firdous - who have defied norms, broken barriers, and emerged as influential leaders in their own right. [1]

Begum Abdullah (1900-1991): A Pioneering Voice for Women's Rights

Begum Akbar Jahan Abdullah, widely known as Begum Abdullah, remains an iconic figure in Jammu and Kashmir's political history. As the wife of Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, the prominent political leader and first Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Begum Abdullah played a crucial role in advocating for women's rights and social reforms. Despite the constraints of her era, she challenged traditional norms and used her platform to promote education, healthcare, and women's empowerment.

Begum Abdullah's efforts were instrumental in the establishment of schools for girls and women's organizations aimed at addressing their unique needs. She emphasized the importance of education as a tool for women's progress

and self-reliance. Her dedication to social reform and gender equality has left a lasting impact on Jammu and Kashmir's socio-political fabric.

Mehbooba Mufti: A Symbol of Resilience and Leadership

Mehbooba Mufti, the first woman Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, stands as a symbol of resilience and leadership in the face of challenges. As the daughter of former Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, she inherited a legacy of political engagement and social responsibility. [1] She co-founded the Jammu and Kashmir People's Democratic Party (PDP) with a vision to bridge divides, promote dialogue, and address the aspirations of the region's people.

Mehbooba Mufti's leadership is characterized by her efforts to create a conducive environment for dialogue and reconciliation amidst a complex political backdrop. Her tenure as Chief Minister witnessed moments of both progress and adversity, demonstrating her commitment to steering the region towards stability, development, and inclusivity.

Shameem Firdous: A Beacon of Youthful Leadership

Shameem Firdous emerged as a beacon of youthful leadership in Jammu and Kashmir's political landscape. As a member of the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly, she represented the PDP and garnered attention for her impassioned advocacy for women's rights, youth empowerment, and social justice. Firdous's articulate and dynamic approach has resonated with a generation that seeks fresh perspectives and active engagement in governance.

Firdous's commitment to addressing societal challenges, gender disparities, and the aspirations of the youth underscores her dedication to fostering a more inclusive and representative political environment.

CONCLUSION

The journey towards empowering women in rural politics in Jammu and Kashmir is a dynamic process that intertwines historical challenges, cultural shifts, and the aspirations of a progressive society. The historical backdrop of limited political involvement for women reflects a landscape that is undergoing a metamorphosis. From the cautious steps taken during early electoral enfranchisement to the emergence of local governance structures under the Panchayati Raj system, strides have been made in recognizing women's agency and potential. The 73rd Amendment Act stands as a beacon of progress, granting rural women the right to actively participate in governance through direct elections and reserved seats.

Jammu and Kashmir's future hinges on the collective efforts to empower rural women in politics. By nurturing their leadership potential, breaking stereotypes, amplifying their voices, and fostering a supportive environment, a more equitable and inclusive society is within reach. As rural women step onto the political stage with confidence, resilience, and determination, they forge a path towards a progressive future where women's contributions are central to the region's growth and development. This journey, marked by challenges and triumphs, is a testament to the enduring spirit of empowerment that guides women in rural politics in Jammu and Kashmir.

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