

Impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act on Grassroots Democracy: A Study of Women's Political Participation in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992** stands as a watershed moment in India's legislative history, introducing mandatory provisions to bring marginalized groups into democratic decision-making structures. By establishing a minimum of **33% reservation for women** in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the Act legally restructured the domain of rural local self-governance. This paper evaluates the structural transition and empirical reality of women's political participation in **Arunachal Pradesh**, with a specific field focus on the **Galo community within West Siang District**.

Adopting a mixed-method approach, this study utilizes empirical data gathered via multi-stage stratified random sampling from **360 survey respondents** alongside structured qualitative data. The findings demonstrate that while institutional reservations have successfully achieved descriptive representation, the transition to functional, substantive empowerment is hindered by structural bottlenecks. These include low levels of traditional socio-economic autonomy, the prevalence of masculine bias within parallel indigenous traditional bodies (*Keba*), and instances of proxy representation. Ultimately, this research underscores that institutional intervention is a crucial prerequisite, but deep-seated socio-cultural transformations are necessary to translate nominal structural presence into meaningful democratic agency.

Keywords: 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Grassroots Democracy, Women Political Participation, Galo Tribe, Arunachal Pradesh, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

1. Introduction

The core conceptual validity of a democratic system hinges upon widespread, structured, and institutionalized political participation by its citizenry. Historically, democratic theoretical lineages—ranging from Classical Aristotelian conceptions of active governance to modern institutional frameworks—emphasize that the legitimacy of public choices depends entirely on citizen inclusion in rule formulation. In contemporary developmental frameworks, political participation is no longer viewed merely as an instrumental choice but as an intrinsic process of empowerment that reshapes governance accountability.

Despite comprising approximately half of the global population, women have historically faced systemic exclusion from formal political power architectures. In the context of India, and specifically within the indigenous tribal societies of Northeast India, the trajectory of women's political engagement presents a

unique socio-structural paradox. While tribal societies are often perceived as egalitarian due to the absence of caste hierarchies, they are fundamentally regulated by stringent patriarchal and patrilocal frameworks that confine women's structural influence to domestic and informal economies.

The introduction of modern local self-government through the **Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1997** (promulgated in 2001), aligned with the mandate of the **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act**, introduced legal, gender-based positive discrimination into this socio-political architecture. This study systematically evaluates how these constitutional mandates intersect with local tribal realities, measuring the baseline impacts, current levels of socio-political awareness, structural impediments, and the overall popular perception regarding the entry of women into formal grassroots governance within the **West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh**.

2. Institutional Evolution of Panchayati Raj in Arunachal Pradesh

The institutional trajectory of administrative decentralization in Arunachal Pradesh is distinctly different from that of mainland India. Prior to formal modern statutory systems, the region—originally administered as the **North East Frontier Tracts (NEFT)** and subsequently the **North East Frontier Agency (NEFA)**—relied completely on traditional village councils to dispense justice and manage local resources. These traditional institutions were formally recognized by the British administration via the **Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation, 1945**.

Following the recommendations of the **Daying Ering Committee (1964)**, the central government enacted the **North East Frontier Panchayat Raj Regulation, 1967**, which introduced an integrated four-tier structure:

- a) **Agency Council** (State/Apex Level)
- b) **Zilla Parishads** (District Level)
- c) **Anchal Samitis** (Block Level)
- d) **Gram Panchayats** (Village Level)

Under the 1967 framework, traditional village councils were simply mapped onto the status of Gram Panchayats. However, this framework lacked any mechanism for gender representation.

The passage of the **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992** necessitated a massive overhaul of existing state statutes. To comply, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh initiated legal modifications, which faced structural delays regarding the mandatory reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs), given that the state has no indigenous SC population. Following the **86th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1999**, which legally exempted Arunachal Pradesh from SC reservation mandates, the **Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1997** finally received Presidential assent on **April 30, 2001**. This state statute operationalized the constitutional mandate, ensuring that not less than **one-third (33%) of the total seats** across all tiers were strictly reserved for women.

Note: Although structural reforms in 2018 altered the local state model into a two-tier framework by removing the intermediate Anchal Samiti level, the baseline gender reservation mandates have remained completely intact.

3. Socio-Cultural Matrix of the Study Area: The Galo Tribe

This research focuses its empirical investigation on the **Galo community**, one of the principal indigenous tribes inhabiting the West Siang, East Siang, and Upper Subansiri districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The

Galo social structure is strictly **patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal**. Kinship and clan lineages dictate social organization, and customary norms heavily influence resource ownership patterns.

The fundamental governing node of traditional Galo political life is the **Keba** (the traditional village council). The *Keba* operates as an indigenous judicial and administrative body. Membership and leadership within the *Keba* are determined by specific, socially acquired criteria:

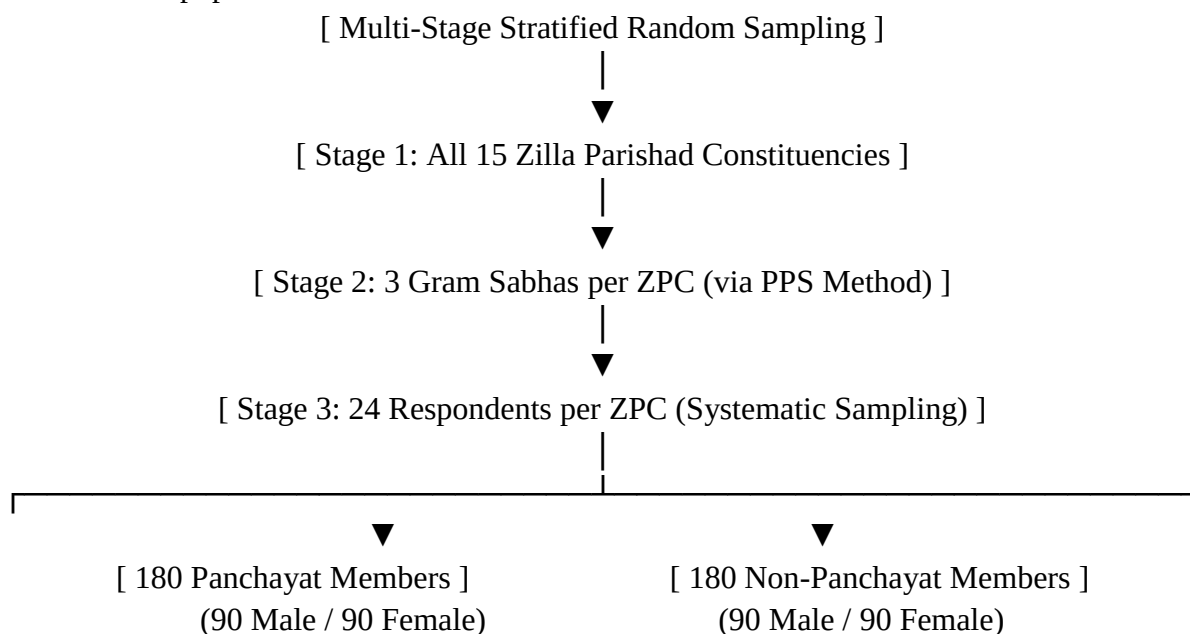
- **Personal Influence and Status**
- **Oratory Capabilities** (*Keba Tom*)
- **Comprehensive Knowledge of Customary Law**
- **Accumulated Wealth**

While customary law contains no explicit, de jure bar preventing women from entering *Keba* deliberations, the de facto reality demonstrates a stark gender imbalance. Historically, women have been entirely excluded from structural membership within these traditional councils.

Furthermore, within customary Galo jurisprudence, **women lack property inheritance rights**. This systematic economic asset deprivation leaves women dependent on male kin, which directly weakens their political bargaining power. Consequently, when modern PRIs were introduced alongside these long-standing parallel traditional frameworks, significant institutional and cultural friction emerged.

4. Methodology and Data Collection

To evaluate the intersections of modern statutory rights and traditional structures, this study adopted a rigorous **historical and analytical mixed-methods framework**. Fieldwork was conducted within the undivided boundaries of the **West Siang District**, providing a highly representative demographic cross-section of the Galo population.



The sample population was generated utilizing a **three-stage sampling strategy**:

1. **Stage 1:** Selection of all **15 Zilla Parishad Constituencies (ZPCs)** within the West Siang District to establish the macroscopic geographic baseline.
2. **Stage 2:** Selection of **3 Gram Sabhas** from each ZPC utilizing the **Probability Proportionate to Size (PPS) sampling method**, ensuring that highly populated settlements were accurately represented.

3. **Stage 3:** Selection of final individual respondents using **Systematic Random Sampling (SRS)** derived from current electoral rolls, using a calculated fixed interval ratio.

The final field sample comprised exactly **360 individual respondents**, structurally divided to capture balanced perspectives across status and gender lines:

Table 4.1: Structural Stratification of Sample Respondents

Respondent Category	Male	Female	Total
Panchayat Members	90	90	180
Non-Panchayat / General Citizens	90	90	180
Total Empirical Sample	180	180	360

Primary data was obtained using a partially structured questionnaire designed in English and translated into local dialects during field interviews to maintain data fidelity. This was supported by targeted in-depth qualitative interviews with community stakeholders, including *Gaon Buras* (traditional village elders), local student leaders, and active political organizers.

5. Empirical Results and Critical Analysis

5.1 The Structural Realities of Local Representation

Data compiled from the official state election databases highlights the foundational impact of statutory reservations on local representation. Table 5.2 reveals the institutional footprint of local representatives across the 15 surveyed constituencies prior to the recent state-wide structural consolidation.

Table 5.2: Institutional Breakdown of Surveyed Constituencies

Sl. No.	Zilla Parishad Constituency (ZPC)	Number of ZPMs	Number of ASMs	Number of GPMs
1	Aalo East (Lower)	1	9	37
2	Aalo East (Upper)	1	13	61
3	Aalo West (Pushi)	1	9	36
4	Aalo West (Yombu)	1	13	55
5	Aalo West (Ubu)	1	8	31
6	Liromoba	1	6	30
7	Yomcha	1	4	19
8	Darak	1	3	11
9	Kamba	1	7	39
10	Kangku	1	8	36
11	Likhabali	1	12	48
12	Gensi	1	11	39
13	Basar I	1	10	35
14	Basar II	1	10	32

15	Daring	1	8	27
-	Total Sampled Post Architecture	15	130	536

To measure how these seats translate into actual field representation, Table 5.3 summarizes the internal distribution of elected positions within our targeted sample of 180 Panchayat leaders.

Table 5.3: Sample Breakdown of Elected Panchayat Respondents

Tier Level	Male Representatives	Female Representatives	Total Sampled
Zilla Parishad Member (ZPM)	09	06	15
Anchal Samiti Member (ASM)	36	39	75
Gram Panchayat Member (GPM)	45	45	90
Total	90	90	180

The data confirms that at the lowest tier (**GPM level**), gender parity matches the exact structural design of the electoral framework (45 Male vs. 45 Female respondents). However, as we look higher up the institutional ladder to the **ZPM level**, a notable imbalance re-emerges: males account for 60% (09 positions) of the sample compared to 40% (06 positions) for females. This demonstrates that while reservations secure a foundational base for women at the village level, men continue to hold a disproportionate share of higher-level leadership positions.

5.2 Awareness levels and Autonomy in Decision-Making

The field survey asked female Panchayat representatives about their political awareness and structural autonomy to measure their functional empowerment:

[Female PRI Representatives Autonomy Assessment]

- 58.0% Acknowledge complete clarity regarding PRI mandates and budget protocols.
- 38.0% Admit to regular dependence on male relatives (husband/brother) for governance tasks.
- 24.4% Report that their policy proposals are frequently dismissed or bypassed in meetings.
- **Mandate Comprehension: 58.0%** of elected women leaders displayed a strong understanding of their statutory responsibilities, financial powers, and administrative protocols under the State Act. However, the remaining **42.0%** demonstrated low institutional awareness, often reporting that they found official procedural dynamics alienating.
- **The "Proxy" Representation Factor:** A notable **38.0%** of female respondents admitted that their administrative duties were routinely handled by male relatives (such as a spouse or brother), a trend widely documented as the *Sarpanch Pati* or proxy phenomenon.
- **Institutional Marginalization:** Within committee deliberations, **24.4%** of female representatives noted that their policy proposals regarding local development priorities were frequently dismissed or downplayed by male colleagues during open block meetings.

5.3 Popular Perception and Societal Support Channels

A critical focus of this study was assessing the broader community's attitude toward women navigating these newly introduced political spaces. The responses from the **180 general non-Panchayat citizens** reveal a complex social consensus:

[General Public Perceptions of Women in PRIs]

- 72.2% Agree that women's reservation has made local governance more approachable.
- 64.5% Believe female leaders focus more on health, education, and sanitation.
- 48.3% Contend that traditional *Keba* structures remain more legitimate than PRIs.

1. **Accessibility and Responsiveness:** 72.2% of general citizens agreed that the presence of female representatives made local governance institutions significantly more approachable for rural women seeking public services or resolving family disputes.
2. **Developmental Alignment:** 64.5% of respondents believed that female leaders prioritized welfare allocations more effectively than their male counterparts, specifically targeting primary education infrastructure, community drinking water facilities, and public health sanitation.
3. **The Traditional Legitimacy Gap:** Despite these positive governance markers, 48.3% of general citizens maintained that the traditional, male-dominated *Keba* councils possessed greater cultural legitimacy for conflict resolution and local resource management than statutory PRIs. This underscores a persistent divide in institutional trust between modern democratic frameworks and customary tribal systems.

6. Structural Impediments to Substantive Participation

The empirical and qualitative findings reveal that women's political participation in Arunachal Pradesh's grassroots democracy is constrained by three deeply intertwined structural barriers:

I. The Customary-Patriarchal Core

Galo society remains anchored in deep-seated patriarchal biases that define leadership spaces as inherently masculine. Women representatives must continually balance their public offices with heavy, traditional domestic workloads. This dual-burden dynamic routinely limits the time they can dedicate to administrative duties, constituent engagement, and unexpected local governance needs.

II. Asset Deprivation and Economic Dependence

Because women lack customary land inheritance rights, they face systemic economic marginalization. This structural asset deficit severely restricts their independent financial capacity, leaving them dependent on male relatives to fund local campaigns or manage administrative logistics. Without economic autonomy, nominal political status rarely translates into independent decision-making authority.

III. The Parallel Hegemony of the *Keba*

The continued dominance of the traditional, all-male *Keba* creates a parallel governing authority at the village level. When major community issues or resource reallocations emerge, they are often settled within these informal, customary councils before ever reaching statutory PRI meetings. This dual-governance model systematically siphons institutional authority away from female Panchayat members, keeping them on the margins of core village power dynamics.

7. Policy Recommendations

To advance women's involvement from simple numerical presence to autonomous, substantive leadership, this study proposes a targeted, four-part policy framework:

- **Institutionalized Capacity-Building Frameworks:** The State Department of Panchayati Raj should partner with civil society organizations to launch mandatory, localized leadership training programs. These sessions must focus on core administrative skills, including budgeting protocols, state regulatory frameworks, and public speaking.

- **Independent Financial Autonomy Mechanisms:** Government agencies should establish dedicated, non-divertable development fund windows directly managed by female Gram Panchayat leaders. This ensures women representatives can execute local projects without needing approval from male-dominated networks.
- **Statutory Integration of Traditional and Modern Spheres:** The state should introduce legal reforms that require traditional village councils (*Keba*) to include elected female statutory PRI members in their official proceedings. This would create a vital structural bridge, giving women a formal voice within customary tribal governance.
- **Structured Community Support Initiatives:** Launching targeted, state-backed community awareness campaigns is essential to challenge patriarchal stigmas surrounding women in public office. Promoting successful female leaders as models can foster a more inclusive political culture within tribal local self-government.

8. Conclusion

The **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act** has fundamentally reshaped local governance in Arunachal Pradesh by breaking the historic male monopoly over formal political spaces. Its mandatory quotas have successfully established a resilient layer of female representation across all tiers of local self-government. However, this empirical analysis of West Siang District reveals that formal legislative integration is only the first step in a longer process of empowerment. True gender equality in grassroots governance remains constrained by customary asset restrictions, the proxy use of public office, and the parallel authority of traditional patriarchal councils. Moving forward, the goal must be transforming this institutional presence into complete, autonomous democratic agency. This requires pairing statutory rights with targeted training, independent funding, and broader socio-cultural reforms to ensure tribal women can lead effectively within India's local self-government systems.

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