



Research Article

Political Participation of Gujjar Women in Himachal Pradesh: A Secondary Data-Based Study of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Electoral Trends

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21262808>

Abstract

The political role of Gujjar women in Himachal Pradesh is explored through secondary data in this study based on election trends and how they interact with Panchayati Raj institutions. Gujjar women face various problems, such as gender discrimination, illiteracy, and lack of institutional backing, even though the Constitution guarantees women's representation. This study analyzes scholarly literature, state resources, and election statistics to determine their contribution to local politics. Despite the fact that reservations have become a better-known concept, there are still barriers to meaningful participation. The research contains certain suggestions for enhancing the leadership and democracy of Gujjar women.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 10-03-2026
- Accepted: 27-04-2026
- Published: 30-04-2026
- IJCRM:5(2); 2026: 1099-1104
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- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Pranjal, Chowdhary S The Intersection of Data Science and Library Science: A 25-Year Analysis of Social Science Research in India (2001–2025). Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2026;5(2):1099-1104.

Access this Article Online



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KEYWORDS: Gujjar women, political participation, Himachal Pradesh, Panchayati Raj, tribal governance, gender.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political participation in a democratic country is perceived as a right and an empowerment tool for the people, especially those who have been historically marginalized, such as tribal women. The Gujjars are a nomadic and pastoral tribe that resides in Himachal Pradesh and other regions and is categorized as one of the Scheduled Tribes of India. Although the Indian Constitution ensures equal political rights for all, tribal women, particularly those in tribes such as the Gujjars, are still underrepresented and almost invisible in political decision-making, as per the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2013).

With the adoption of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, there was a significant shift in power and the granting of statutory space to women in government. It provided a chance to allow women to be politically involved at the local level by requiring a minimum of 33 percent female representation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) (Government of India, 1992). This legislative framework provided opportunities to women who had never been heard of in such a political leadership position in the state of Himachal Pradesh, where PRIs are the main pillars of rural governance regulation. However, caste, gender, and tribal structural injustices remain major obstacles to successful participation (Desai and Thakkar, 2007).

The Gujjar community is mostly found in the districts of Chamba, Kangra, and Sirmour in Himachal Pradesh. The 2011 Census of India showed that they normally reside in remote and underdeveloped regions. Women belonging to the Gujjar group are socioeconomically marginalized and discriminated against because of their gender, thus restricting their mobility, education, and access to public life (Kumar, 2014). They are also negatively affected by their institutional support and political know-how, which helps them to be effective in their participation in local administration and electoral politics (Thakur, 2017).

Although some reports have been published on women's involvement in PRIs, few studies have been conducted on the involvement of indigenous women within the Gujjar community of Himachal Pradesh. This study attempts to assess the levels, patterns, and issues of Gujjar women's political participation in the state by examining existing secondary data. Given the clarity of how inclusive and representative the local governance systems in India are, especially towards tribal women, this study is topical and relevant.

Background of the Study

Although the Indian democratic system focuses on inclusive participation, there are still significant inequalities between disadvantaged groups, especially tribal women. Scheduled Tribes (STs) comprise approximately 8.6% of the Indian population, and numerous such communities, such as the Gujjars, are politically and socioeconomically marginalized (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2021). Gujjar is a major tribal group in Himachal Pradesh, comprising approximately 5.7% of the total population of approximately 5.7 percent people in

Himachal Pradesh who belong to tribal groups (Census of India, 2011).

The Gujjar people of Himachal Pradesh are pastoralists and have been living a semi-nomadic life. They are not able to exercise much political participation, education, and basic amenities as they live and work in remote mountainous places (Kumar 2014). Gujjar women are especially starved because of patriarchy, lack of literacy, and lack of exposure to formal systems of governance. Gender and tribal identity compound their marginalization in political processes (Bhasin, 2007).

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) drastically changed the nature of local governance by instituting Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), as well as by ensuring that women had a one-third quota at every level of rural administration (Government of India, 1992). This reform aims to empower women and democratize government by providing them with a chance to participate in grassroots decision-making positions. Since this amendment came into effect, the number of elected female representatives in PRIs in Himachal Pradesh has grown considerably (Thakur, 2017). Nonetheless, little research has been conducted on the effectiveness of engagement with indigenous women, such as Gujjars.

Studies indicate that many female citizens continue to act as stand-ins on behalf of their male relatives or have weak institutional backing and lack competence, although more women have made their way to local governments due to reservations (Buch, 2000). Moreover, Indigenous women are exposed to unique issues that are not always properly addressed using traditional political empowerment programs. The situation of Gujjar women is especially problematic because of their financial reliance, cultural seclusion, and lack of specific efforts to promote political awareness and leadership (Sharma & Devi, 2019).

In this regard, special attention should be paid to the political activity of Gujjar women in Himachal Pradesh. This study uses secondary sources to explore the level and nature of their involvement in Panchayati Raj institutions and elections. In so doing, it aims to contribute to the wider debate in India on the subject of tribal inclusion, grassroots democracy, and gender equality.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse Gujjar women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Himachal Pradesh.
2. To study the electoral participation patterns of Gujjar women over recent election cycles.
3. To explore the role of literacy, socio-cultural norms, and economic status in enabling or hindering political engagement.
4. To evaluate the impact of government policies, reservation provisions, and awareness programs aimed at enhancing the political representation of tribal women.

5. To suggest policy recommendations for improving the quality and quantity of Gujar women's participation in political and governance processes.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper discusses the theme of political participation of Gujar women in Himachal Pradesh through a descriptive and analytical research design that involves the use of secondary sources of information only. The primary topic of this research is the engagement of women in elections and representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Official sources, such as the Department of Panchayati Raj, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Census of India, and reports by the Election Commission of India and Himachal Pradesh State Election Commission, provided the information. To provide a background and support analysis, relevant journal articles, academic literature, and reports by NGOs were consulted. The research targets districts such as Chamba, Kangra, Sirmaur, and Mandi, which are dominated by Gujjars. Although qualitative content analysis was applied to understand the barriers to and facilitators of political turnout, quantitative data were employed to analyze the changes in voter turnout, the count of reservation used, and the elective women of Gujar. The disadvantages of the secondary data-based research in this study are the absence of primary fieldwork and the lack of recent micro-level data and community perspectives. Nevertheless, the methodology allows for a comprehensive, comparative, and policy-relevant overview of the research problem.

Political Participation through Panchayati Raj Institutions

The most significant amendment is the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution in 1992, which established the Panchayati Raj system as the third tier of government in rural India and gave constitutional powers to local self-governance. One of the elements of this amendment was that one-third of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), including Sarpanch and Panch seats, be reserved for women (Government of India, 1992). This legal provision caused the number of women in rural government to soar, especially those in the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

Although Himachal Pradesh started practicing the Panchayati Raj system in 1970, the role of women did not increase until the 1992 amendment. The state has been at the forefront of ensuring gender-inclusive local administration through the allocation of 50 percent of PRI seats to women (Department of Panchayati Raj, Himachal Pradesh, 2020). Nevertheless, according to the indicators, there are still considerable societal and institutional obstacles that prevent Indigenous women, including representatives of the Gujar community, from actively participating in politics.

The reservation requirement has resulted in an increase in the number of Gujar women seeking office, as per the current figures on the past PRI elections. Some Gujar women have been voted into positions such as Ward Members, Panches and Sarpanches in tribally dominated districts such as Sirmaur and Chamba (State Election Commission, Himachal Pradesh, 2021).

Nevertheless, due to social factors, low literacy, and political ignorance, most women would serve as proxies for male family members; thus, their roles are often symbolic rather than substantive (Buch, 2000; Sharma & Devi, 2019).

Gujjar women who are elected may not be able to attend meetings, express their concerns about their communities, and access government programs because of gender stereotyping, inability to develop capacity, and being exposed to the procedures in the institutions (Behera, 2006). Additionally, research indicates that even though a certain number of women end up gaining confidence and start engaging actively, many of them are restricted to ceremonies or rely heavily on male relatives for decision-making (Thakur, 2017).

There have been efforts by non-governmental organizations and the state government to educate elected female lawmakers, but the results have been mixed. Although the number of women leaders has become resilient and strong advocates in their locales through exposure trips and capacity-building workshops, they have not managed to reach the remote tribal regions where the Gujar population dominates (PRIA, 2015). Consequently, the political representation of Gujar women in PRIs is still not developed and balanced, which is why special and persistent work is required.

Electoral Trends among Gujar Women

Voting is an important measure of democracy. Recent developments indicate that Gujar women are slowly becoming more active as candidates and voters in Himachal Pradesh, particularly following the introduction of gender-based reservation in the 73rd constitutional Amendment, even though socioeconomic and cultural factors have not enabled them to fully engage in electoral politics.

The statistics provided by the State Election Commission of Himachal Pradesh (2021) explain that the voter turnout of women in rural and tribal regions is steadily growing, in most cases, exceeding that of men during Panchayat elections. Nevertheless, the turnout and participation of Gujar women is still uneven, with a big discrepancy between various districts. Gujar women in remote and tribal regions, such as Chamba and Sirmaur, face barriers to accessibility (logistical), insufficient knowledge of politics, and difficulties accessing polling stations. These problems influence registered voters as well as candidacy (Devi and Sharma 2019).

Most Gujar women contest only municipal elections because they are required by quota to contest, as per the data of the candidate. They are usually brought to contest as nominal candidates by male relatives or the elderly in the area, and most of the time, they are unaware of their roles (Buch, 2000). This is particularly evident in impoverished tribal situations with low literacy and strict gender roles, but is not specific to Gujar culture (Behera, 2006).

However, signs of change are increasing. After being elected to Panchayati Raj institutions several times, some Gujar women

have started to have more say in the way they seek development projects. Such women usually state that they feel more respected by society, more confident, and more aware of government procedures after serving a full term (Thakur, 2017). Where women have greater access to education and NGO outreach is relatively higher, such as in Kangra, Gujar women have demonstrated a propensity to participate in elections and political participation beyond the Panchayat level (PRIA, 2015).

Despite these developments, some problems remain. Election campaigns in tribes are mostly male-dominated, and Gujar women do not participate in political party meetings, rallies, and mobilizations related to issues. They cannot devote time to specific political training, and the burden of household and financial duties still prevents their active involvement in electoral politics (Sharma 2017).

Recent trends in the electoral process point to the fact that although entry has become a possibility due to reservations, institutional support and sociocultural change are still needed before meaningful participation can take place. Unless consistent efforts are undertaken to enhance the political literacy and leadership of Gujar women, chances are that they will continue to be inactive and dominated by external forces and not active and empowered.

Challenges to Political Participation

Despite constitutional guarantees, legal protections, and electoral reservations, Gujar women in Himachal Pradesh continue to face several barriers to true political participation. These challenges result from the complex interplay between gender, tribal identity, geographic isolation, and socio-economic hardship. Consequently, their scope and impact of their involvement in political processes as representatives and voters are limited.

➤ **Socio-Cultural Constraints:** The Gujar society's deeply rooted patriarchal system, which confines women to household duties and discourages their involvement in public life, is a significant roadblock (Bhasin, 2007). Women's ability to participate in political institutions and procedures is further restricted by early marriage, purdah (veiling), and movement limitations (Sharma & Devi, 2019). The goal of political reservation is compromised because many Gujar women continue to serve as replacements for male relatives even after being elected to Panchayati Raj institutions (Buch, 2000).

➤ **Low Literacy and Awareness:** Backwardness in education remains a significant barrier. According to the 2011 Census of India, Gujar women in Himachal Pradesh have a significantly lower literacy rate than the state average. Insufficient education has an immediate effect on political consciousness, self-assurance, and communication abilities, making it challenging to comprehend governance processes, participate in formal gatherings, or communicate with bureaucrats (Kumar, 2014). Poor self-representation and

dependency on others to carry out their official responsibilities have been exacerbated by this.

- **Economic Dependence and Time Poverty:** The majority of Gujar households works as regular wage employees or as pastors, and women have responsibility for both household and financial responsibilities. Their availability for training sessions, involvement in the community, and political work has been severely restricted by this "time poverty." Women frequently do not have the resources necessary to run for office or travel for work related to governance when they lack financial independence (Thakur, 2017).
- **Institutional and Structural Gaps:** The quality and scope of institutional support for elected female representatives are still uneven and despite the state providing reservations and certain training programs. Workshops for capacity-building are frequently urban-focused or lack cultural adaptation for tribal settings. Due to social constraints, inadequate transportation infrastructure, or a lack of knowledge, Gujar women in rural areas frequently pass up these opportunities (PRIA, 2015). Their political empowerment is further restricted by the absence of networks of encouragement, female role models, and mentors.
- **Political Tokenism and Resistance:** Gujar women candidates are frequently treated by political parties and male leaders more as symbolic participants to satisfy reservation requirements than as capable leaders. Women frequently come across opposition from within their communities, which can take the form of threats, verbal abuse, or exclusion from forums for decision-making (Behera, 2006). After one election term, such tokenism causes disappointment, a decline in motivation, and a withdrawal from public life.

Role of Government and NGOs

Promoting women's political participation, especially among marginalised populations like Gujar women, has been a stated objective of the Indian government and multiple non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Entering political environments has been made possible by legal protections and constitutional restrictions, but successful participation requires constant awareness-raising campaigns, training programs, and support networks. Governmental organizations and civil society organizations are both significant in connecting this division.

- **Government Initiatives:** The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), which required reservations of seats for women, including those from Scheduled Tribes, was the most essential shift in policy (Government of India, 1992). In an attempt to ensure that more Gujar women were able to participate in local governance structures, Himachal Pradesh increased this reservation to 50% for women (Department of Panchayati Raj, Himachal Pradesh, 2020).
- Additionally, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj have placed in place a variety of capacity-building initiatives, which include the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), which involves education for recently elected officials, in particular women from SC/ST backgrounds (MoPR, 2020). Indirectly encouraging tribal women's participation in politics, the

National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) and Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana additionally attempt to empower them socially and economically (MoTA, 2015).

Many of these programs are still not effectively implemented at the local level, though. The effectiveness of these programs is compromised in Gujar-dominated areas through limited monitoring, language barriers, and a lack of localized planning (Sharma & Devi, 2019). Women from remote and forested settlements find it challenging to attend training programs because they are frequently held in central locations.

Role of NGOs and Civil Society: Non-governmental organisations have played a complementary role in promoting indigenous women's political participation. Non-governmental organisations like PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia), Jagori Rural, and HIMVIKAS have conducted leadership development workshops, grassroots training, and political literacy campaigns in Himachal Pradesh (PRIA, 2015). These groups often take a more community-oriented approach, using participatory methods such as storytelling, street theatre, and village meetings, and conversing with Gujar women in their own languages. These initiatives have helped women gain confidence, understand their legal rights, and improve their public speaking and negotiating skills (Behera, 2006). Additionally, NGOs have assisted some districts in forming women's collectives and self-help groups, which serve as platforms for political mobilisation and support.

Despite all of these initiatives, expanding these programs and ensuring long-term participation remain challenges. Many NGO programs' short duration and dependence on outside funding have an impact on their financial sustainability. Furthermore, there are instances when NGOs and the government do not coordinate well, which leads to service gaps or duplication.

Need for Collaborative Governance: To boost Gujar women's political participation, NGOs and government organizations must work together more closely. More context-specific government initiatives are required, with tribal and nomadic groups like the Gujjars receiving particular attention. At the same time, NGOs needed to be given a more official role in government capacity-building programs, especially in terms of planning and directing training programs for elected female representatives.

Recommendations

To boost Gujar women's political participation in Himachal Pradesh, an integrated strategy combining government reforms, NGO interventions, and community empowerment is needed. The following recommendations, which are based on the study's findings, are meant to eliminate the structural, institutional, and sociocultural barriers that Gujar women face when trying to engage in politics.

Strengthening Capacity-Building Programs:

Government initiatives like the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA) and NRLM have provided a great deal of

cooperation, but their effectiveness in remote tribal communities has been poor. Consequently, the following actions have been suggested:

- **Localised Training Programs:** Establish district-level training centres that provide Gujar women with governance and political literacy skills specific to their region, taking into account local languages, customs, and needs.
- **E-learning platforms:** Given all the challenges caused by remote locations, women-specific online political education courses and digital literacy initiatives can be put into place, especially in places like Sirmaur and Chamba (Thakur, 2017).
- **Mentorship Programs:** Elected Gujar women are placed with experienced female leaders from nearby communities to provide professional guidance, peer support, and leadership development.

Empowering through Education and Awareness:

Gujjar women's low literacy rates have a big influence on how they participate in elections. It is necessary to:

- **Improved Educational Access:** Implementing career training and adult education programs in the community that are tailored to the needs and schedules of Gujar women.
- **Initiatives for Political Awareness:** The introduction targeted campaigns highlighting the value of local government, political rights, and election processes. This should include information sharing about the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions and voter education campaigns (PRIA, 2015).

Promoting Economic Independence:

Gaining economic independence is essential to raising political engagement. The actions listed below can be beneficial in this respect:

- **Microfinance Initiatives:** Expand Gujar women's access to microcredit programs to help them fund small business initiatives, reducing their dependence on family members and giving them the finances to participate in politics (Behera, 2006).
- **Job Creation Programs:** Put in place rural employment programs that give women flexible work schedules and opportunities to earn money so they can manage their domestic and political responsibilities.

Strengthening Women's Role in Decision-Making:

Making sure Gujar women can actively participate in decision-making and are not just symbolic candidates in PRIs is vital. The following steps can be beneficial:

- **By offering special incentives for their participation and effective management,** you may encourage women to take on leadership roles in the Panchayats.
- **Promote Inclusive Representation:** Ensure that the decision-making process is not dominated by the male relatives of elected women. Regular evaluations should be carried out to ensure that female leaders truly possess the ability to make decisions (Sharma & Devi, 2019).

Strengthening Government-NGO Collaboration:

For political empowerment initiatives to have the greatest possible impact, the government and NGOs must work together more closely:

- **Integrated Programs:** Create collaborative initiatives that bring together government funding and non-governmental organizations' ground presence. This will guarantee that initiatives for financial empowerment, leadership development, and political literacy are carried out in sync for maximum effect.
- **Better Coordination:** To observe the effects of current programs and adjust them to meet the requirements of Gujar women, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and local Panchayats should coordinate more closely.

Expanding Political Representation:

Increasing political representation is not enough without active participation. To ensure significant political participation, the following measures are suggested:

- **Improve Political Networking:** Provide avenues for Gujar women to interact with political parties in order to enable them to take part in the political process at an early stage. This would also encourage them to run for higher-level positions than the Panchayat.
- **Encourage Political Candidacy:** Set up regulations that will allow Gujar women to independently run for office, such as providing financial assistance and support for first-time female candidates' nominations.

4. CONCLUSION

Gujjar women's political participation in Himachal Pradesh has gradually increased over time, largely as a result of constitutional mandates like the 73rd Amendment and state-level reforms like the reservation of 50% of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). These laws have boosted the opportunities for Gujar women to be participating in local governance. However, the body of current research and secondary data make it clear that qualitative empowerment has not always come after quantitative inclusion.

Gujjar women have made significant advancements as PRI election candidates and voters, however periodically their participation is purely symbolic and motivated by external factors. Illiteracy, financial dependency, lack of political exposure, and established sociocultural norms continue to be significant barriers. Structural imperfections in institutional support, training, and policy execution further restrict these individuals' capacity to take initiative and fulfil their responsibilities as elected representatives.

Activities by governmental and non-governmental organisations have demonstrated guarantee in addressing some of these gaps, especially in areas where capacity-building programs and awareness campaigns are sustained and localized. These programs need to be strengthened, institutionalized, and better coordinated in order to ensure long-term impacts. It is necessary to convert formal representation into active,

knowledgeable, and empowered participation, which calls for increased collaboration between civil society and state institutions as well as programs created especially for tribal and nomadic groups like the Gujjars.

In conclusion, if Gujar women are to surpass the political borders of Himachal Pradesh, interventions must place equal emphasis on inclusion, leadership, education, and empowerment as they do on representation. Political participation has to transform from a necessary formality to a deliberate, meaningful activity founded on knowledge, autonomy, and accountability. Only then is true democratic participation at the grassroots possible.

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