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## WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AND INCLUSIVE RURAL GOVERNANCE: EVIDENCE FROM ALWAR DISTRICT OF RAJASTHAN, INDIA

Garvit Sharma

Bhawna Bali

Ranjana Ray Chaudhuri

### Abstract

*Rural governance institutions in India have long been characterized by gender inequalities, which have limited their access to power and decision-making despite the electoral reservation. The study explores the impact of gendered representation on development priorities and governance processes in the rural areas. It draws evidence from a female-led and a male-led Scheduled Tribe reserved Gram Panchayats (GPs) of Thanagazi Tehsil in Alwar district of Rajasthan. The study has employed a concurrent triangulation approach integrating analysis of Gram Panchayat Development Plans, expenditure records, primary surveys, and interviews. Findings reveal that although both the panchayats have similar planning priorities, yet the female-led panchayat has shown a stronger implementation of these priorities. The female-led panchayat has also performed better in other governance aspects, including perceived accessibility, community participation, and responsiveness. However, structural constraints like low literacy levels, proxy representation, and political linkages also shape governance outcomes.*

**Keywords:** Gendered Representation, Gram Panchayat, Inclusive Planning, Participatory Governance, Rajasthan.

### Introduction

Rural governance assumes a significant role in determining socio-economic development, particularly in countries wherein the majority of its population lives in rural areas (UNDESA, 2021). The effectiveness of local governance depends on its ability to represent diverse social groups and respond to their development priorities through inclusive planning and resource allocation. In the Indian context, where rural areas continue to play a central role in overall development, the extent to which these local governance institutions

promote inclusion directly influences development outcomes (Dasgupta et al., 2014). Yet, the rural political institutions have long reflected caste and gender hierarchies that limited the engagement of women and other marginalized social groups in formal processes of governance (Rani and Kamalakar, 2025).

This exclusion is even more significant in the case of women, who play a crucial role in maintaining households and rural economy through farming, water management and domestic responsibilities, often intensified by male outmigration (Leder, 2022). However,

their role and engagement in formal decision-making institutions remain piecemeal. In an effort to address this imbalance, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 institutionalized Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), and introduced electoral reservations for women, Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Scheduled Castes (SCs). It represented a turning point in Rajasthan, where traditional patriarchal structures have dominated rural governance despite the presence of PRIs since the 1960s (Köhler-Rollefson, 2018). For further strengthening women's participation in grassroots governance, the reservation for women has increased from 33 per cent to 50 per cent through the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Act, 2008 (Hooja and Hooja, 1998; Parveen and Hussain, 2024).

This has led to growing interest in understanding the implications of expanding women's political representation on local governance and development. Empirical evidence suggests that women representatives influence both development priorities and governance processes within local institutions. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) have found that women-led Gram Panchayats accord greater priority to public goods aligned with household welfare needs. Subsequent studies similarly report that women representatives place greater emphasis on drinking water, sanitation, health and social welfare (Mori et al., 2024; Opoku and Acheampong, 2025; Tadjadjeu et al., 2025). Beyond sectoral priorities, women's leadership has also been associated with greater accessibility, participation and responsiveness in local governance (Fadia, 2014; Lindgren et al., 2009). Despite these advances, comparatively limited attention has been paid to understand how

gender leadership impacts not only development priorities but also the implementation of these priorities within comparable institutional settings. This gap is particularly evident in Rajasthan, where relatively few in-depth empirical studies have examined women's political leadership despite deeply embedded patriarchal socio-cultural structures. In light of the gaps stated above, this study has been undertaken to examine the role of women representation in inclusive rural governance in Alwar district, Rajasthan.

### Objectives of Study

Major objectives of the study are:

- to examine the impact of the gender of elected representatives on local development planning and implementation, and
- to examine the functioning of participatory governance and the inclusiveness of local decision-making processes in Gram Panchayats.

### Study Area

The study has been conducted in two Gram Panchayats (GPs), namely Seeli Baori and Kyara situated in Thanagazi Tehsil of Alwar district, in eastern Rajasthan. The tehsil is located between 27° 06' 53" to 27° 30' 45" north latitudes, and 76° 06' 50" to 76° 25' 18" east longitudes (Fig. 1). A total of 130 villages, governed by 29 panchayats, and one urban settlement fall within the tehsil. Both the selected GPs are situated along the foothills of the Aravalli range and share similar ecological conditions characterized by a semi-arid climate, erratic rainfall, limited surface water availability, undulating terrain, shallow soils, and a high dependence on groundwater for agriculture and domestic use.

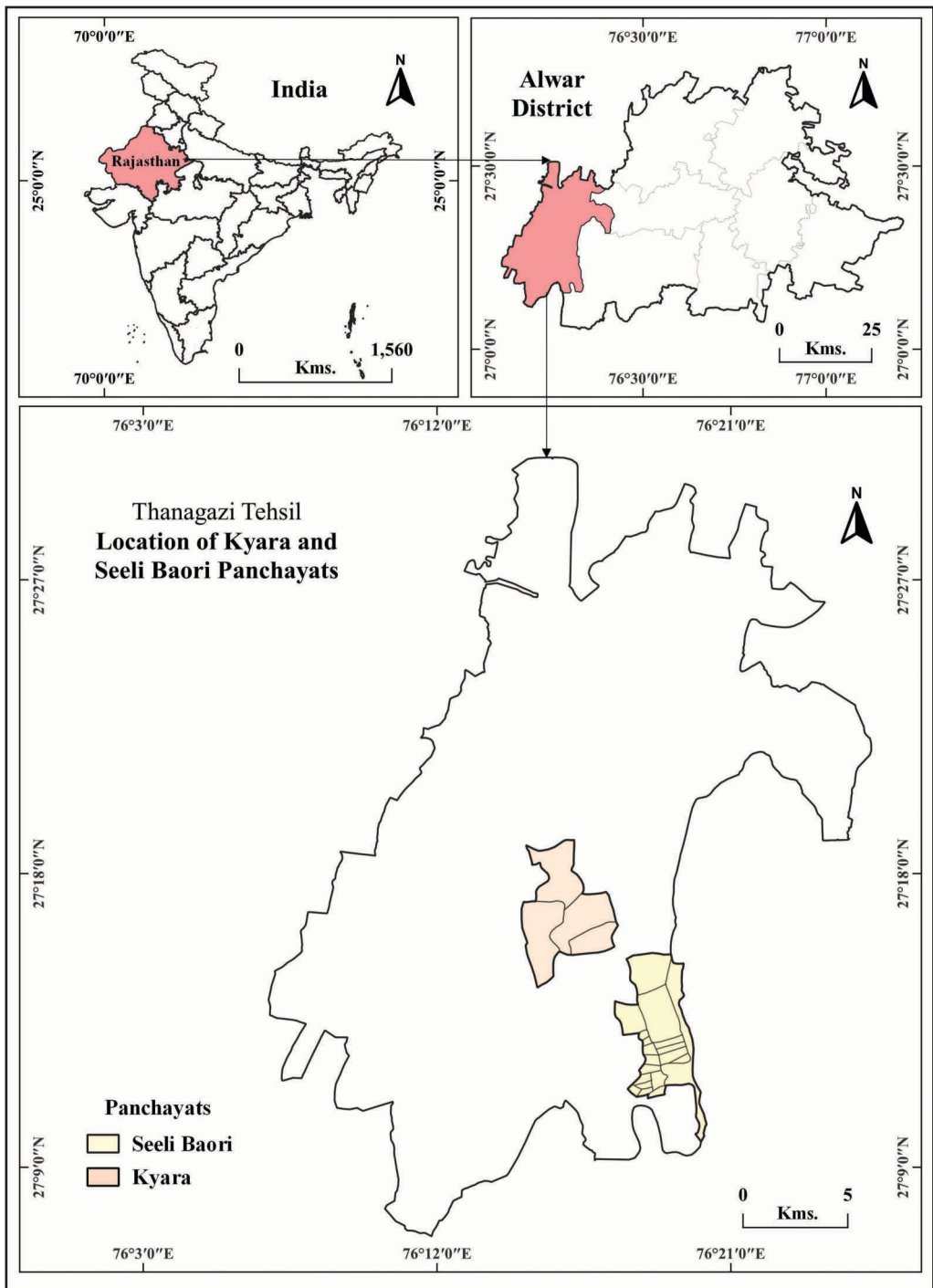


Fig. 1

### Database and Methodology

The study employed a stratified purposive sampling approach to select two GPs from the 29 GPs in Thanagazi Tehsil, based on the reservation category and gender of the elected *sarpanch* (*Head of the panchayat*). Accordingly, Seeli Baori (ST female-led) and Kyara (ST male-led) GPs have been selected from the same reservation category to ensure a comparable institutional context, allowing the gender of the elected *sarpanch* to serve as the principal analytical variable (Fig. 1). The study covers the full Panchayat term from 2020 to 2025.

The study draws on both secondary and primary data. Secondary data have been collected from the State Election Commission's Statistical Book of Panchayat General Elections (Gram Panchayat) (2020), the Alwar District Census Handbook (2011), GP cashbooks maintained by the Village Development Officer (VDO), the e-GramSwaraj portal of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, and village-level records from the e-Jal Shakti portal, Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen), and the Panchayat Asset Register. These sources have been used to analyze demographic characteristics, reservation categories, Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs), sectoral expenditure, and village infrastructure.

Primary data have been collected by administering a questionnaire to 50 respondents (25 from each panchayat) using structured, open-ended, and perception-based questions measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very low to 5 = very high). The respondents have been selected by using a hybrid non-probability sampling method combining opportunistic household visits and snowball referrals. Table 1 presents the socio-economic profile of the respondents across the two

panchayats. In-depth interviews with the *sarpanch* have been conducted, in presence of VDO, to gain additional insights into leadership, decision-making, and governance practices. Informed consent has been obtained from all participants, and responses have been anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

The study has adopted a concurrent triangulation research design in which quantitative and qualitative data have been collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and integrated during the interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of governance outcomes (Mengshoel, 2012). Quantitative analysis involved descriptive examination of GPDP action plans and expenditure records, both of which have been converted into sectoral per cent shares to compare planning priorities with expenditure allocation across the two panchayats. The only parameter of village-wise assets which required calculation has been the Individual Household (HH) Latrine (IHHL) Density, which has been calculated as the number of IHHL in the village/Total number of HH in the village. A value of above 1 indicates more than 1 IHHL per HH. Qualitative data from open-ended questionnaire responses and interviews have been analyzed thematically to interpret decision-making processes, participatory dynamics and governance practices. Perception-based responses have been analyzed using weighted mean Likert scores for key governance indicators.

### Results and Discussion

#### Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile

Both the GPs differ in spatial extent and demographic characteristics. Seeli Baori panchayat extends over 3,088 hectares of area and comprises 19 villages, whereas Kyara

**Table 1**  
**Kyara and Seeli Baori Panchayats: Socio-economic Characteristics of Respondents (2025)**

| Variable                                              | Parameter                                  | Kyara | Seeli Baori |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------|-------------|
| Gender                                                | Female (per cent)                          | 32.00 | 36.00       |
|                                                       | Male (per cent)                            | 68.00 | 64.00       |
| Age Composition                                       | Less than 30 Years (per cent)              | 8.00  | 8.00        |
|                                                       | 30 to 50 Years (per cent)                  | 72.00 | 72.00       |
|                                                       | More than 50 Years (per cent)              | 20.00 | 20.00       |
| Caste                                                 | Scheduled Castes (per cent)                | 8.00  | 24.00       |
|                                                       | Scheduled Tribes (per cent)                | 56.00 | 32.00       |
|                                                       | Other Backward Classes (per cent)          | 20.00 | 12.00       |
|                                                       | General (per cent)                         | 16.00 | 32.00       |
| Average Size of the Households                        | Average Number of Females in the Household | 2.68  | 4.00        |
|                                                       | Average Number of Males in the Household   | 3.28  | 4.32        |
|                                                       | Average Number of Members in the Household | 5.96  | 8.32        |
| Level of Education among the Females in the Household | No Schooling (per cent)                    | 32.00 | 48.00       |
|                                                       | Primary Level (per cent)                   | 16.00 | 8.00        |
|                                                       | Upper Primary Level (per cent)             | 20.00 | 8.00        |
|                                                       | Secondary Level (per cent)                 | 8.00  | 12.00       |
|                                                       | Higher Secondary (per cent)                | 20.00 | 16.00       |
|                                                       | Graduate and above Level (per cent)        | 4.00  | 8.00        |
| Main Source of Income of the Household                | Farming (per cent)                         | 72.00 | 64.00       |
|                                                       | Non-farm Labour (per cent)                 | 12.00 | 20.00       |
|                                                       | Service Sector (per cent)                  | 16.00 | 16.00       |
| Total Income of the Household                         | Less than 1 Lakh Rupees (per cent)         | 68.00 | 56.00       |
|                                                       | 1 Lakh to 3 Lakh Rupees (per cent)         | 20.00 | 20.00       |
|                                                       | 3 Lakh to 5 Lakh Rupees (per cent)         | 0.00  | 12.00       |
|                                                       | 5 Lakh to 8 Lakh Rupees (per cent)         | 8.00  | 12.00       |
|                                                       | More than 8 Lakh Rupees (per cent)         | 4.00  | 0.00        |

Source: Compiled by Authors.

panchayat covers 2,413 hectares of area across 4 villages (Table 2). Seeli Baori panchayat records a slightly higher average household size (5.82) and a more favourable sex ratio (909 females per thousand males) as compared to Kyara panchayat (5.48 and 875 females per thousand males respectively), indicating a relatively more balanced gender composition in the former.

Both the panchayats have a predominance of ST population with 34.22 per cent in Kyara panchayat and 43.64 per cent in Seeli Baori panchayat. Similarly, the share of SC population is 29.38 per cent in Kyara panchayat and 18.20 per cent in Seeli Baori panchayat. Less than half the population in both the panchayats has been recorded as literate, with overall literacy rate at approxi-

**Table 2**  
**Kyara and Seeli Baori Panchayats: Demographic Attributes of Population (2011)**

| <b>Gram Panchayat</b>                               | <b>Kyara</b> | <b>Seeli Baori</b> |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Number of Villages in Panchayat                     | 4            | 19                 |
| Total Geographical Area (ha)                        | 2413         | 3088               |
| Number of Households                                | 728          | 974                |
| Population (number of persons)                      | 3992         | 5669               |
| Sex Ratio (female/1000 males)                       | 875          | 909                |
| Scheduled Castes Population (per cent)              | 29.38        | 18.2               |
| Scheduled Tribes Population (per cent)              | 34.22        | 43.64              |
| Literacy Rate (per cent)                            | 45.67        | 45.97              |
| Female Literacy Rate (per cent)                     | 28.45        | 31.23              |
| Male Literacy Rate (per cent)                       | 60.73        | 59.36              |
| Worker Participation Rate (per cent)                | 55.91        | 49.00              |
| Female Worker Participation Rate (per cent)         | 58.29        | 47.72              |
| Male Worker Participation Rate (per cent)           | 53.83        | 50.17              |
| Workforce involved in Agriculture (per cent)        | 73.12        | 75.92              |
| Female Workforce Involved in Agriculture (per cent) | 73.02        | 77.48              |
| Male Workforce Involved in Agriculture (per cent)   | 73.21        | 74.56              |

Source: Compiled by Authors.

mately 46 per cent. However, gender disparity in the levels of literacy between females and males is highly pronounced in both the panchayats, wherein only one-third of females have been literate as compared to nearly 60 per cent of males. Workforce participation rates range between 55.91 per cent in Kyara panchayat and 49.00 per cent in Seeli Baori panchayat, while the engagement in agriculture is more than 70 per cent of the total workers in both the panchayats. This, combined with low literacy rates in both panchayats, indicates that both the panchayats operate within a primarily agrarian socio-economic setting.

#### **Development Priorities and Implementation Patterns**

The sectoral composition of approved GPDs for 2020-2025 indicates that people in

both the panchayats accord high priority to the provision of essential infrastructure and basic services, particularly drinking water. Prepared by the Gram Sabha, where residents collectively identify and prioritize local development needs, the GPD reflects the development aspirations and priorities of the community. The percentage of action plans under each sector, out of the total GPD action plans, indicates the relative importance given to different community priorities.

In Kyara panchayat, drinking water constituted 35.48 per cent of total plans, followed by road construction and maintenance (21.08 per cent), sanitation facilities (13.37 per cent), and awareness programs and training camps related to minority and women empowerment (23.65 per cent). Similarly, in Seeli Baori panchayat, drinking water accounted for an even higher share at 39.09 per

**Table 3**  
**Kyara and Seeli Baori Panchayats: Sector-wise Percentage Share of Total Gram Panchayat Development Plans (2020-2025)**

| Sectors                                          | Kyara | Seeli Baori |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------|-------------|
| Drinking Water                                   | 35.48 | 39.09       |
| Road Construction and Maintenance                | 21.08 | 14.24       |
| Sanitation Facilities                            | 13.37 | 13.94       |
| Awareness Programs and Training Camps and Others | 23.65 | 23.33       |
| Other Infrastructure Development                 | 6.43  | 9.39        |

Source: Compiled by Authors.

cent, followed by road construction and maintenance at 14.24 per cent and sanitation facilities at 13.94 per cent, respectively. Notably, awareness programs and training camps related to minority and women empowerment account for 23.33 per cent of the total plans (Table 3). These include health awareness campaigns, dissemination of government policies and schemes and, career counselling. These programs also include identification of malnourished children and migrants, enrolment of beneficiaries in welfare schemes, and construction of disability-friendly infrastructure. Thus, despite gendered differences in leadership, the development priorities articulated by the community through the Gram Sabha remained broadly similar, centring on the provision of basic infrastructure and public services. Within this shared planning orientation, however, Seeli Baori (female-led) panchayat's plan composition reflects a relatively stronger emphasis on drinking water and social-sector interventions, whereas Kyara (male-led) panchayat's planning profile assigns comparatively greater weight to road construction and maintenance.

Actual expenditure patterns (2020-2025) reveal both convergence and divergence with planning priorities, as expenditure decisions in a panchayat are undertaken by the

elected members of the panchayat through resolutions passed by the ward panch in the presence of the sarpanch. Consequently, the percentage of expenditure under each sector out of the total expenditure reflects how community priorities identified through the Gram Sabha have been translated into implementation by the elected leadership.

Both panchayats have incurred the largest share of expenditure on road construction and maintenance, which constitutes about a third of their total expenditure budget (32.20 per cent in Kyara panchayat and 31.93 per cent in Seeli Baori panchayat; Table 4). Besides this common expenditure priority, the allocation of expenditures on other activities differs to a significant extent between the GPs. For instance, in the case of Seeli Baori panchayat, expenditure on water related infrastructure and sanitation collectively amounted to 37.71 per cent of total expenditure (17.52 per cent and 20.19 per cent, respectively), suggesting a significant amount of spending on basic services. In contrast, the corresponding allocation by Kyara panchayat has been considerably lower at 24.48 per cent (11.64 per cent and 12.84 per cent, respectively). Kyara panchayat allocated a relatively higher proportion of expenditure (26.34 per cent) towards other infrastructure development, as

**Table 4**  
**Kyara and Seeli Baori Panchayats: Sector-wise Percentage Share of Total Expenditure**  
**(2020-2025)**

| Sectors                                  | Kyara | Seeli Baori |
|------------------------------------------|-------|-------------|
| Road Construction and Maintenance        | 32.20 | 31.93       |
| Water Related Infrastructure             | 11.64 | 17.52       |
| Sanitation Facilities and Infrastructure | 12.84 | 20.19       |
| Other Infrastructure Development         | 26.34 | 9.75        |
| Miscellaneous Expenditure                | 16.99 | 20.61       |

Source: Compiled by Authors.

compared to 9.75 per cent allocated by the Seeli Baori panchayat (Table 4). This is an indication of greater dispersion in allocation of expenditure beyond water and sanitation sectors by the GPs.

Comparative analysis of planning priorities and expenditure of GPs reveals two important findings. First, although both panchayats prioritized infrastructure and basic service delivery, yet the female-led Seeli Baori panchayat placed relatively greater financial emphasis on drinking water, sanitation and other welfare-oriented interventions. On the other hand, the male-led Kyara panchayat has allocated a larger share of expenditure towards other infrastructure sectors. This pattern is broadly consistent with previous studies suggesting that women representatives often accord greater emphasis to services associated with household welfare, including drinking water, sanitation, health and social welfare (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Fadia, 2014; Lindgren et al., 2009; Mori et al., 2024; Opoku and Acheampong, 2025; Tadadjeu et al., 2025). Secondly, the comparison between GPDP priorities and expenditure further highlights that gendered differences extend beyond sectoral emphasis alone. While the communities in both panchayats articulated broadly similar development priorities through the

Gram Sabha, the extent to which these priorities have been translated into financial implementation, differed. The female-led Seeli Baori panchayat has shown a stronger correspondence between community priorities and financial allocation, particularly in drinking water and sanitation. Whereas, the male-led Kyara panchayat exhibits greater divergence between planning priorities and expenditure as it has allocated relatively higher investments in other infrastructure development (Table 4). Thus, the gendered differences in governance have been reflected not only in which sector receives greater emphasis, but also in how effectively community priorities are translated into implementation by the elected panchayat.

#### **Availability of Infrastructure Assets**

Infrastructure provision in both the panchayats exhibits spatial clustering, with public amenities concentrated in the GPs headquarter villages and in settlements historically associated with the residence of the sarpanch. The drinking water pipeline coverage is highly uneven across both the panchayats. In the case of Kyara panchayat, the pipeline network provided by the Public Health Engineering Department and extended under the Jal Jeevan Mission of the Government of

India, on an average, covers 52.01 per cent of the total households (Table 5). Villages like Suratgarh, Kyara, and Kabligarh within Kyara panchayat, respectively have 89.57, 55.95 and 40.27 per cent of the total households with pipeline connections (Table 5). However, Daulatpura village is without water pipeline connections, and therefore depends on borewell and community tanks for supply of water. Water supply disruptions have also been experienced, particularly in areas that are at higher elevations or have dysfunctional pump systems. In comparison with Kyara panchayat, there has been relatively high coverage of pipeline connections in Seeli Baori panchayat, at 71.73 per cent of the total households (Table 5). However, there are variations in terms of coverage across different villages in the panchayat. The households in the villages like Guwara Dabar, Guwara Dhasi, Guwara Hanuman, Guwara Har, Guwara Janawat, Guwara Kalot, Guwara Kalyan, Guwara Lala Bhaiya, Guwara Seera, and Guwara Soti have pipeline coverage for 100 per cent of the households. However, there are some villages like Guwara Bhagwan, Guwara Jamadar, Guwara Sahiba, and Guwara Vyas which do not have pipeline connections. Both the panchayats have shown reliance on groundwater systems for daily needs, where community water storage facilities commonly known as *khel tanki* also help to provide additional water supply to households not connected to pipelines.

Road connectivity in both the panchayats is supported by *pucca* all-weather roads linking villages to the GPs headquarters and nearby towns. However, marked variations have been observed in the conditions of internal roads. Road infrastructure in both panchayats has been developed under schemes

such as the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), through allocations under the Member of Legislative Assembly, Member of Parliament and through Local Area Development funds, however the sewerage and drainage infrastructure in both the panchayats is limited and is largely concentrated in the villages of GPs headquarters. Field observations made during the monsoon period have indicated frequent problems of waterlogging and sewage stagnation on village roads.

Despite the limited drainage infrastructure, both GPs headquarters and their respective constituent villages have been designated as ODF+ (Open Defecation Free +) under the Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen). Both the panchayats have recorded very high average IHHL density exceeding 1 (1.23 in Kyara panchayat and 1.50 in Seeli Baori panchayat) (Table 5). Thus, high levels of individual household latrine coverage of more than one IHHL per HH have been reported across the constituent villages. Sanitation access is further strengthened by the availability of community sanitary complexes located in Kabligarh, Kyara, and Suratgarh villages of Kyara panchayat, and in Guwara Hanuman, Guwara Har, Guwara Kalyan, Guwara Lala Bhaiya, Guwara Pakhal, Jaitpur Brahman, and Seeli Baori villages of Seeli Baori panchayat. However, limited drainage infrastructure suggests that improvements in IHHL coverage have not been accompanied by equivalent developments in waste management infrastructural projects.

The health and educational infrastructures in both the panchayats have shown functional centralization. For instance, each panchayat has one Primary Health Center (PHC) that exists in the GPs headquarters village, making it the focal point for institu-

**Table 5**  
**Kyara and Seeli Baori Panchayats: Village-wise Availability of Infrastructure Assets (2024)**

| Gram Panchayat     | Number of Households | Percentage of Household Pipeline Connection | Individual Household Latrines Density | Number of                  |                       |                                  |                         |          |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|----------|
|                    |                      |                                             |                                       | Community Sanitary Complex | Primary Health Center | Primary and Upper Primary School | Senior Secondary School | Library  |
| <b>Kyara</b>       | <b>728</b>           | <b>52.01</b>                                | <b>1.23</b>                           | <b>3</b>                   | <b>1</b>              | <b>4</b>                         | <b>2</b>                | <b>1</b> |
| Daulatpura         | 141                  | 0.00                                        | 0.60                                  | 0                          | 0                     | 2                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Kabilgarh          | 149                  | 40.27                                       | 0.80                                  | 1                          | 0                     | 1                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Kyara              | 227                  | 55.95                                       | 1.96                                  | 1                          | 1                     | 1                                | 1                       | 1        |
| Suratgarh          | 211                  | 89.57                                       | 1.16                                  | 1                          | 0                     | 0                                | 1                       | 0        |
| <b>Seeli Baori</b> | <b>1040</b>          | <b>71.73</b>                                | <b>1.50</b>                           | <b>8</b>                   | <b>1</b>              | <b>9</b>                         | <b>2</b>                | <b>1</b> |
| Guwara Bhagwan     | 13                   | 0.00                                        | 1.00                                  | 0                          | 0                     | 0                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Dabar       | 45                   | 100.00                                      | 0.96                                  | 0                          | 0                     | 0                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Dhasi       | 30                   | 100.00                                      | 2.00                                  | 0                          | 0                     | 0                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Hanuman     | 20                   | 100.00                                      | 2.10                                  | 1                          | 0                     | 1                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Har         | 66                   | 100.00                                      | 1.05                                  | 1                          | 0                     | 1                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Jamadar     | 18                   | 0.00                                        | 1.00                                  | 0                          | 0                     | 0                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Janawat     | 25                   | 100.00                                      | 1.72                                  | 0                          | 0                     | 1                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Kalot       | 26                   | 100.00                                      | 1.85                                  | 0                          | 0                     | 0                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Kalyan      | 73                   | 100.00                                      | 1.26                                  | 1                          | 0                     | 1                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Lala Bhaiya | 45                   | 100.00                                      | 1.27                                  | 1                          | 0                     | 1                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Pakhal      | 36                   | 77.78                                       | 0.92                                  | 1                          | 0                     | 1                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Sahiba      | 8                    | 0.00                                        | 1.00                                  | 0                          | 0                     | 0                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Seera       | 42                   | 100.00                                      | 1.40                                  | 0                          | 0                     | 0                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Soti        | 65                   | 100.00                                      | 1.20                                  | 0                          | 0                     | 1                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Guwara Vyas        | 12                   | 0.00                                        | 1.00                                  | 0                          | 0                     | 0                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Jaitpur Brahman    | 181                  | 95.03                                       | 1.06                                  | 1                          | 0                     | 1                                | 0                       | 0        |
| Seeli Baori        | 335                  | 32.54                                       | 2.08                                  | 2                          | 1                     | 1                                | 2                       | 1        |

Source: Compiled by Authors.

tional access to health services. Primary and upper primary schools are scattered across villages; however, senior secondary schools are concentrated in few villages, namely Kyara and Suratgarh in Kyara panchayat, and Seeli Baori village in Seeli Baori panchayat. Access to higher education requires moving outside the panchayats. The field observations have revealed that the nearest higher education institution is roughly 16 kilometres away from Kyara panchayat and 22 kilometres away from Seeli Baori panchayat. Thus, basic facilities for education have been scattered within the panchayats, while the facilities for health and secondary education have been spatially concentrated.

### **Leadership, Participation and Perceived Governance Processes**

While the comparison of GDPD priorities and expenditure between two GPs has shown variations in the extent to which community priorities have been translated into implementation, it does not explain the governance processes through which these outcomes have been achieved. Therefore, an assessment of the impact that leadership has on governance requires closer analysis of the way in which local leadership works with community members and the extent to which the participation of community members is facilitated, and how deliberations take place.

The respondents from both the GPs consistently participated in Gram Sabha meetings, grievance redressal forums and village development discussions with the panchayat leadership. Thirteen out of 25 respondents from Seeli Baori panchayat have reported that the presence of a female *sarpanch* made women feel more comfortable in approaching the panchayat with issues

affecting the community, encouraging them to voice their opinions more openly and participate more actively in Gram Sabha meetings and other local decision-making processes. This perception has also been reflected in the household survey, where respondents from Seeli Baori panchayat reported a higher perceived impact of leadership on women's participation in Gram Sabha meetings (weighted mean score: 3.56) than respondents from Kyara panchayat (weighted mean score: 2.20) (Table 6). It has been observed that participation of women in both panchayats has been uneven, as household responsibilities, especially fetching water and other domestic chores, kept many women away from attending Gram Sabha meetings regularly.

Effectiveness of governance processes is also reflected in general trends of community participation and responsiveness. With a weighted mean score of 3.40, the people in Seeli Baori panchayat have higher participation in local development and management of water resources than the people in Kyara panchayat, which has recorded a weighted mean score of 2.32 (Table 6). A similar trend has also been observed in the way the leaders respond to the community complaints regarding water management, where Seeli Baori panchayat has scored weighted mean score of 3.64, as compared to weighted mean score of 2.44 recorded by Kyara panchayat. Respondents from Seeli Baori panchayat have also rated water distribution as more equitable and have been more positive about women leaders' role in resolving drinking water problems. It is clear from the fact that the Seeli Baori panchayat has recorded a weighted mean score of 3.08, against the weighted mean score of 2.52 recorded by Kyara panchayat on this issue (Table 6). These observations are

**Table 6**  
**Kyara and Seeli Baori Panchayats: Mean Scores on Perceived Leadership, Participation and Governance Processes**

| Criteria                                                                       | Kyara                      |    |    |   |   |       | Seeli Baori         |                            |   |    |    |   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|----|----|---|---|-------|---------------------|----------------------------|---|----|----|---|
|                                                                                | Score Given by Respondents |    |    |   |   | Total | Weighted Mean Score | Score Given by Respondents |   |    |    |   |
|                                                                                | 1                          | 2  | 3  | 4 | 5 |       |                     | 1                          | 2 | 3  | 4  | 5 |
| Perceived Impact of Leadership on Women's Participation in Gram Sabha Meetings | 8                          | 8  | 5  | 4 | 0 | 25    | 2.20                | 1                          | 5 | 6  | 5  | 8 |
| Community Participation in Local Development and Management of Water Resources | 6                          | 9  | 7  | 2 | 1 | 25    | 2.32                | 1                          | 3 | 10 | 7  | 4 |
| Leadership Responsiveness to Community Complaints on Water Management          | 6                          | 9  | 5  | 3 | 2 | 25    | 2.44                | 3                          | 1 | 6  | 7  | 8 |
| Women Leaders' Role in Resolving Drinking Water Problems                       | 5                          | 7  | 10 | 1 | 2 | 25    | 2.52                | 4                          | 4 | 5  | 10 | 2 |
| Leadership Effectiveness in Solving Village-Level Problems                     | 5                          | 11 | 6  | 1 | 2 | 25    | 2.36                | 4                          | 9 | 4  | 2  | 6 |

Source: Compiled by Authors.

consistent with the expenditure trends that have been examined in the previous section, where Seeli Baori panchayat has spent a larger share of its budget on drinking water and sanitation. Taken together, this suggests that the higher spending in these sectors has been accompanied by stronger public perceptions of service delivery, responsiveness and inclusiveness of GPs. In line with the above, the leadership in Seeli Baori panchayat has also been found to be more effective in solving village-level problems (weighted mean score: 2.88) than the leadership of Kyara panchayat (weighted mean score: 2.36). It is an indicator of greater public confidence in the female-led Seeli Baori panchayat.

These observations are in line with earlier research, which states that female leaders are often seen as more approachable and responsive to community issues, and can also promote greater participation in local governance processes (Beaman et al., 2012; Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Girard, 2015). These results also confirm the literature on deliberative governance in the Indian village democracy, which asserts that institutional structures like the Gram Sabha work effectively only when local leaders proactively ensure deliberative processes and community participation (Besley et al., 2005; Rao and Sanyal, 2010). Thus, the relatively higher perceptions of accessibility, participation and responsiveness observed in the female-led Seeli Baori panchayat suggest that participatory spaces have been viewed not merely as statutory forums, but as more consultative and inclusive platforms for local decision-making.

### **Effect of Political and Institutional Support on Governance**

The preceding discussion has indicated

that the female-led Seeli Baori panchayat has shown relatively stronger perceptions of accessibility, participation and responsiveness than the male-led Kyara panchayat. However, governance outcomes do not depend only on the leadership behaviour. The implementation of development priorities is also affected by the political relationships, institutional support and administrative capability of the leadership of the panchayat.

One of the important factors affecting governance outcomes has been the nature of the political relationships of the *sarpanch* with the higher-level political representatives like Pradhan, (chairman of Panchayat Samiti), Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), and Member of Parliament (MP). The respondents from both the panchayats have reported that the relationship between the *sarpanch* and these high-level political representatives has its impact on the mobilization of financial resources and implementation of development priorities. While both the *sarpanches* belonged to the ST community, similar to the MLA and MP representing the region, however, respondents reported differences in the political and administrative support received by both the GPs. The respondents from the female-led Seeli Baori panchayat have reported that un-cordial relationship between the *sarpanch* and higher-level political representatives has resulted in the inability of the panchayat to obtain additional funds through the mechanisms such as the Member of Legislative Assembly Local Area Development Scheme (MLALADS), and Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS). Such differences have also affected the employment opportunities under schemes like Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Grameen) (VB-

GRAM G). On the other hand, the respondents from male-led Kyara *panchayat* have reported that the sarpanch has been able to get adequate amounts of financial and resource assistance from these channels in order to make additional investments into local development schemes. Thus, the governance outcomes depend not only on representation in the government or common social background, but also on the ability of the panchayat leadership to navigate multi-level political structures. This observation is consistent with studies highlighting that vertical political connections continue to play an important role in determining local resource allocation under decentralized governance systems (Gupta and Chhibber, 2024).

In addition to vertical political structures, the outcomes of local governance are also affected by electoral support that shapes the distribution of resources among villages. Respondents from both the panchayats have reported that development activities and investments in infrastructure have often been concentrated in the villages from where the elected leadership enjoyed stronger electoral support. In other words, it can be said that some of the local development initiatives may also be shaped by the electoral support. This observation is consistent with the existing studies which show that political support, and electoral calculations often play an important role in spatial distribution of allocation of public goods and development investments (Besley et al., 2012; Khemani, 2015; Zimbalist, 2022).

Institutional constraints within the panchayat may also affect the governance processes. One of the respondents from Kyara panchayat has reported that even though only ward *panchs* have the institutional power to

make decisions and vote on plans, disagreement among them often resulted in facilitation of undue power to *sarpanch* to sway decisions in his favour. This reduces the effectiveness of collective deliberation. Respondents from both the panchayats have also reported that some ward *panchs* did not actively engage in governance activities. In some cases, they do not live in the village and rarely participate in panchayat meetings. Further, there are cases where female representatives perform more of a symbolic role than a substantive one. One of the respondents from Kyara panchayat has reported that, in some cases, female *panch* act as “puppet representatives,” who are only responsible for signing papers, without participating in any decision-making process. These institutional barriers limit participatory governance by weakening decision making at the collective level and reducing the role played by elected members in the process. Proxy representation further curtails the transformational ability of the gender reservation. This is in line with earlier studies indicating that institutional deficiency, such as proxy representation along with control of male members of family hinders substantive participation of women in PRIs (Ban and Rao, 2008; Lopes and Sharma, 2026).

## Conclusions

This study reveals that the disparities in the governance of two Gram panchayats under study are not only evident in terms of sectoral priorities for expenditures but also in other areas such as implementation processes. The female-led Seeli Baori panchayat has not only given importance to drinking water, sanitation and welfare schemes, but also had better linkage between the community priorities, identified by Gram Sabha and the extent to

which these priorities have been implemented by using the budget. This has been coupled with higher perceptions of accessibility, community involvement, and responsiveness of the leadership. On the other hand, the male-led Kyara panchayat, invested more broadly in infrastructure. Thus, greater divergence has been observed between the GPs on account of community priorities and expenditure allocation for their implementation. This suggests that gender shapes local governance not only in terms of what gets prioritized, but also how effectively these priorities are carried through into actual implementation.

However, the dynamics of governance are also conditioned by the capacity of institutions, political linkages, and the socio-cultural context at the grassroots level. The findings show that the political relationships of the *sarpanch* with higher-level political representatives affect the mobilization of financial resources and implementation of development priorities. At the same time, limited participation of some elected members, disagreements among the ward *panchs* and proxy representation by females have affected collective decision-making and weakened participatory governance. Strengthening decentralized governance requires stronger institutional capacity, political and administrative support, and greater participation of elected representatives. Therefore, policy interventions are required for addressing proxy representation and limited participation of elected representatives, enabling effective participation in public decision-making, and making local governance more inclusive and accountable.

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**Garvit Sharma**, Research Scholar  
Department of Natural and Applied Sciences,  
TERI School of Advanced Studies,  
New Delhi (India).

**Dr. Bhawna Bali**, Associate Professor

Email: [bbali@aud.ac.in](mailto:bbali@aud.ac.in)  
(Author for Correspondence)  
School of Global Affairs,  
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi,  
New Delhi (India).

**Dr. Ranjana Ray Chaudhuri**, Associate  
Professor,  
Department of Natural and Applied Sciences,  
TERI School of Advanced Studies,  
New Delhi (India).

# punjab geographer

