

Original Research Article

Participation and Role of Women in Traditional Institutions (TIs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to assess the engagement and influence of women in Traditional Institutions (TIs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Arunachal Pradesh, and to evaluate the impact of these institutions due to dual governance. The objectives of this research are as follows: 1) Assess the nature and extent of women's participation in TIs and PRIs; 2) Understand how women's participation in these institutions is influenced by socio-cultural barriers and political norms; and 3) Identify the potential for women's empowerment through increased participatory and representative roles in local governments. Women's participation in PRIs has been enhanced by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 by providing size restrictions on the number of members from women. However, although women have gained improved descriptive representation through reserved seats, their substantive participation remains hindered by cultural barriers to access decision-making authority, proxy representation, and insufficient institutional support. In contrast, most women in TIs do not have formal decision-making authority. Rather, women's only role in TIs is to provide informal influence and socio-cultural contributions. This study argues that to achieve meaningful women's empowerment, TIs and PRIs must evolve to not only provide a place for women within the institutions, but also work to transform the traditional norms that restrain women; to build women's capacity; and to create policies that support women's participation. The conclusion of this study is that improving women's participation in both TIs and PRIs is critical to achieving a participatory, inclusive, and equitable system of grassroots governance in Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Gender Empowerment, Grassroots Governance, Decentralization, Patriarchy.

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INTRODUCTION

Participation is defined as participation in a particular decision-making process. The women's involvement in governance is a three-dimensional analysis, namely, descriptive representation (the number of women represented), substantive participation (the impact of women's input on decisions made) and transformative empowerment (the ability of women to challenge the traditional beliefs of a patriarchy). The authors of the studies agree that decentralization can facilitate the empowerment of marginalised populations, including women; however, how successful these outcomes will be will vary based on the context in which they occur (Mishra, 2018). In Arunachal Pradesh, women are subjected to traditional norms that affect their ability to participate in governance and decision-making

processes, and many of the traditional norms intersect with formal institutions.

Women's involvement in governance is a crucial indication of inclusive development and democratization, especially in tribal regions, such as Arunachal Pradesh where traditional and modern institutions co-exist. Arunachal Pradesh has a distinctive form of governance where Traditional Institutions (TIs) based on customs and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) that were created according to the Constitution of India operate simultaneously. PRIs, especially following the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution in 1992, have provided formal mechanisms for women's political representation through reservation, while TIs remain predominantly male-dominated and limit women's formal participation in decision-making processes (Yakar, 2024). Women have gained entry to PRIs in

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large numbers; however, patriarchal norms and various forms of social exclusion continue to constrain their participation in the overall process of governance (Mishra, 2018). In most of the tribal societies, women have not historically participated in public decision-making; this has reinforced existing gender hierarchies even though women contribute significantly to their homes and communities, but the scenario is going to be changed. It is essential to understand women's participation and roles in Arunachal Pradesh through the interactions between customary practices and constitutional provisions that govern these systems of governance. Understanding women's participation in both TIs and PRIs provides greatly needed perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for developing a gender-equitable system of governance in Arunachal Pradesh.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study tries:

1. To investigate how women participate and contribute in Traditional Institutions (TIs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).
2. To find out what social, cultural, economic and institutional factors hinder women's ability to participate fully in ITs and PRIs.
3. To study how women's involvement affects the growth and development of TIs and PRIs.
4. To make recommendations regarding policy strategies that will enable women to have a greater level of involvement with both TIs and PRIs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

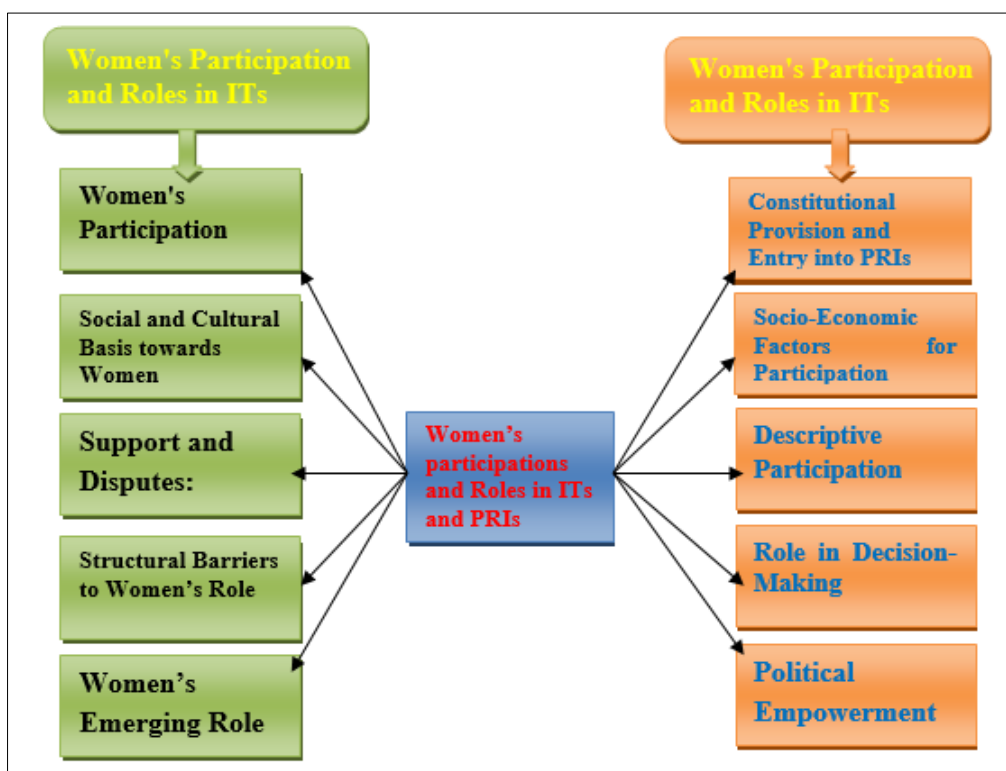
1. The study utilizes a descriptive, analytical, and comparative approach to research the participations of women in Traditional Institutions (TIs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Arunachal Pradesh.
2. The research is qualitative in nature and will primarily focus on understanding the institutional structures, gender relationships, and the political role of women within these governance structures.
3. The data used for this research is mainly secondary and will include books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research papers, governmental documents, census data, policy papers, newspapers, online academic databases, and other secondary sources of information related to TIs, PRIs, and women within Arunachal Pradesh.

4. Data collection for this research includes systematic literature reviews, archival records, and scholarly research related to women's participation in politics and governance through traditional governance systems.
5. The descriptive method describes how TIs and PRIs are structured, operate, and function in the state of Arunachal Pradesh.
6. The comparative method is used to analyse the similarities and differences between women's representation, authority, and decision-making power within TIs compared with PRIs.
7. The analytical method of analysis is used to critically analyse the socio-economic, socio-cultural, and institutional impediments that affect women's effective participation in governance.
8. The interpretative approach is used to develop an understanding of the interrelatedness of patriarchy, customary law, constitutional law, and women's empowerment.
9. The geographic area of the research is within different tribes in Arunachal Pradesh.
10. The methodology in the research provides a description of the current level of participation of women in ITs and PRIs and explores the challenges, current impacts and future direction of women's participation in governance institutions in Arunachal Pradesh.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Women's participation in governance and their role within the governance structures of Arunachal Pradesh are a direct result of both new and old institutions. Although the introduction of PRIs in Arunachal Pradesh has created new opportunities for women's participation in governance, women continue to face structural barriers created by traditional institutions. The attainment of women's true empowerment will require both the reform of governance institutions and the transformation of prevailing socio-cultural norms. Women in Arunachal Pradesh are moving from a position of passive engagement to being active change-makers. However, attaining equality requires ongoing policy support, an increase in community education and knowledge, and the provision of gender-sensitive frameworks of governance. Now we explore their roles in ITs and PRIs in context of participation and contribution in regard to social, cultural, economic and institutional factors and how their involvement affects the growth and development of TIs and PRIs.

Framework for Women’s Participations and Roles in ITs and PRIs



This framework describes the importance of local governance through women’s participation in both Traditional Institutions (ITs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Women’s participation is substantially affected by societal and cultural views of women. The encouragements of family, community, and institutional support allow women to be engaged in governance, while the existence of obstacles, such as disputes or opposition will hinder women from becoming engaged in governance. The framework identifies structural barriers that impede women from being engaged in decision making such as the presence of patriarchy, lack of educational opportunities, and limited work opportunities. However, women have also been identified as emerging leaders and participating in public affairs. Constitutional provisions and reservations have also increased the number of women entering into the PRIs. By participating in PRIs, women build political empowerment, confidence, and leadership abilities. In addition to barriers and encouragements, socio-economic factors such as income, education, awareness, and social status affect the level of women’s participation in governance. The framework focuses on descriptive participation, referring to the number of women present in governing bodies and institutions. Lastly, the overall purpose of this framework is that women’s effective participation in governance will strengthen the decision-making processes and provide inclusive development within local governance systems.

Women's Participation and Roles in Traditional Institutions (TIs)

The Traditional Institutions in Arunachal Pradesh maintain social order and settle disputes, as well as preserving customary laws. They are traditional governance systems among tribes and keep it preserved through ongoing use of tradition and public approval. TIs are indigenous governance systems that are based on representative democracy and provide a means of maintaining social order and dispute settlement in the community. Although decision making is made as a group and collectively; the role of woman is limited, indirect, informal, or absent. Arunachal Pradesh traditional institutions such as village councils in the Adi, Nyishi, Apatani, and Monpa tribes are the primary embodying governance system for indigenous people: maintaining social order, settling disputes and preserving customary laws. Although collective decision-making occurs in these institutions, women's participation is limited, indirect, and primarily informal in nature.

1. Women's Participation

- 1.1 Women are generally excluded from formal decision-making inherently, women will hold no position in respect to the Kebangs, the Buliang, or in the Nyedar Namlos as a centre of authority or leadership. Male elders and community leaders are traditionally associated with decision-making.
- 1.2 Women will often provide indirect and informal input into collective decisions despite their formal exclusion from decision making by influencing their husbands/fathers/brothers/and household

discussions or being involved in informal family/kinship networks that may help to influence decision making at the community level.

2. Social and Cultural Basis towards Women

2.1 Gender Division of Roles -Men are attuned to public authority/leadership; Women are more tied to domestic responsibilities/caregiving/agriculture and cultural responsibilities. Although women's contributions are critical to well being, they are politically less visible than men.

2.2 Role in Customary Practices:

Women play an essential role in ceremonial activities such as celebrating festivals, ceremonies or marriages and in preserving oral traditions, food practices and culture in general, which are integral to preserving tribal identity.

3. Economical and Knowledge Contributions:

Women are significant contributors to agriculture, jhum cultivation, seed preservation, conserving biodiversity, food production, management of household resources; these are all activities that contribute to overall food security of communities, which in turn provide economic and social stability for Traditional Institutions (Wangpan, et al., 2026).

4. Support and Disputes:

Women's Mediating Role in Conflict Resolution Informal mediation, moral support and reconciliation to resolve family disputes, marital disagreements and community disputes is primarily handled by women; however, formal mediation typically occurs through male-dominated councils.

5. Structural Barriers to Women's Role:

- a. Patriarchal Norms and Customary Law The patriarchal norms that govern customary law, including matters relating to governance, inheritance, and property ownership are biased toward male supremacy and therefore do not enable nor acknowledge female political influence.
- b. Lack of Institutional Support for Women's Work, Knowledge and Mediation Roles Institutionally recognized work is rarely supported formally; therefore, women's work and knowledge remain unrecognized in both official capacities as leaders in the workplace.
- c. Tradition and Modernity Modernly educated people are affecting traditional laws of custom that have imposed restrictions on the participation of women; however, the impact of modern education, constitutional values and PRIs on traditional practices will take time to cultivate sufficient levels of change (Mishra, 2018).

6. Women's Emerging Role:

Improvements to women's educational status, legal awareness, access to information and successful participation in PRIs continue to change the attitudes of many traditional institutions (local councils). Women are increasingly being included as advisers or consulted, but the geographical dispersion of women's success and change in perspective create disparities across locations. Women's placement within Traditional Institutions continues to be paradoxical with respect to the exclusion of women from leadership roles at the same time they are recognised for their economic contributions, their cultural support and their ability to influence socially. Achieving meaningful inclusion will require culturally sensitive reform, recognising women's contributions and more room for formal participation.

Participation and Role of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

1. **Constitutional Provision and Entry into PRIs:** Women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Arunachal Pradesh has been significantly aided by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 which mandates reservation for women in local government, thereby providing a formal mechanism for connecting women to the electorate. This provision has led women into formal political structures and has resulted in increased numeric representation of women at the grassroots level, thereby breaking down the historical exclusion of women from spaces of public decision-making (Yakar, 2024).
2. **Socio-Economic Factors for Participation:** Women's socio-economic determinants of participation impact the amount and effectiveness of their participation in PRIs. Factors like education, family background, and political awareness all play an essential role in determining how active and confident women are in governance processes. Those women who have had a greater level of education and have been exposed to public life participate more actively and confidently in governance processes, while Women from less privileged backgrounds typically face more restrictions when compared with Women who come from privileged families (Pegu & Sharma, 2023).
3. **Descriptive Participation:** Women's descriptive participation may have increased due to the reservation policy; however, there are many instances where Women's substantive participation (i.e., actual involvement in decision-making) has been unequally experienced by women. Women's substantive participation in decision-making is often mediated through existing patriarchal social structures and cultural norms. (Mishra, 2018).
4. **Role in Local Governance and Decision-Making:** By participating in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of development programs, Women representatives significantly contribute to the development of local governance by contributing to

the decision-making processes that occur within both Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings. Through their contributions and participation in these decision-making processes, Women strengthen the democratic decentralization of government in their communities and actively promote participatory governance. (Yakar, 2024).

5. **Women Take Priority for Social Development:** In their decisions as elected officials in the PRI system, women prioritize social issues such as health, education, sanitation, and women's and children's well-being. By participating in PRIs women have shifted the governance agenda away from one focused on human development, to a more community focused and socially responsible agenda for local governance (Yakar, 2024).
6. **Women's Political Empowerment:** By being members of the PRIs, women develop their political empowerment by learning how to lead, learning about politics, and having the experience of being agents in the public domain. The ability of women to move from the private to the public domain strengthens their position in democratic governance systems (Yakar, 2023).
7. **Women's Role in Mobilizing Communities:** Women's representatives are vital to mobilizing communities to participate in the development of government programs and initiatives. Because of their high level of involvement with communities, women can disseminate information about government programs and services and receive grassroots support for their initiatives (Yakar, 2023).
8. **Women's Role in Resolving Conflict:** Women's participation provides another avenue to resolve conflict in their communities. They facilitate dialogue, cooperation, and consensus among community members when resolving disputes and can therefore facilitate a more inclusive and empathetic approach to dispute resolution, while also working to complement and enhance existing formal means of governance (Yakar, 2023).
9. **Barriers To Effective Participation:** Women continue to face numerous obstacles to participate effectively in PRIs as they continue to populate them more than before. This includes patriarchal practices, proxy representation, and the limited power they hold over the decisions made in these institutions. According to Mishra (2018), "multiple marginality" hinders one's ability to fully exercise their power in governance.
10. **New Trends in Women's Leadership and Participatory Opportunities:** In recent years, we have noticed an increase in women's ability to participate, as well as leadership positions, in PRIs as result of a shift in social views towards women and increased awareness of gender equality. Even though progress is being made, the PRI system will provide opportunities to create transformational change by giving women opportunities to take part

in decision-making, as well as challenge gender norms (Yakar, 2023).

Women's Challenges in TIs & PRIs

Structural, socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers limit women's participation in governance in Arunachal Pradesh. Although they have formal opportunities through PRIs, patriarchal norms and culturally based systems lower women's ability to make decisions about issues that impact their lives.

- 1) **Governance has been male-dominated throughout history:** Men have historically led governments while women have been relegated to the home, which discourages women from seeking leadership positions (Bathey 2019).
- 2) **Exclusion of Women in ITs:** Women are excluded from TIs, which means they have few opportunities to be in a position of political power or to participate directly in leadership roles and decision-making processes within customary councils. Therefore, women miss out on gaining valuable political experience and being exposed to decision-making structures.
- 3) **Limited of Participation of Women in PRIs:** Women hold reserved seats within PRIs but may not exercise their voice at meetings or have agency over local decisions. Representation alone does not equal empowerment (Mishra, 2018).
- 4) **Proxy Representation:** Elected representatives are often proxies for their husbands, male relatives, or local elites. This reduces their independence and authority.
- 5) **Multiple Marginalities:** Women experience multiple forms of marginalization due to poverty, isolation, tribal hierarchies, and lack of access to state services, resulting in deeper exclusion from participation, (Mishra, 2018).
- 6) **Lack of Education and Awareness:** Due to limited education and low levels of political awareness, women may not know how government operates, budget processes, legal processes, or any written official communication (Pegu & Sharma 2023).
- 7) **Socio-Cultural Constraints:** Women are frequently excluded from participating and leading in most public forums due to traditional norms, stereotypes regarding gender, and practices associated with a rigid division of labour.
- 8) **The Double Burden of Responsibilities:** Given their need to manage household work, child raising and income generating activities in addition to political responsibilities, women often have limited time and energy left for fulfilling their governance responsibilities.
- 9) **Lack of Training and Institutional Support:** Many of the women representatives that exist today do not receive sufficient training or mentoring or receive administrative assistance which leads to them being less effective as representatives.
- 10) **Resistance from Traditional Power Structures:** Traditional leaders and male elders have been

known to challenge the authority of women in panchayati raj institutions which undermines both elected institutions and women leaders.

11) Limited Advancement to Higher Politics: While grassroots representation of women has increased, there continues to be a significant gap in the representation of women in both district leadership positions and at the state level (The Arunachal Times, 2018).

The barriers hindering women's participation in Arunachal Pradesh are due primarily to patriarchy, the application of dualism within the institutions that govern women and socio-economic inequity. Legal reform, education, economic empowerment, support from the institution that governs women, and a change in social attitudes towards gender equality will be necessary for effective participation by women.

Enhancing Women's Representation and Its Effects on the TIs and PRIs

Women have been instrumental in transforming the political, sociocultural, economic and institutional aspects of governance in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Though there are several obstacles to women's active civic engagement within the contexts of these social constructs and several institutionalized patriarchal barriers to women's political involvement, the degree of women's active political engagement within PRI and indirect participation within TI have helped to catalyze a gradual progression toward a more democratic government.

- 1. Increasing Representation:** The implementation of reservations for women has provided women with increased access and opportunity to participate as village (or local) representatives at the elected grassroots level (as elected representatives, chairpersons, and local leaders), and thereby, have begun to alter the traditional male-dominant systems of governance (Yakar, 2024).
- 2. Increasing Inclusive Governance:** The increased number of women engaged in governance has resulted in an expanded scope of governance that incorporates some of the issues women face, such as health, welfare, children and community welfare. However, although women's contributions to governance have expanded the scope of governance, the power associated with that level of involvement is still relatively limited (Mishra, 2018).
- 3. Focus on Social Development:** Women's leadership in governance primarily focuses on issues related to the promotion of education, sanitation, safe drinking water, health, maternal health and local welfare programs; therefore, women's participation in governance has significantly enhanced human development at the local level.

- 4. Development of Agency and Empowerment:** The greater number of women participating in governance enhances their level of confidence, their capacity to lead and their ability to communicate and make decisions. Furthermore, women's active engagement in governance has increased their community's recognition of them as effective leaders.
- 5. Changing of Gender Norms:** The greater prevalence of women in decision-making positions has begun to change the negative stereotypes associated with women as decision-makers; and the increased number of women as leaders in PRIs has provided an opportunity to challenge society's traditional views regarding women's roles in society (particularly as it relates to public life).
- 6. Strengthening of Grassroots Democracy:** The involvement of women in governance has allowed local governance systems to become more representative, participatory, transparent and accountable, which ultimately has fostered community involvement in the governance of communities.
- 7. Economic Development:** Women's leadership in PRI systems often results in support for Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs), livelihood programs, poverty alleviation programs and equitable distribution of welfare benefits, all of which support the creation of inclusive development (Nirin & Komow, 2025).
- 8. Limitations on Continued Use:** Proxy representation, patriarchal control, lack of training, financial dependence and continued dominance of Traditional Institutions over PRI bodies continues to restrict access (Mishra, 2018).

Consequently, Women's involvement in TIs and PRIs have increased representation, created an inclusive government, enhanced social development, and provided greater women's empowerment in Arunachal Pradesh. Despite existing barriers to access, this is a significant move towards a democratic and inclusive gender equitable society.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

A comprehensive policy approach is necessary to remove structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers to women's participation in Traditional Institutions (TIs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Arunachal Pradesh. While PRIs are designed to create opportunities for women through reservation, patriarchal norms and the predominance of traditional institutions are still significant limitations on women's real empowerment. Therefore, policies must focus on both representation as well as decision-making ability.

1. **Leadership Development and Building Capacity:** There need to be regular training sessions for elected women representatives to develop governance processes, finance, leadership, communication and decision-making skills to build confidence and competence (Yakar, 2024).
2. **Gender Sensitization within Traditional Institutions:** There should be awareness campaigns and workshops to sensitise traditional leaders and communities about the need to incorporate women into customary governance systems (Bathey, 2019).
3. **Coordination between TIs and PRIs:** Defining the respective roles and responsibilities of both institutions can help decrease conflict, avoid duplication, and increase cooperation in development and dispute resolution (Mishra, 2018).
4. **Ensuring Meaningful Participation of Women:** Policies should ensure that women are not only numerically represented but that they are actively engaged in the discussion, decision-making and local development processes.
5. **Improving access to Education and Awareness:** Adult literacy; civic education; and public awareness initiatives can provide women with information about their rights; reservation policies; and government schemes to improve their political participation (Pegu; Sharma; 2023).
6. **Economic Empowerment:** Access to Self-Help Groups (SHGs); Entrepreneurial Development; Skill Development; and Access to Credit can give women independence; confidence; and public engagement.
7. **Ending Proxy Representation:** Strengthening Legal Safeguards; Grievance Mechanisms; and Women's Support Networks will help to ensure male relatives or local elites do not control elected women representatives.
8. **Institutional Support; Monitoring:** Women representatives need support through enhanced district or block level support systems; and regular monitoring/evaluation of women representatives' participation and challenges.
9. **Reform of Customary Laws:** To comply with constitutional principles of equality, justice, and non-discrimination, reform of gender-biased customary law should take place over time.
10. **Facilitating Women's Political Leadership:** Women can be supported in their transition from grassroots institutions to higher political offices through leadership training; mentoring; and a greater number of woman candidates nominated for office.

Therefore, A comprehensive strategy that includes institutional reform; gender sensitive training (for both men and women); access to education;

economic empowerment; and development of leadership is necessary to increase participation rates of women in Arunachal Pradesh. Achieving this requires collaboration between the government; civil society; local communities; and Traditional Institutions to promote inclusive and equitable governance from a gender perspective.

Limitations of the Study

1. This research was predominantly undertaken with secondary sources and due to lack of a significant number of primary data-based field surveys there was limited opportunity for primary survey results to inform the research outcomes.
2. Arunachal Pradesh is home to many different ethnic groups and there are considerable variations in governance practices among tribes and districts; this means that the current findings may not necessarily represent all of the diverse communities.
3. The report concentrates on institutional patterns of governance at an aggregate level as opposed to providing an exhaustive list of case studies of every village/district.
4. The influence of women within the family and customary systems is very difficult to quantify by means of documentary sources.
5. Changes to the political context and gendered attitudes may also change the nature of participation over time.
6. Limited availability of region-specific information about women's real decision-making power in TIs and PRIs restricts the possibilities for more in-depth empirical analysis.

CONCLUSION

The examination of women's roles in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Traditional Institutions (TIs) in Arunachal Pradesh illustrates how customary practices and legal mandates interact to define the boundaries and success of women's involvement in institutional governance. PRIs were established as part of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 and were designed to allow for the political inclusion of women through formalised reservation systems; however, TIs continue to function within patriarchal structures that inhibit women's direct involvement in governance. The analysis shows that while there are substantial increases in the number of women holding descriptive office within PRIs, their substantive participation is limited by traditional socio-cultural norms, by being represented through proxies, and by male-dominated traditional authorities exercising tremendous influence over PRIs. The presence of "multiple marginalities" prevents women from obtaining meaningful power, thereby limiting the potential for transformation through decentralisation. Similarly, women are excluded from traditional systems of

governance which reinforces gender inequality and reduces opportunities for women to be politically socialised. Despite these challenges, women have begun to participate more commonly in PRIs, which has resulted in greater visibility for women within the public sphere, greater focus on the social development agenda, and growing challenges to traditional notions of gender. Although there are typically tensions between the two systems and both have the potential to produce opportunities for convergence and reform, this dual system has the potential to evolve toward an inclusive and gender-responsive system of governance over time.

The findings demonstrate that empowering women in Arunachal Pradesh requires a more comprehensive approach than simply including women in institutions. A comprehensive approach that involves transforming the social and cultural norms that women face, as well as enhancing institutional capacity to support such changes, is necessary for women to grow from symbolic to active participants in making systemic changes and contributing to an equitable and participatory democratic process at all levels.

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