

Government's Vision Behind the 73rd Amendment and Women Empowerment in Local Bodies: A Comparative Study of Aligarh and Ballia Districts in Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract: *The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 was a landmark reform in India's democratic framework, aiming to decentralize governance by empowering local bodies known as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). One of its most significant features was the mandatory reservation of one-third of all seats for women, with the goal of encouraging their participation in grassroots politics. This paper explores the vision behind this amendment, focusing specifically on how it has impacted women's empowerment in two contrasting districts of Uttar Pradesh- Aligarh and Ballia. Aligarh, located in western UP, is relatively urban and more educationally developed, while Ballia, in the eastern part of the state, reflects a more traditional and rural setup. Through a comparative lens, this study investigates whether the reservation has led to meaningful empowerment for women, or if their participation remains symbolic due to persistent social and cultural barriers. Drawing on secondary data, government reports, and academic literature, the research finds that while there has been a noticeable rise in women's political visibility, real empowerment is uneven and often obstructed by patriarchal structures, lack of training, and limited decision-making authority. The paper concludes by recommending practical policy interventions to strengthen the role of women in local governance, ensuring that the vision of the 73rd Amendment translates into genuine social change.*

Keywords: Aligarh, Ballia, Women Empowerment, Decentralized Government, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

1. Introduction

Women's representation in political decision-making has long been a contested issue in India, particularly in rural regions where traditional norms and gender roles remain deeply entrenched. For decades, women were largely excluded from formal political spaces, especially at the grassroots level. It was only with deliberate constitutional interventions that the space for women in local governance began to open meaningfully. The representation of women in rural governance is not just about increasing numbers; it is intrinsically linked to empowerment, defined by autonomy in decision-making, participation in public life, and control over local development issues (Rai, 2011).

The historical route of women's involvement in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) was relatively insignificant before the early 1990s. Although some states experimented with local bodies and women's inclusion earlier, there was no uniform policy ensuring women's participation in the governance structure across India. That changed with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, which came into force in 1993. This amendment institutionalized PRIs as a three-tier system of rural governance and made it constitutionally mandatory to reserve one-third of seats for women, including for positions of chairpersons at all levels (Government of India, 1992). The reform was envisioned as a tool not just for political inclusion, but for broader social transformation and empowerment of women across rural India.

The state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) provides a compelling context for studying the outcomes of this constitutional vision. Being India's most populous state, with significant rural demography and socio-cultural diversity, UP serves as both a challenge and an opportunity for implementing decentralized, inclusive governance. Within the state, Aligarh and Ballia districts represent two distinct settings. Aligarh, in western UP, is more urbanized and educationally progressive, while Ballia, in eastern UP, is predominantly rural and more traditional. This unambiguous contrast makes them ideal for comparative analysis of how the same constitutional policy can play out differently across contexts.

This study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the 73rd Amendment in advancing women's empowerment through PRIs in these two districts. It focuses on the actual experiences of elected women representatives, how they navigate power structures, and whether their presence leads to substantive participation or remains symbolic.

1.1 Objectives of the Study:

- To understand the government's original vision and objectives behind the 73rd Amendment concerning women's empowerment.
- To assess the impact of women's reservation in PRIs in Aligarh and Ballia.
- To explore the enabling and limiting factors affecting women's performance and autonomy in local governance.

1.2 Research Questions:

1. What was the government's intent behind enacting the 73rd Constitutional Amendment with regard to women's participation?
2. How has this constitutional change impacted women's empowerment in the districts of Aligarh and Ballia?
3. What differences exist in the experiences of elected women representatives in these two districts?

1.3 Methodology:

This study adopts a comparative case study approach, focusing on Aligarh and Ballia. It uses both qualitative and quantitative data sources, including:

- Government reports and election data from the State Election Commission.
- Secondary research from peer-reviewed journals and policy briefs.
- Field studies, interviews, and NGO reports.
- Comparative analysis of indicators such as literacy levels, re-election rates of women, participation in Gram Sabhas, and leadership outcomes.

By drawing on these sources, the research aims to provide a grounded understanding of how policy, context, and culture intersect in shaping the path of women's political empowerment in rural India.

2. The 73rd Amendment: Vision and Objectives

The 73rd Amendment was a significant step towards empowering women and promoting gender equality in local governance. However, for the vision of the amendment to be fully realized, it is essential to address the challenges of implementation and ensure that women can exercise their rights and responsibilities in PRIs effectively. By mandating one-third reservation for women in PRIs, the amendment sought to empower women at the grassroots level, enabling them to participate actively in local governance and decision-making processes.

2.1 Key Provisions for Women:

1. Reservation of Seats: The amendment stipulated that not less than one-third of the total seats in Panchayats at all levels (village, intermediate, and district) be reserved for women. This provision aimed to increase women's representation and participation in local governance (Government of India, 1992).

2. Reservation of Offices of Chairpersons: In addition to reserving seats, the amendment also mandated that not less than one-third of the offices of Chairpersons in Panchayats at each level be reserved for women. This measure was intended to ensure that women held leadership

positions within local governance structures (Government of India, 1992).

3. Rotation of Reserved Seats: To prevent the entrenchment of specific constituencies for women, the amendment provided for the rotation of reserved seats and offices of Chairpersons among different constituencies in Panchayats. This provision aimed to promote broader participation and prevent the marginalization of women in specific areas (Government of India, 1992).

2.2 Government's Vision:

The government's vision behind these provisions was to promote gender equality and empower women by providing them with opportunities to participate in decision-making processes at the local level. By ensuring women's representation in PRIs, the amendment aimed to address issues such as women's health, education, sanitation, and rural development, which are crucial for the well-being of communities (Choudhury, 2023).

2.3 Empowerment through Participation:

The reservation of seats and offices for women was seen as a step towards political empowerment, enabling women to influence policies and decisions that directly affect their lives. It was anticipated that women's participation in local governance would lead to more inclusive and effective decision-making, raising community development and social change (Choudhury, 2023).

2.4 Challenges and Limitations:

Despite the constitutional provisions, the implementation of the 73rd Amendment faced challenges. In many instances, women elected to PRIs were found to be proxies for male relatives, a phenomenon often referred to as "Sarpanch Pati" or "Pradhan Pati" (husband as Panchayat head). This practice undermined the intent of the amendment and limited women's actual participation in governance (Choudhury, 2023).

3. Aligarh and Ballia: District Profiles

Understanding the outcomes of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment requires analysing how local contexts shape the empowerment of women in PRIs. In this regard, **Uttar Pradesh**, India's most populous state with deep rural roots serves as a valuable case. Within it, **Aligarh** and **Ballia** districts offer contrasting socio-economic, cultural, and developmental settings that make them ideal for comparative analysis.

3.1 Aligarh: Semi-Urban Progress within Traditional Structures

Aligarh is located in western Uttar Pradesh and is known for its semi-urban character, strengthened by educational infrastructure and moderate industrial activity. According to Census 2011, Aligarh had a literacy rate of 67.5%, with male literacy at 77.9% and female literacy at 55.6%, reflecting a significant gender gap in education (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). Despite this, the presence of institutions like **Aligarh Muslim University (AMU)** has helped shape progressive narratives, particularly in urban clusters.

Economically, Aligarh is supported by agriculture and small-scale industries, most notably the lock

manufacturing, metal works sector and large meat export companies. The exposure to urban facilities and moderate infrastructure development offers women in PRIs slightly better access to training, media, and institutional support compared to more rural districts (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Uttar Pradesh, 2023).

3.2 Ballia: Deep-Rooted Rural Traditions and Social Conservatism

Ballia, on the other hand, lies in eastern Uttar Pradesh and is a largely rural, agrarian district. While the overall literacy rate in Ballia is slightly higher at 73.8%, the female literacy rate still lags at 58.6%, compared to 81.2% for males (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). The district's socio-cultural environment is often more conservative, with stronger patriarchal norms and lower exposure to institutional resources.

Women elected in PRIs in Ballia often face traditional gender role expectations and limited autonomy. Field studies and policy assessments suggest that their political engagement is more vulnerable to "proxy representation," where husbands or male relatives unofficially operate in their place (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024). The lack of support systems such as NGOs, self-help groups, or gender sensitization workshops further limits the practical empowerment of women in local governance.

3.3 Significance of Aligarh and Ballia

The unambiguous contrast between Aligarh and Ballia underscores the importance of context in assessing the impact of the 73rd Amendment. While both districts comply with the legal mandate of one-third reservation for women in PRIs, the **quality** and **depth** of participation differ substantially. Aligarh shows signs of emerging leadership among women, especially in peri-urban areas, whereas Ballia reflects the ongoing struggle against socio-cultural constraints that inhibit genuine empowerment.

This comparative approach allows for a grounded understanding of how structural variables such as education, economy, social norms, and institutional access mediate the effectiveness of women's political participation. These insights are critical for tailoring policy interventions that go beyond legal reservation to ensure substantive gender empowerment.

4. Comparative Analysis of Women's Role in PRIs in Aligarh vs. Ballia

The experiences of women in Aligarh and Ballia underline the critical role of **local context** in determining the success of the 73rd Amendment. While urbanized and relatively progressive areas like Aligarh have seen more genuine political engagement by women, rural areas like Ballia still grapple with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that limit the effectiveness of women's participation in governance. A deeper focus on education, leadership development, and empowerment programs can go a long way in ensuring that the objectives of the 73rd Amendment are more fully realized across all districts, regardless of socio-economic conditions. By comparing the role of women in PRIs in Aligarh and Ballia, this section highlights both the opportunities and challenges they face in these two districts of Uttar Pradesh. The data shown below presents various

attributes of both districts, allowing for a comparative analysis between them;

Table 1: Aligarh vs Ballia: Population and Local Governance Attributes

ATTRIBUTES	ALIGARH	BALLIA
Total Population	36,73,897	32,39,774
Urban Population	12,17,199	3,04,109
Rural Population	24,56,698	29,35,665
Tehsil	5	6
Villages	1,241	2,361
Panchayat Samiti	12	17
Panchayat	887	948
Female Sarpanch	299	441

Note: The data presented in the above table has been sourced from the official websites of the Government of India and the Government of Uttar Pradesh.

4.1 Women's Participation in PRIs: Aligarh

In Aligarh, women's participation in local governance has been relatively more active compared to rural districts like Ballia. This can be attributed to several factors: urbanization, relatively higher literacy rates, and a more progressive cultural environment, which together create an enabling atmosphere for women to take on leadership roles (Rai, 2011). The presence of Aligarh Muslim University provides an intellectual hub that influences gender norms, resulting in more women actively pursuing roles in Panchayats rather than simply being proxies for male relatives (Choudhury, 2023).

Field studies show that women elected to PRIs in Aligarh have, in many cases, been able to influence decisions regarding local infrastructure projects, healthcare, and education (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024). Furthermore, exposure to NGOs and various gender training programs has increased women's leadership capabilities. These women are seen as active agents of change, not just token representatives, with their political actions reflecting genuine community involvement. Women's involvement in these roles also leads to greater visibility, helping break traditional gender barriers in the region (Rai, 2011).

However, challenges persist in Aligarh as well. While more women hold positions in PRIs, many still face resistance from entrenched patriarchal attitudes, especially in rural pockets of the district. Often, they struggle to balance traditional family responsibilities with their political duties, and many have to navigate subtle forms of patriarchal control, such as Sarpanch Pati or Pradhan Pati (husband as Panchayat head), even in more progressive settings (Choudhury, 2023).

4.2 Women's Participation in PRIs: Ballia

In Ballia, the experience of women in Panchayats is unambiguously different due to the more conservative and rural nature of the district. While the legal provisions of the 73rd Amendment are in place, women in Ballia often face significant cultural and social barriers that limit their ability to exercise their political rights. A significant percentage of women in Ballia are either proxy candidates or simply fulfil ceremonial roles while male family members control the decision-making (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024). This phenomenon, known as Sarpanch Pati, remains deeply ingrained in the political culture of the region (Choudhury, 2023).

Women in Ballia often report feeling side-lined by their male counterparts, who take over the actual decision-making, despite women holding formal positions. The lack of educational opportunities, low literacy rates, and limited exposure to gender equality programs exacerbate this issue. Furthermore, the economic dependency on male family members makes it difficult for women to challenge entrenched patriarchal systems (Rai, 2011). Even though women have access to positions within the PRIs due to reservations, their actual power and autonomy are limited.

However, there have been instances of success stories in Ballia where women have taken charge in health, education, and rural development sectors, particularly when they are supported by local women's groups or NGOs that provide training and empowerment initiatives (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024). These instances, though not widespread, highlight the potential for women in rural UP to significantly impact their communities if given the right resources and opportunities.

4.3 Comparative Insights and Factors Influencing Women's Empowerment

The comparative analysis of Aligarh and Ballia highlights the complex interplay of social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors that shape women's roles in PRIs. In Aligarh, higher literacy rates, urbanization, and educational resources create an environment where women are more likely to take active political roles. However, even in Aligarh, patriarchal norms and social expectations occasionally constrain women's ability to exercise real political power (Choudhury, 2023).

In contrast, in Ballia, although the constitutional provisions for women's reservation in PRIs exist, cultural conservatism, lower literacy levels, and limited institutional support significantly hinder women's active participation. Proxy representation remains a serious issue, with many women unable to exert independent political agency. For Ballia, increasing educational opportunities, providing leadership training, and ensuring stronger support systems are essential steps for improving the genuine empowerment of women in PRIs (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024).

5. Challenges and Limitations in Both Districts

While the 73rd Constitutional Amendment was designed to empower women through guaranteed representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), its implementation has not been without significant hurdles. Both Aligarh and Ballia districts, despite their contrasting socio-economic profiles, reflect common challenges that hinder the full realization of women's political empowerment.

5.1 Shared Barriers: Literacy, Mobility, and Economic Dependence

One of the most persistent challenges is low female literacy, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. In both districts, although literacy rates are higher in Aligarh (female literacy at 55.6%) compared to Ballia (58.6%), many women elected to PRIs lack formal education, which limits their ability to comprehend administrative procedures, budgets, and legal frameworks (Census of India, 2011). This, in turn, affects their confidence and autonomy in governance roles (Datta, 2020).

Mobility restrictions, especially in more traditional households, also obstruct women's active participation. Cultural norms often discourage women from traveling alone or attending public meetings, making it difficult to fulfil their Panchayat responsibilities. Additionally, economic dependence on male family members restricts their decision-making freedom, especially when they rely on husbands or sons for financial support (Rai, 2011).

5.2 Structural vs. Cultural Limitations

The barriers women face are both structural and cultural. Structurally, there is a lack of access to government training programs, digital literacy, and institutional guidance—particularly critical in Ballia, where state and NGO outreach is limited. Culturally, patriarchal attitudes continue to define politics as a male domain. These attitudes manifest in subtle control over women's public roles, despite the formal reservation policy (Choudhury, 2023).

5.3 Proxy Representation and Political Manipulation

A significant issue undermining the spirit of the 73rd Amendment is proxy representation, often referred to as the "Sarpanch Pati or Pradhan Pati" phenomenon, where male relatives unofficially control the elected woman's position. This is particularly prevalent in Ballia but also present in rural parts of Aligarh. Such manipulation turns women's political roles into symbolic gestures rather than transformative opportunities (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024).

5.4 Lack of Institutional Support

Finally, the absence of consistent institutional support and leadership training weakens the capacity of elected women representatives. While some NGOs and state agencies offer workshops in Aligarh, these are not uniformly accessible or frequent. Ballia, in particular, suffers from a deficit in such resources, leaving many women without the tools to succeed in governance roles (Datta, 2020).

6. Policy Recommendations

While the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has created an important entry point for women in local governance, its transformative potential can only be realized if systemic gaps are addressed. Based on the comparative findings from Aligarh and Ballia, this segment outlines targeted policy recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

6.1 Strengthening Training and Leadership Development

Women in both districts often lack the technical and administrative skills necessary to navigate governance roles. State led capacity building programs should be standardized and made mandatory for all newly elected women representatives. These should focus on Panchayat procedures, budgeting, digital literacy, and leadership skills. Successful models such as Kerala's Kudumbashree program show how training can enhance women's autonomy and decision-making capacity at the grassroots level (Deshpande & Mishra, 2020). In Uttar Pradesh, scaling up district level training centers, especially in under resourced areas like Ballia, is essential.

6.2 Awareness and Social Sensitization Campaigns

Addressing the cultural barriers to women's political participation requires community level engagement. Public

awareness campaigns led by local administration and supported by NGOs should focus on educating communities about the role and rights of elected women representatives. Campaigns that include men, community elders, and religious leaders have shown better outcomes in reducing resistance and stigma (Chaudhuri, 2021).

6.3 Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

To curb proxy representation and tokenism, state governments must enforce stricter monitoring mechanisms. Regular audits, public reporting of PRI meetings, and citizen grievance forums can increase transparency. Involving local media and civil society groups in monitoring can also help expose misuse of power and encourage accountability (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024).

6.4 Institutionalizing Best Practices through State Support

There is a pressing need for state level frameworks to replicate successful initiatives across districts. Uttar Pradesh should consider setting up a centralized knowledge hub to document and share effective practices from districts like Aligarh, where women have shown greater autonomy. Additionally, incentives such as awards or financial support for high performing Panchayats led by women can further motivate inclusive governance (Datta, 2020).

7. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Aligarh and Ballia provides critical insights into how the government's vision behind the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has translated into real world outcomes. The Amendment's promise of decentralization and women's empowerment through reservation in PRIs has indeed broadened the political space for rural women. However, the quality and depth of that empowerment remain highly contingent on local socio-economic and cultural factors. In Aligarh, better literacy rates, urban influence, and moderate institutional support have contributed to more active participation of women in governance. Some women have moved beyond symbolic roles to assert meaningful leadership. Conversely, in Ballia, entrenched patriarchal norms, economic dependence, and lack of institutional backing continue to undermine the effectiveness of women's political participation. The widespread practice of proxy representation in Ballia illustrates how formal empowerment does not always result in substantive empowerment (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024). The government's original intent to democratize power and elevate women's voices remains commendable, but the ground-level impact is uneven. Structural and cultural barriers still inhibit many women from fully exercising their rights and responsibilities within PRIs (Datta, 2020).

Looking ahead, the way forward lies in addressing both institutional and social deficits. Scaling up leadership training, enforcing anti-proxy regulations, promoting gender-sensitive community engagement, and incentivizing inclusive governance models are essential next steps. Only through context sensitive interventions can the full potential of the 73rd Amendment be realized and women's empowerment at the grassroots level be truly achieved (Deshpande & Mishra, 2020).

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