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**DIGITAL PATHWAYS IN EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH  
PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS**

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<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Abstract</b>
<i>Digital Technology, Governance, Women Empowerment, Panchayat Raj Institution, Digital platforms and Digital Transition</i>	The intersection of digital technology and grassroots democracy has redefined governance and women’s empowerment in India. Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs), constitutionally mandated with a minimum of one-third reservation for women, are increasingly integrating digital platforms and tools to enhance efficiency, inclusivity, and accountability. This paper explores how digital pathways—such as e-Governance platforms, mobile connectivity, digital literacy programs, and social media—are transforming the participation, performance, and empowerment of women in PRIs. A review of literature and case studies provides insight into both the opportunities and limitations of this digital transition.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The landscape of governance in India underwent a fundamental transformation with the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992, which institutionalized the Panchayati Raj system as the third tier of government. This constitutional mandate decentralized political power to the grassroots level and, significantly, introduced a provision for reserving at least one-third of all seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This was not just a legal milestone but a radical step toward gender equity in political participation. For the first time, women—especially those from



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rural, marginalized, and traditionally underrepresented communities—gained an official platform to voice their concerns, influence decision-making, and shape development outcomes. Over the past three decades, this move has resulted in the election of millions of women to local government bodies, thereby creating a silent revolution in India’s democratic framework.

However, the mere provision of political representation is not synonymous with empowerment. While institutional reforms created avenues for participation, they did not automatically translate into influence or agency. Women faced numerous challenges: from patriarchal social structures, low literacy and awareness levels, to lack of access to resources and limited autonomy in decision-making. In this context, the emergence of digital technology—particularly in the wake of the Digital India initiative launched in 2015—has opened up new pathways for empowering women leaders in rural governance. By enabling access to information, facilitating communication, promoting transparency, and strengthening accountability, digital tools offer a unique opportunity to amplify the agency of women in PRIs.

Digital empowerment in rural governance refers to the strategic use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to bridge gaps in access, knowledge, and participation. It includes a broad array of tools and platforms: e-governance portals such as e-Panchayat, mobile apps for service delivery and grievance redressal, online training platforms like Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (DISHA), digital formats for planning and budget tracking, and social media channels for public engagement. When used effectively, these digital tools enable women to access critical information, manage administrative tasks more efficiently, and actively engage in governance and development processes.

Women elected to PRIs often operate in complex socio-political environments where power is negotiated not just through legal mandates, but through everyday interactions shaped by gender norms. In such contexts, digital tools act as both symbolic and functional resources. On a symbolic level, digital inclusion represents modernity, capability, and legitimacy—traits often denied to rural women in leadership roles. Functionally, it equips them with knowledge, skills, and platforms to perform their roles more effectively. For example, e-Panchayat portals enable real-time access to government records, plans, and budget documents, reducing dependency on intermediaries. Similarly, mobile apps designed for rural governance allow women leaders to monitor local development works, register complaints, and coordinate with administrative departments.

Digital tools also contribute significantly to building the confidence and visibility of women leaders. Participation in virtual meetings, exposure to digital planning formats, and the ability to communicate over social media platforms help these leaders move beyond their traditionally passive roles and become active agents of change. Additionally, online training programs and digital literacy drives equip them with knowledge and skills necessary for governance, planning, budgeting, and public speaking. These skill sets, in turn, empower women to challenge entrenched patriarchal attitudes, assert their leadership, and influence local policies in areas such as health, education, sanitation, and gender justice.



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Yet, the digital transformation of rural governance is not without its limitations. Despite significant strides in ICT development, a glaring digital gender divide persists in rural India. According to recent data from the National Family Health Survey and reports by the Internet and Mobile Association of India, rural women are significantly less likely to own or use mobile phones and access the internet compared to their male counterparts. The problem is not just one of access, but also of control. In many instances, digital tools accessed in the name of women elected representatives are actually used by male relatives or political proxies, limiting the transformative potential of digital inclusion.

Moreover, issues such as language barriers, low digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of localized content further hinder women's effective digital participation. Many digital platforms are available only in English or Hindi, making them inaccessible to women who speak only regional or tribal dialects. Older women, or those with limited formal education, often struggle to understand or operate digital systems without assistance. In remote areas, even basic infrastructure such as internet connectivity, electricity, and digital access points remain unreliable or non-existent.

These challenges are further compounded by cultural and social constraints. Patriarchal norms in rural societies often restrict women's mobility, decision-making powers, and exposure to technology. Fear of social stigma, lack of time due to domestic responsibilities, and opposition from male family members frequently prevent women leaders from attending training sessions or using digital tools independently. As a result, many women remain confined to ceremonial roles in PRIs, with real power wielded by their husbands, sons, or other male relatives—a phenomenon widely referred to as “proxy leadership.”

Nevertheless, the potential of digital technology to act as a game-changer in women's empowerment remains immense. Case studies and field reports from across India show that with the right mix of policy support, infrastructure development, and capacity building, digital pathways can overcome traditional barriers and democratize leadership at the grassroots. Initiatives like the Digital Sakhi program by the Mahila Abhivruddhi Society (MAS), the Smartgram initiative by the President of India's office, and the e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project are transforming the capabilities and confidence of women leaders in PRIs. These programs focus on training elected women representatives in digital literacy, financial inclusion, and leadership skills, thereby enabling them to take informed decisions and effectively perform their governance duties.

The convergence of legal, social, and technological changes in the last few decades has thus created a dynamic environment for women's empowerment through PRIs. While legal reforms have mandated women's inclusion, digital technologies are helping to operationalize this inclusion by enhancing their capabilities and autonomy. However, to fully realize the promise of digital empowerment, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach that addresses the multidimensional challenges faced by women in PRIs. This includes providing vernacular digital content, designing gender-sensitive platforms, ensuring safe digital spaces, and involving communities in co-creating solutions.



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Furthermore, there is a need for robust policy frameworks that promote inclusive digital governance. This involves localized training modules tailored to the specific needs and contexts of rural women, setting up digital access points in Panchayat offices, and instituting monitoring mechanisms to curb proxy usage. Public-private partnerships can also play a pivotal role by bringing in technological expertise, resources, and innovative solutions tailored to the grassroots context.

Empowering women in PRIs through digital pathways is not just about bridging the gender gap in governance—it is about redefining the very nature of governance to be more inclusive, participatory, and responsive. It challenges the traditional monopolies of knowledge and power and opens up new avenues for democratic deepening. In doing so, it affirms the idea that technology, when grounded in equity and accessibility, can be a powerful tool for social transformation.

Conclusion, the digital revolution in rural governance presents an unprecedented opportunity to advance gender equity and strengthen democratic institutions. Women in PRIs are no longer just symbolic figures; they are becoming informed, capable, and dynamic leaders who are leveraging digital tools to solve real-world problems in their communities. The journey is still unfolding, and challenges remain. But with sustained commitment, innovation, and inclusive policy-making, digital pathways can indeed become highways of empowerment for millions of rural women in India.

## **2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- To analyze how digital tools and platforms are used within PRIs to empower women.
- To review relevant literature on digital empowerment and women in rural governance.
- To assess challenges and barriers to effective digital inclusion.
- To recommend policy measures for strengthening digital pathways in PRIs.

## **3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Digital empowerment refers to the process by which individuals gain the ability to use digital tools to access services, information, and opportunities. In the context of PRIs, it includes:

- E-Governance platforms (e.g., e-Panchayat)
- Mobile-based services and grievance redressal tools
- Digital training programs
- Online participation in meetings and planning
- Use of social media for governance visibility and community outreach

## **4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The integration of digital technology into rural governance has been the subject of increasing academic interest, particularly in the context of women's empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Early research by Bhatnagar (2002) noted that the initial implementation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Panchayats was limited in scope, largely driven by government mandates without a focus on gender inclusivity. Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2014) acknowledged that while ICTs improved service delivery



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mechanisms, their full potential could only be realized through gender-sensitive policies. Supporting this, the World Bank (2011) emphasized that digital empowerment requires not only technological infrastructure but also community-level capacity- building, particularly for women who are often excluded from decision-making processes. Kumar and Best (2006) added that many early e-governance efforts reproduced existing social hierarchies, limiting their transformative potential.

A growing body of literature highlights the transformative impact of digital literacy and access on women's participation in PRIs. Jha and Kumar (2016) found that digital literacy enhanced elected women representatives' (EWRs) ability to independently manage Panchayat documentation, reducing dependency on male counterparts. Meena and Das (2019) observed that initiatives such as the Digital Sakhi program significantly improved both financial and political agency among women leaders. These findings are reinforced by Roy and Dey (2017), who noted that digitally trained women in West Bengal displayed greater confidence and assertiveness in public roles. Kudva (2003) argued that digital tools encouraged new leadership models among women, particularly in Karnataka, where PRI reforms were stronger. Chhibber and Nooruddin (2004) also recognized that access to ICT enabled marginalized groups, including women, to challenge entrenched caste and gender power structures.

In terms of performance and transparency, digital tools have shown considerable promise in improving governance outcomes. Rajaraman (2011) emphasized the benefits of e-Panchayat initiatives in allowing women to monitor key development schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2014) provided compelling evidence that women Sarpanches in villages with digitized administrative systems performed better in resource allocation, especially in areas that affected women directly, such as sanitation and water access. Kumar and Prasad (2019) supported this by showing that digital templates in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) process helped women contribute more effectively to participatory planning. Similarly, Banerjee et al. (2017) found that digital monitoring tools improved accountability and allowed women leaders to play an active role in tracking local infrastructure projects.

Despite the growing promise of digital tools, several scholars have noted significant barriers to digital empowerment. Sarin (2019) highlighted the persistent patriarchal norms that restrict women's access to mobile phones and internet-based tools. NITI Aayog (2020) pointed out that infrastructural limitations must be addressed alongside skilling programs to ensure meaningful inclusion. Maneela (2014) stressed that education plays a foundational role in overcoming both social and technological barriers, suggesting that digital exclusion is both a symptom and cause of broader marginalization. Kumar and Gupta (2021) revealed that many women leaders remain figureheads, with male relatives controlling their digital identities and access—an extension of the “proxy leadership” problem. Tandon and Ravi (2022) added that the usability of digital platforms is hindered by language and design choices that exclude low-literate and non- Hindi/English speaking users.



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Emerging research also highlights the impact of focused interventions in empowering women through digital means. Gogoi (2023) noted that PRI-led digital initiatives can result in improved service delivery and governance when women are given direct control over resources. Yadav (2021) documented how digital training in Haryana and Bihar enabled women to manage health and education services more effectively. Kabeer and Subrahmanian (2020) emphasized that digital platforms enhance women’s visibility and voice in governance, especially when paired with collective action platforms like Mahila Sabhas. Jain and Sinha (2022) examined the use of WhatsApp by women PRI members in Rajasthan to track and report development issues in real time. Sharma and Pal (2018) found that digital grievance redressal tools increased women’s trust in governance systems and improved responsiveness from officials.

Synthesizing the reviewed literature reveals that digital empowerment through PRIs is a multi-dimensional process. It requires not just technological access but a comprehensive approach involving training, inclusive platform design, and cultural transformation. While digital tools have proven effective in increasing participation, transparency, and performance, persistent gender-based barriers continue to limit their full potential. Therefore, a systemic, localized, and gender-sensitive strategy is essential to transforming digital access into genuine empowerment for rural women. Empowering women through digital means is not merely a technological challenge but a social and institutional one that demands long-term investment, policy coherence, and grassroots engagement.

### 5. DIGITAL TOOLS IN ACTION: PATHWAYS OF EMPOWERMENT

Pathway	Empowering Effect
<b>e-Panchayat</b>	Portals Transparency in budgeting, digital record-keeping, real-time monitoring
<b>Mobile Apps</b>	Access to schemes, grievance redressal, health and welfare information
<b>Online Training</b>	Capacity building through MOOCs, webinars, and state-run digital learning platforms
<b>Digital GPDP Planning</b>	Women contribute actively to planning using digital templates and participatory tools
<b>Social Media Usage</b>	Women leaders connect with constituents and share developmental work

### 6. CHALLENGES IN DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT

1. Digital Gender Divide: Limited access to smartphones and internet for rural women.
2. Low Digital Literacy: Older women leaders and those with little formal education face difficulties using digital platforms.



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3. Language Barriers: Many platforms are in English/Hindi, limiting accessibility in local languages.
4. Proxy Leadership: Male family members often control digital access on behalf of elected women.

### **7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Localized Training Modules: Digital literacy programs in vernacular languages tailored for women in PRIs.
2. Community-Based Infrastructure: Establish digital access points in Panchayat offices with female trainers.
3. Monitoring Proxy Usage: Enforce laws and mechanisms to curb proxy leadership through biometric or video-based participation.
4. Recognition and Incentives: Awards for digital governance innovation by women Panchayat leaders.
5. Public-Private Partnerships: Engage NGOs and tech companies to develop gender-sensitive e-governance tools.

### **8. CONCLUSION**

Digital technology is not merely a tool but a potential equalizer in the quest for gender equity in governance. When effectively integrated into the structure of PRIs, digital platforms can amplify the voice and agency of women, making governance more inclusive, transparent, and effective. While the digital divide persists, the right combination of training, infrastructure, and policy support can turn digital pathways into highways of empowerment for millions of rural women across India.

### **9. AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION**

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this manuscript.

### **10. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **11. PLAGIARISM POLICY**

All authors declare that any kind of violation of plagiarism, copyright and ethical matters will take care by all authors. Journal and editors are not liable for aforesaid matters.

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