



CHAMPIONING CHANGE

Stories of
**Women Leading
Grassroots Democracy
in India**

Celebrating the leadership journey of
Women Elected Representatives across India.





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FOREWARD

India's democratic framework rests on the principle that governance must be closest to the people it serves. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment gave institutional expression to this vision by establishing Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as the third tier of government and strengthening decentralized decision-making across rural India.

One of the most transformative features of this reform has been the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Over the past three decades, this provision has enabled millions of women to enter public life and participate directly in shaping the development of their communities. Today, women constitute nearly half of all elected representatives in Panchayats, making India home to one of the world's largest networks of women leaders in grassroots governance.

However, representation alone does not automatically translate into effective leadership. Elected representatives must be equipped with knowledge, confidence, and an understanding of institutions to perform their roles effectively. Recognizing this, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has placed strong emphasis on structured capacity building for elected representatives, particularly women leaders.

Under the Revamped Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), the Ministry has undertaken large-scale initiatives to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions and support the leadership development of Women Elected Representatives (EWRs). These programmes aim to enhance governance capabilities, strengthen engagement with administrative systems, and enable women leaders to participate confidently in local decision-making.

The stories presented in this volume capture the journeys of women leaders from across the country who have benefited from these initiatives. Their experiences demonstrate how knowledge, confidence, and institutional support can transform representation into meaningful leadership.

I hope this compilation inspires women representatives across India and contributes to strengthening grassroots democracy through empowered local leadership.

Secretary
Ministry of Panchayati Raj
Government of India

FOREWARD

The strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions depends not only on institutional frameworks but also on the capabilities and confidence of the leaders who guide them. Over the past decade, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has made sustained efforts to expand and improve capacity-building initiatives for elected representatives across the country.

Under the Revamped Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), particular emphasis has been placed on supporting Women Elected Representatives (EWRs), who today constitute nearly half of all representatives in Panchayats. While their presence has significantly strengthened grassroots democracy, many women leaders enter public office with limited exposure to governance systems, administrative procedures, and institutional processes.

To address this, the Ministry launched the “Championing Change” capacity-building programme for Elected Women Representatives as part of the broader Sashakt Panchayat Netri Abhiyan. The programme adopts an experiential and participatory learning approach designed to strengthen leadership capabilities, deepen understanding of Panchayat governance, and build the confidence required to navigate administrative systems.

Over the past year, I have had the opportunity to interact closely with women leaders participating in these programmes, including during several Training of Trainers (ToT) sessions across states. These engagements have reaffirmed the immense potential of women representatives when provided with the right knowledge, institutional support, and learning platforms.

The stories documented in this volume reflect the outcomes of these efforts. They highlight how training can translate into stronger participation in Gram Sabhas, improved Panchayat functioning, and more inclusive community engagement.

It is hoped that these narratives will serve as both inspiration and learning for women representatives, trainers, and institutions working to strengthen Panchayati Raj across the country.

Additional Secretary
Ministry of Panchayati Raj
Government of India

PREFACE

The strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is central to India's vision of participatory and decentralized governance. Since the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Panchayats have emerged as key democratic institutions that bring governance closer to citizens and enable communities to actively participate in local development.

A defining feature of this reform has been the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, which has significantly expanded women's participation in grassroots governance. Today, more than 14 lakh women serve as elected representatives in Panchayats, many of them in leadership roles as Sarpanch, Mukhiya, Pradhan, or Panchayat President.

Despite this remarkable progress, many Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) continue to face challenges in effectively performing their roles. Limited awareness of governance systems, societal barriers, and a lack of confidence often restrict their ability to exercise authority and participate fully in decision-making.

Recognizing these challenges, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has undertaken extensive capacity-building initiatives under the Revamped Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA). A key component of this effort is the nationwide initiative "Sashakt Panchayat Netri Abhiyan," under which the experiential learning programme "Championing Change – Module for Capacity Building of EWRs" was launched in 2025.

This compilation brings together selected Stories of Change that illustrate how such training initiatives have strengthened the leadership of women representatives across different states. The narratives highlight how women leaders have applied their learning to improve Panchayat functioning, mobilize communities, and address local development challenges.

By documenting these experiences, this volume seeks to inspire women representatives across the country and contribute to strengthening democratic institutions at the grassroots.

INTRODUCTION

Women's Leadership and the Evolution of Grassroots Democracy in India

Women's Leadership and Grassroots Democracy in India

The principle that governance should reflect the voices of those most directly affected by it lies at the heart of democratic practice. In India, this vision was institutionalized through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which granted constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions and established a framework for decentralized governance in rural areas.

By creating elected governments at the village, intermediate, and district levels, the amendment brought decision-making closer to communities and enabled citizens to participate directly in development planning and implementation.

A particularly transformative provision of this reform was the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. This measure opened the doors of political participation to millions of women and significantly reshaped the landscape of grassroots democracy. Several States have since expanded this reservation to 50 per cent, further strengthening women's representation in local governance.

Today, women serve as Sarpanches, Panchayat Presidents, ward members, and committee leaders across hundreds of thousands of villages. Their participation has introduced new perspectives into governance and strengthened the responsiveness of local institutions.

However, representation alone does not automatically translate into effective leadership. Many newly elected representatives must learn to navigate administrative systems, financial procedures, and governance processes while responding to the expectations of their communities.

Recognising this, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has prioritised capacity building for elected representatives through initiatives such as the Revamped Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA).

The stories presented in this volume reflect the outcomes of these efforts. They capture how women leaders across the country are applying knowledge and training to strengthen Panchayat governance and contribute to inclusive rural development.

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Section I

The First Step into Leadership

For many women elected representatives, the journey into public leadership begins quietly.

An election brings them into office, often with the support and encouragement of their communities. Yet stepping into the Panchayat office or presiding over a Gram Sabha meeting for the first time can feel unfamiliar and daunting. Governance introduces a new language—budgets, development schemes, departmental coordination, and institutional responsibilities.

In these early moments, leadership is not defined by large development projects or policy decisions. Instead, it begins with understanding the role itself: recognizing that the Panchayat is an institution of local self-government and that the elected representative carries both authority and responsibility.

The stories in this section capture that first step. They describe the moment when women representatives begin to understand their role, gain confidence through learning and training, and find their voice in public decision-making.

These journeys remind us that leadership often starts not with certainty, but with curiosity and determination. With knowledge and support, hesitation gradually gives way to confidence, and participation evolves into leadership.

Finding My Voice in the Gram Sabha



The Leadership Journey of Sandhya Devi

Name: Smt. Sandhya Devi
Position: Pradhan
Gram Panchayat: Tikker
Block: Rajgarh
District: Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh

A Moment of Hesitation

The first time I sat in the chair of the Pradhan during a Gram Sabha meeting, I felt the weight of many expectations. Villagers had gathered to discuss the development needs of our panchayat. People were speaking confidently about roads, water supply, and welfare schemes.

I had recently been elected as Pradhan of Gram Panchayat Tikker and although I wanted to serve my village well, I was still learning how the system of Panchayati Raj truly worked.

As that moment, I realized that leadership in the Panchayat is not only about being elected. It also requires knowledge, confidence, and the ability to guide collective decisions. That realization marked the beginning of my journey as an elected representative.

Before the Transformation

When I assumed the responsibility of Pradhan, several challenges stood in my way. Like many newly elected women representatives, initially I had limited knowledge and understanding of about the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions, the roles, rights, and responsibilities of elected representatives. I was not fully confident about working collectively with other Panchayat members, presiding over Gram Sabha meetings or effectively raising village issues before the concerned departments.

Communicating with officials and staff was also difficult. I often hesitated while taking decisions after listening to people's problems. The fear of making wrong decisions, lack of coordination with departments and limited leadership experience were major challenges during the initial phase of my tenure.

These challenges are common for many newly elected representatives, especially women who are entering public leadership roles for the first time.



The Turning Point

The turning point in my journey came when I participated in the “Championing Change” specialized training programme for Women Elected Representatives organized by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

The training sessions were interactive and practical. Through group discussions, activities, and role-playing exercises, we learned how Panchayats function as institutions of local self-government. The programme clarified our responsibilities and helped us understand how development schemes, funds, and departments are linked to Panchayat functioning.

One of the most valuable lessons was learning how to conduct Gram Sabha and committee meetings effectively. The training also explained which departments and officers are responsible for different types of development works. This knowledge helped remove much of the hesitation I had previously felt.

Another important learning was understanding which department and officer should be approached for specific types of development work. This knowledge helped remove much of the hesitation I previously felt.

The training significantly improved my leadership abilities, communication skills, problem-solving capacity, and decision-making skills.

Taking Action

After completing the training, I began to approach my role with greater confidence and clarity. I started presiding over Gram Sabha and Standing Committee meetings more confidently and actively participated in discussions. Instead of hesitating, I encouraged Panchayat members and villagers to share their views and participate in decision-making.

Coordination with officials of different line departments also improved. I learned how to raise village issues clearly during block and district-level meetings and seek support from the relevant authorities. Gradually, interacting with government officials became easier.

Another change was the way I make decision. Earlier, I often worried about making mistakes. Now, I focused on understanding the issue, consulting the Panchayat members, and taking informed decisions in the interest of the village. With better understanding and communication, I was able to express my views more clearly and take informed decisions in the interest of the Gram Panchayat.

The training had not only provided information it had strengthened my belief that women representatives can lead effectively when they are equipped with the right knowledge.

Visible Change

With growing confidence and better coordination, the functioning of the Panchayat improved. Meetings began to be conducted more effectively, discussions became more focused on solving community issues, and coordination with officials improved significantly.

The Panchayat became more actively connected with administrative processes and development programmes. These changes strengthened the overall functioning of the local governance system and made the role of the elected representative more effective in addressing community concerns.



Most importantly, the role of the elected representative became more visible and effective in addressing the concerns of the community.

A Personal Reflection

Looking back, I realize that the most important change was within myself. The training programme helped me understand that leadership is not about authority alone. It is about responsibility, communication, and the confidence to represent the voices of the people.

Today I am able to participate actively in meetings, coordinate with officials, and take decisions for the development of the Gram Panchayat. The journey from hesitation to confidence has been gradual, but it has transformed the way I perform my role as a representative of the community.

Leadership Lesson

When women elected representatives receive proper training and institutional support, they gain the confidence to move from symbolic participation to active leadership in grassroots governance.



Learning to Lead a Village



The Leadership Journey of Ritu Kumari

Name: Smt. Ritu Kumari

Gram Panchayat: Bishnupur Okari

Block: Modanganj

District: Jehanabad

State: Bihar

The Responsibility of Trust

When I was elected as a representative of Bishnupur Okari Gram Panchayat, I felt the weight of the responsibility entrusted to me.

The people of the village had placed their trust upon me. They expected that I would represent their concerns and contribute to the development of the Panchayat. Yet in those early days, I often found myself unsure of how to carry out that responsibility effectively.

Public leadership was new to me. I did not fully understand the roles and responsibilities of an elected representative and my participation in development activities remained limited. Communication with community members and coordination with officials did not come easily.

At times, I hesitated before speaking in meetings, unsure whether I had the knowledge required to make the right decisions. But I also knew that leadership could not grow without learning.

The Turning Point

My journey began to change when I attended the “Championing Change” specialized training programme for Women Elected Representatives.

The training opened a new window of understanding. For the first time, I learned in detail about the duties, powers, and responsibilities of Panchayat representatives. The programme explained how Panchayati Raj institutions function and how the Gram Sabha plays a central role in participatory governance.

Through discussions and practical exercises, we learned how meetings are conducted, how communities can be mobilized, and how elected representatives can work with government officials and line departments to address local issues.

The concepts that once felt complicated gradually became clear. More importantly, I began to see myself differently—not as someone having confusion about her role, but as someone capable of performing it with confidence.



Finding My Voice

After the training, I returned to the Panchayat with renewed clarity and confidence. Gradually, I began presiding over Gram Sabha and Standing Committee meetings more actively. I participated more confidently in discussions and worked closely with other Panchayat members to address issues raised by villagers.

I also started attending block and district level meetings, where development matters are discussed with officials and representatives from different departments.

Each meeting became an opportunity to learn and contribute. With time, my decision-making ability improved, and coordinating with officials became easier. What once felt intimidating slowly became part of my daily responsibilities.

Learning Through Practice

One of the most helpful aspects of the training programme was the way it was conducted. The sessions used simple language, role plays, group discussions, and visual tools such as flip charts. These methods made it easier for us to understand governance concepts and apply them in real situations.

Instead of simply listening to lectures, we practiced how to conduct meetings, discuss development issues and work collaboratively as representatives.

These experiences helped transform knowledge into confidence.

A Journey of Growth

Today, when I look back at the beginning of my journey, I realize how much I have grown.

The training programme helped me understand the responsibilities of Panchayat leadership and gave me the confidence to participate actively in governance processes. It strengthened my ability to represent the community and contribute to the development of the village.

Programmes like Championing Change are extremely valuable for women elected representatives. If such training programmes are conducted regularly and include exposure visits to well-performing Panchayats, they can further strengthen leadership at the grassroots level.

Leadership Lesson

When women representatives receive the right knowledge and support, they gain the confidence to move from hesitation to leadership and contribute meaningfully to village governance.



From Silence to Leadership



The Leadership Journey of

Aarti Kumari

Name: Smt. Aarti Kumari

Position: Elected Representative

Gram Panchayat: Mishrauliya

LGD Code: 101028 Block: Dumra District: Sitamarhi State: Bihar

The Meeting Where I Chose to Speak

In the early days after my election, I attended many Panchayat meetings without saying much. I listened carefully as discussions moved from one issue to another development works, welfare schemes and administrative matters. The conversations were important, but I often felt uncertain about participating.

I had been elected to represent the people of my village, yet I sometimes wondered whether I understood the Panchayat system well enough to contribute confidently. Like many first-time representatives, I was still learning what leadership truly meant.

Understanding the Challenge

During the initial phase of my tenure, I faced several challenges. My awareness of Panchayati Raj procedures and governance processes was limited, and I often hesitated to speak in public meetings. Managing discussions and participating actively in Panchayat meetings felt difficult because I had little prior experience in leadership and meeting management.

Another challenge was coordinating with line departments and other stakeholders. I was not always sure which department to approach for specific development issues, and this sometimes-delayed decisions and the implementation of Panchayat activities

These challenges made me realize that to serve the community effectively, I needed to strengthen my understanding of governance and build confidence in my role as an elected representative. I realized that if I wanted to serve my village effectively, I needed to strengthen my understanding of governance.

The Turning Point

The significant turning point came when I attended the Championing Change training programme for Women Elected Representatives.



The training provided practical knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of elected representatives and the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Through group exercises, interactive sessions, and practical learning activities, we gained a better understanding of governance processes and community participation.

The programme also helped us develop important skills such as communication, teamwork, coordination, and problem-solving. It clarified how Panchayat representatives can work with different departments and officials to address local development issues.

For me, the training was not only about information. It helped remove the hesitation I had carried into my role.

Stepping Forward

After returning from the training, I began participating more actively in Panchayat activities and meetings. Instead of remaining silent, I started sharing my views on village issues and discussing possible solutions with other Panchayat members.

Gradually, my confidence increased. I also began interacting more with community members, listening to their concerns, and encouraging them to participate in development discussions.

A New Confidence

Over time, the meetings that once felt intimidating became familiar spaces for discussion and decision making. I learned that leadership does not require knowing everything at the beginning. It grows through learning, dialogue and commitment to the community. The training programme helped me discover that confidence.

Reflection

Looking back, I realize that the most important change was within myself. The training programme helped me develop the confidence and leadership skills needed to perform my responsibilities effectively.

Today, I see my role as an opportunity to contribute to the development of the village and strengthen community participation in governance. What began as hesitation gradually transformed into confidence. Sometimes leadership begins simply with the courage to speak.

Leadership Lesson

When women elected representatives receive the right knowledge, training, and institutional support, they gain the confidence to move from silence to leadership and contribute meaningfully to the democratic functioning of Panchayats.



From Challenges to Leadership



The Leadership Journey of Sumitra

Name: Smt. Sumitra

Position: Sarpanch

Gram Panchayat: Gutoli

Block: Geedam **District:** Dantewada **State:** Chhattisgarh

A Leader Facing Early Challenges

When Sumitra was elected as the Sarpanch of Gram Panchayat Gutoli, she entered a role that came with both responsibility and difficulty. Like many women elected representatives in rural governance, she had to navigate a complex social and administrative environment.

In the early days of her tenure, participating confidently in Panchayat meetings and decision-making processes was not easy. Many people in the community were still adjusting to the idea of a woman leading the Panchayat.

For Sumitra, the journey toward effective leadership began with understanding these challenges and gradually learning how to address them.

Understanding the Challenges

During the initial phase of her leadership, Sumitra faced several obstacles while performing her roles and responsibilities. One of the major challenges was interference in decision-making. Male family members, including her husband, often tried to influence or control Panchayat decisions. This made it difficult for her to function independently as the elected head of the Panchayat.

Administrative responsibilities also appeared complex. Budget management and the use of online government portals were unfamiliar to her, making it difficult to carry out official work smoothly.

At the same time, she faced the challenge of balancing public responsibilities with family duties. Encouraging women in the village to participate in Gram Sabha meetings was also difficult, as many were hesitant to speak in public spaces.

The Turning Point

A significant change in Sumitra's leadership journey came when she participated in the "Championing Change" specialized training programme for Women Elected Representatives.



The three-day training programme provided her with practical knowledge and confidence to perform her responsibilities more effectively.

During the training, she learned about the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which strengthened Panchayati Raj Institutions and emphasized the importance of women's participation in local governance. She also gained clarity about the concept of Funds, Functions, and Functionaries, which are essential for understanding the functioning of Panchayats. These sessions helped her realize that she was not merely a symbolic representative but the primary decision-maker responsible for leading the Panchayat.

Applying Knowledge in Governance

After returning from the training, Sumitra began applying the knowledge and skills she had gained. She started independently calling and chairing Gram Sabha meetings, ensuring that village development issues were discussed openly. Her confidence in handling meetings and interacting with officials improved significantly.

Sumitra also began participating actively in the preparation of the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GDPD). She prioritized the needs of the village while allocating resources in the Panchayat budget.

In addition, she developed the confidence to meet government officials and present the Panchayat's demands.

Growing Confidence and Recognition

The training not only improved Sumitra's administrative abilities but also transformed her self-confidence and leadership identity. She began to feel more confident in questioning Panchayat budgets, expressing her views, and addressing opposition during meetings.

Her perspective on gender roles also changed. She began encouraging a more balanced sharing of household responsibilities within her family.

As her leadership strengthened, the community gradually began recognizing her efforts. Her work in Panchayat governance brought her greater respect and recognition in the village.

Reflection

For Sumitra, the journey from hesitation to confident leadership illustrates the importance of capacity-building for women in local governance.

Training programmes can equip women representatives with the knowledge, confidence, and administrative skills needed to perform their responsibilities effectively.

Her experience shows that when women leaders receive the right support and training, they can overcome social barriers and actively contribute to village development.

Leadership Lesson

Effective local governance depends not only on elected positions but also on the confidence and capability of leaders.



Capacity-building initiatives such as the Championing of Change training programme play a crucial role in empowering women representatives to become independent decision-makers and active drivers of rural development.

Voice from the Leader

"Today I feel proud and responsible. If I had not received the training, I would have lacked confidence and would not have been able to plan the GPDP."



When Leadership Demands Courage



The Leadership Journey of Sulekha

Name: Smt. Sulekha Kushwaha
Position: Gram Panchayat Pradhan
Block: Patara
District: Kanpur Nagar
State: Uttar Pradesh

The Leadership Journey of Smt Sulekha

When Sulekha Kushwaha became the Pradhan of her Gram Panchayat, the expectations of the entire village rested on her shoulders. Villagers came forward with their concerns, farmers seeking solutions to agricultural challenges, families struggling with daily issues, and women quietly sharing their worries about safety and social problems.

However, stepping into leadership was not easy. Sulekha initially found the administrative system complex. Panchayat governance involved meetings, procedures, coordination with officials, and institutional responsibilities that were unfamiliar to her.

Working in a male-dominated environment also meant that every decision required confidence and persistence.

Challenges in the Village

The village was facing several pressing concerns. Issues such as alcoholism among male members were affecting families and creating social tensions. Incidents of theft and safety concerns also made residents uneasy. Farmers faced practical difficulties in selling their produce, often travelling long distances to markets in Patara, Ghatampur, or Kanpur. This required both time and money.

Even basic administrative services were not easily accessible. Villagers had to travel outside the Panchayat for documents such as income, caste, residence, birth, or death certificates. Paying electricity bills also required visiting offices outside the village.

These everyday challenges made it clear that stronger local governance was needed.



The Turning Point

A major turning point in Sulekha's leadership journey came when she participated in the three-day specialized training programme under the Championing of Change module.

During the training, she gained a deeper understanding of the Panchayati Raj system established under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

The sessions introduced the concept of the 3Fs – Funds, Functions, and Functionaries, which form the foundation of Panchayat governance. The training also explained the procedures for conducting Gram Sabha meetings and Gram Panchayat Standing Committee meetings effectively.

Through practical exercises and discussions, she developed a clearer understanding of how governance systems function and how decisions can be implemented at the local level. Most importantly, the training strengthened her confidence.

Applying the Learning

After returning from the training, Sulekha began applying her learning in the functioning of the Panchayat. Gram Sabha meetings started being conducted regularly as mandated, and Gram Panchayat meetings became more structured and organized.

As Pradhan, she began presiding over meetings more confidently and ensured that responsibilities were clearly assigned so that Panchayat work could move forward efficiently.

She also began actively monitoring the functioning of schools and health services to ensure that institutions meant for community welfare worked effectively. Participation in block and district-level meetings also became easier, as she now felt more confident interacting with officials and presenting the needs of her village.

A Journey of Leadership

Sulekha's journey reflects how leadership evolves over time. What began with hesitation gradually transformed into confidence through learning, experience, and determination.

Today, she is able to identify village challenges more clearly and work with institutions to develop solutions for community development.

Leadership Lesson

When women representatives gain knowledge about governance systems and the confidence to engage with institutions, they become strong leaders capable of guiding their communities toward positive change.







Section II

Breaking invisible Barriers

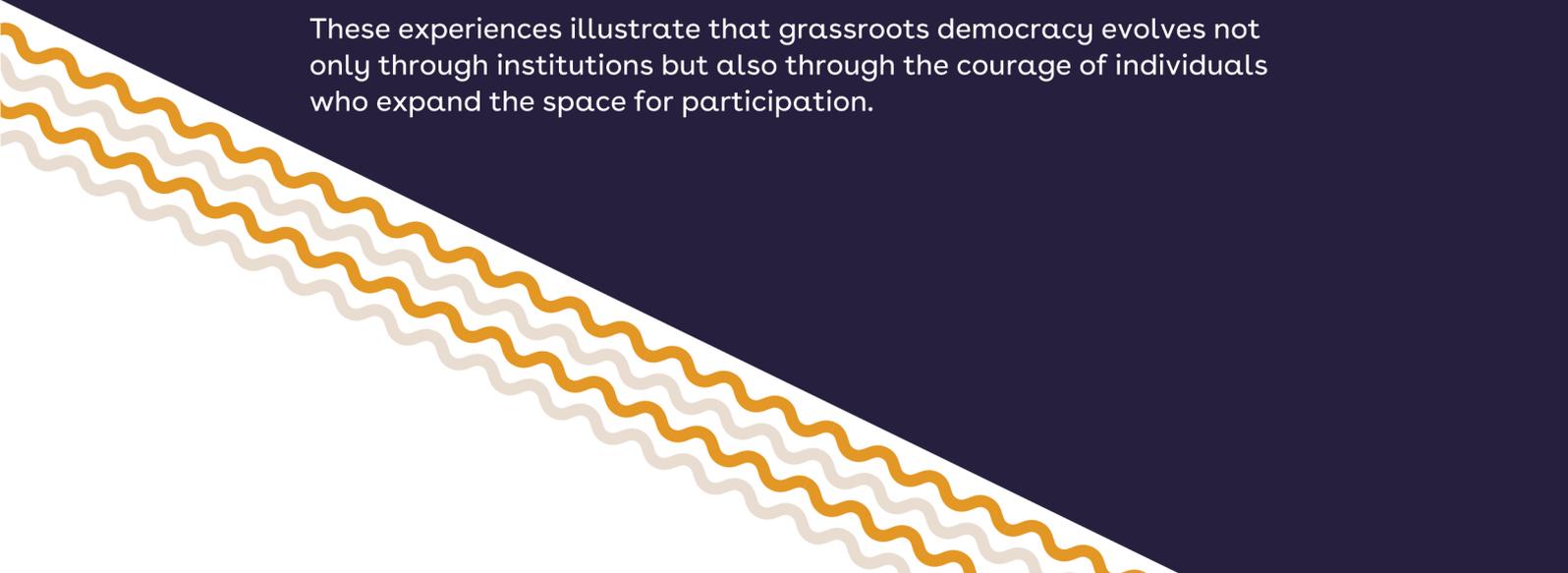
While the Constitution guarantees representation, the path to effective leadership is not always straightforward.

Women elected representatives frequently encounter invisible barriers rooted in long-standing social expectations. In some cases, they must navigate assumptions that their role will remain symbolic. In others, they face hesitation from community members who are unaccustomed to seeing women preside over meetings or lead development discussions.

Overcoming these barriers requires more than formal authority. It demands courage, persistence, and the willingness to assert one's role as a representative of the community.

The stories in this section highlight women who gradually transformed hesitation into leadership. Through dialogue, collective engagement, and confidence gained through capacity-building programmes, they strengthened their role in governance and encouraged greater participation by other women in public decision-making.

These experiences illustrate that grassroots democracy evolves not only through institutions but also through the courage of individuals who expand the space for participation.



The Sarpanch Who Refused to Be a Rubber Stamp



The Leadership Journey of Sunita Devi

Name: Sunita Devi

Position: Sarpanch

Gram Panchayat: Gadli

Block: Bhattu Kalan

District: Fatehabad, Haryana

A Quiet Realization

When I was elected as the Sarpanch of Gadli, the village had formally chosen a woman leader. However, in practice, exercising leadership was not easy. In the initial phase, I experienced a challenge that many women representatives face in local governance being treated as a symbolic or proxy leader rather than an independent decision maker.

Despite holding the elected position, important decisions were often influenced by others, limiting my ability to exercise statutory powers fully. At the same time, women's participation in Panchayat meetings and Gram Sabha discussions remained low. Mahila Sabhas were not active, and many women felt hesitant to speak in public forums.

These challenges highlighted the gap between formal representation and meaningful participation in grassroots governance.

The Challenge

The Panchayat system is designed to give elected representatives the authority to govern their communities. Yet in many places, traditional norms still influence how power is exercised. In Gadli, this meant that despite being the elected Sarpanch, I initially faced the phenomenon often described as "proxy leadership," where women representatives are expected to follow decisions made by others.

At the same time, participation of women in village governance was limited. Mahila Sabhas were rarely active, and many women felt uncomfortable speaking in public forums. I realized that if this situation continued, the promise of grassroots democracy would remain incomplete.

The Turning Point

Through capacity building initiatives and exposure to Panchayati Raj processes, I gained a deeper understanding of the agency, authority and responsibilities associated with her position. I studied the provisions of the Panchayati Raj Act carefully and learned about the institutional



powers vested in elected representatives. This knowledge gave me clarity about leadership. I realized that leadership could not be exercised hesitantly; it required both awareness and assertiveness.

Taking Action

Gradually, I began to reclaim my role as elected Sarpanch. I started presiding over Gram Panchayat meetings regularly and ensured that decisions were taken through collective discussion. I also increased interaction with government offices to access resources and support for development works.

One of the most significant initiatives was strengthening platforms for women's participation. Mahila Chaupals and community meetings were organized to encourage women to speak openly about their concerns and aspirations.

These forums soon became spaces where women could discuss issues, share ideas, and contribute to village development. In addition, vocational training initiatives were encouraged, helping several women explore opportunities for economic independence.

Visible Change

Over the time, the atmosphere of governance in Gadli began to shift. Attendance in Gram Sabha meetings improved, and women became more visible participants in community discussions. Many women who had earlier remained silent started expressing their views confidently.

The Panchayat itself evolved into a more participatory institution where discussions focused on development and community welfare rather than disputes. I believe that when elected representatives start understanding about their authority and responsibilities, they can strengthen democratic institutions at the grassroots level.

Leadership Reflection

My journey reflects how awareness, confidence, and determination can transform symbolic representation into effective leadership.

By understanding legal authority and actively engaging with the community, I was able to reclaim my role as the elected head of the Panchayat and create spaces for greater participation of women in governance.

My experience demonstrates that when women leaders receive the right knowledge, support, and opportunities, they can play a powerful role in strengthening grassroots democracy.

Leadership Lesson

Women's political representation creates an opportunity for inclusive governance.

When this representation is supported by legal awareness, confidence, and community engagement, it can lead to meaningful and transformative leadership at the grassroots level.



When Confidence Replaced Doubt



The Leadership Journey of Noor Nehar Begum

Name: Smt. Noor Nehar Begum
Position: Panchayat President
Gram Panchayat: 7 No Nichuka
Block: Chakchaka
District: Barpeta, Assam

Learning to Carry the Responsibility

I was elected as the Panchayat President of 7 No Nichuka Gram Panchayat. The responsibility brought both pride and uncertainty. It was my first experience in a public leadership role, and initially I felt anxious about managing the responsibilities associated with the position.

One of the major challenges I faced was gaining the confidence of the Panchayat staff and other officials. I felt the need to demonstrate that I could understand administrative processes and effectively perform my responsibilities as an elected representative. As a woman leader, I was determined to ensure that my role would not be viewed merely as a symbolic position created through reservation.

The Turning Point

A major turning point in my journey came when I participated in the three-day Championing of Change Specialized Training Programme for Women Elected Representatives.

During the training, I learned about important aspects of Panchayati Raj governance. The sessions helped me understand the three pillars of Panchayat administration—Funds, Functions and Functionaries (3Fs). I also gained clarity about the Gram Sabha process, Gram Panchayat Development Planning (GPDP), and the roles and responsibilities of elected representatives.

Before attending the training, I did not fully understand many of these aspects. The programme helped me realise that the responsibilities of an elected representative are not as difficult as they appear if we have confidence and proper knowledge.

Leading with Confidence

Following the training, I began to engage more actively in Panchayat governance and administrative processes. The programme also helped me understand the importance of convergence with line departments for addressing community needs.



Applying this learning, I coordinated with the Health Department and successfully organized a health camp in her Panchayat on World Leprosy Day. The initiative helped improve community awareness and access to health services. This experience strengthened confidence and reinforced my ability to lead effectively. After the training, my approach to governance changed.

A New Perspective

The training programme also changed the way I saw myself as a woman leader. I realized that I had been holding certain doubts about my own abilities. The programme helped me unlearn those assumptions and understand that leadership is not limited by gender.

Today I believe that women representatives must trust their own capabilities and lead from the front, not simply because seats are reserved for us, but because we are capable of guiding our communities.

Reflection

Looking back, the Championing Change training programme was an important step in my journey. It gave me the knowledge, clarity, and confidence needed to perform my responsibilities as Panchayat President whether in implementing schemes, coordinating with departments, or mobilizing resources for the welfare of the community.

Leadership begins with belief in oneself. Once that confidence is built, serving the community becomes a meaningful and achievable responsibility.

Leadership Lesson

Training and knowledge empower women elected representatives to move beyond hesitation and lead Panchayat governance with confidence.



Convincing a Village to Listen



The Leadership Journey of Jyoti Srivastava

Name: Smt. Jyoti Srivastava
Position: Elected Representative
GP: Senveriya
BP: Manjhauliya
Dist: West Champaran
State: Bihar

The Conversation That Changed the Meeting

The discussion had been going on for several minutes. Villagers had gathered to talk about development issues affecting the community. As different opinions were shared, Jyoti Srivastava listened carefully, waiting for the right moment to speak.

When she finally raised her voice, the meeting grew quieter. "What if we begin by listening to everyone's concerns first?" she suggested. "Only then can we decide what the village truly needs."

The suggestion was simple, but it changed the direction of the discussion. That day, the meeting became less about competing opinions and more about collective understanding.

Entering Public Leadership

When Jyoti Srivastava first stepped into public life as an elected representative, she quickly realized that leadership in a village is often about communication.

Development issues involve many perspectives farmers, families, local workers, and community leaders. Bringing these voices together requires patience and the ability to listen carefully.

In the beginning, navigating these conversations was not always easy. Community discussions could become complicated when people had different expectations or priorities. Jyoti understood that effective leadership required building trust and encouraging open dialogue.

Learning Through Training

Her participation in the Championing Change training programme for Women Elected Representatives helped strengthen that understanding.

The training introduced participants to the principles of participatory governance and explained how Panchayat representatives can engage communities in development discussions.



Through group activities, role plays, and discussions, the programme emphasized the importance of communication and collaboration in village governance.

For Jyoti, these lessons reinforced an important idea; leadership is not only about making decisions it is also about helping communities reach those decisions together.

Bringing People Together

After returning to the Panchayat, Jyoti began encouraging more open discussions in village meetings. She focused on listening carefully to the concerns of different groups and ensuring that conversations remained constructive. By guiding discussions and encouraging participation, she helped create a space where villagers felt comfortable sharing their views.

She also began spreading awareness about various government schemes and encouraged women to participate actively in Gram Sabha meetings and Panchayat activities.

Gradually, meetings began to feel more collaborative.

Villagers started to see discussions not as disagreements but as opportunities to find solutions together.

A Village That Listens

Over time, the atmosphere in community discussions began to change.

People spoke more openly about their concerns and worked together to identify development priorities. Panchayat meetings became spaces where ideas could be shared and decisions could emerge through dialogue.

For Jyoti Srivastava, this transformation reinforced the value of communication in grassroots governance. Sometimes leadership begins with a simple act helping people listen to one another.

Reflection

The journey of an elected representative is often shaped by the ability to connect with the community.

Through patience, dialogue, and a commitment to inclusive participation, village discussions can become powerful platforms for collective decision-making.

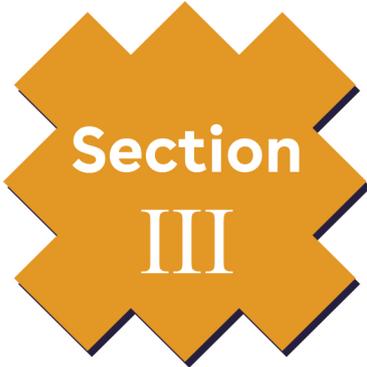
For Jyoti, leadership became a process of guiding conversations toward solutions that benefit the entire community.

Leadership Lesson

Effective grassroots leadership is built on dialogue. When leaders encourage communities to listen to one another, collective solutions begin to emerge.







Section III

Building Institutions of Governance

Effective leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions extends beyond individual initiative. It involves strengthening the systems through which local governance functions.

Panchayats play a crucial role in planning development activities, coordinating with government departments, and ensuring that public resources address the priorities of communities. To perform these responsibilities effectively, elected representatives must understand administrative processes, financial procedures, and participatory planning mechanisms.

Capacity-building programmes help bridge this gap by equipping representatives with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate governance systems. As leaders gain familiarity with these processes, Panchayats begin to function more confidently and transparently.

The stories in this section reflect this transition from individual leadership to institutional strengthening. They show how women representatives have improved the functioning of Gram Sabha meetings, strengthened planning processes, and encouraged collective participation in development decisions.

These journeys demonstrate that strong institutions are built through informed leadership and community engagement.

Learning to Govern



The Leadership Journey of Niharika Sukriti

Name: Smt. Niharika Sukriti

Position: Mukhiya

Gram Panchayat: Bundu

District: Bokaro

State: Jharkhand

The First Block Meeting

The room was full of officials and elected representatives from different Panchayats. It was one of the first block level meetings that Niharika Sukriti attended after becoming the Mukhiya of Bundu Gram Panchayat. Development issues were being discussed plans, budgets, departmental responsibilities, and coordination between institutions.

For someone entering Panchayat governance for the first time, the discussion felt overwhelming. Niharika listened carefully, trying to understand how all these pieces fit together. It was clear that leadership in a Panchayat required more than enthusiasm. It required an understanding of governance systems.

A New Responsibility

When Niharika Sukriti first assumed the role of Mukhiya, she brought with her a strong desire to contribute to her community.

However, the administrative processes of Panchayat governance, planning development activities, coordinating with departments, and managing meetings required practical knowledge that she was still developing.

Like many newly elected representatives, she was learning while leading. She knew that strengthening the Panchayat meant understanding how these systems worked.

The Turning Point

Participation in capacity-building programmes for Women Elected Representatives became an important step in that learning process.

The training sessions explained the structure of Panchayati Raj institutions and the responsibilities of elected leaders in local governance. Through discussions and activities, participants explored how Panchayats coordinate development initiatives, engage with government departments, and involve communities in planning.



For Niharika, the training helped translate abstract governance concepts into practical responsibilities. It provided the clarity she needed to approach her role with greater confidence. She learnt how to speak effectively in public, understanding various provisions of Panchayati Raj Act and government business.

Building Administrative Confidence

After the training, Niharika began participating more actively in administrative discussions and Panchayat meetings. She engaged more confidently with Panchayat members and officials, discussing development priorities and exploring ways to address community needs.

Block level meetings, which once felt intimidating, gradually became valuable opportunities to learn about government programmes and coordinate development initiatives.

With each meeting and decision, her understanding of governance deepened.

Strengthening the Panchayat

As her confidence grew, the functioning of the Panchayat also strengthened. Meetings became more structured and focused on development priorities. Discussions with officials and community members became more productive, allowing the Panchayat to address local concerns more effectively.

The learning process that had begun with uncertainty gradually evolved into institutional leadership.

Reflection

Looking back, Niharika Sukriti sees her journey as a continuous process of learning.

Leadership in Panchayat governance does not happen overnight. It develops through experience, training, and engagement with the community and administrative institutions.

The knowledge gained through capacity building helped transform uncertainty into confidence and participation into leadership.

Leadership Lesson

Strong Panchayats are built when elected representatives understand governance systems and use that knowledge to guide development in their communities.



Seven Pillars of a Village



The Leadership Journey of Savithri Loganathan

Name: Smt. Savithri Loganathan
Position: Panchayat President
Gram Panchayat: Eraiyur
District: Villupuram
State: Tamil Nadu

Looking at the Village as a Whole

When Savithri Loganathan began her work as Panchayat President of Eraiyur, she spent time observing the village carefully.

Every street, every public space, and every conversation with residents revealed something about the needs of the community. Development challenges were not limited to one issue—they were connected to many aspects of village life.

Water, sanitation, livelihoods, education, and community participation were all part of the same larger picture.

For Savithri, governance meant understanding how these different elements fit together.

Understanding the Challenge

Like many first-time Panchayat leaders, Savithri initially faced the challenge of navigating the administrative responsibilities of local governance.

Managing development initiatives required coordination with government departments, engagement with community groups, and careful planning to ensure that resources were used effectively.

Without a structured understanding of governance systems, it could be difficult to address these interconnected issues in a systematic way.

Savithri knew that strengthening the Panchayat required both vision and practical knowledge.

The Turning Point

Participation in capacity-building programmes for Women Elected Representatives helped deepen her understanding of Panchayat governance.



Through training sessions and discussions, Savithri learned how local development initiatives could be planned through coordinated efforts across different sectors. The programme emphasized participatory planning, institutional coordination, and community engagement.

These insights helped her begin to see governance not as isolated tasks but as a comprehensive effort to improve the quality of life in the village.

Building the Foundations of Development

With a clearer perspective, Savithri began working toward strengthening multiple aspects of village governance.

She engaged with community members to understand their priorities and encouraged participation in discussions about development. Coordination with different departments helped bring together resources that could support village initiatives.

Gradually, development efforts began to address a range of needs from basic services to community welfare.

This integrated approach helped the Panchayat move forward with a broader vision for village development.

Strengthening Community Participation

An important part of this journey was ensuring that the community remained actively involved.

Savithri encouraged villagers to participate in discussions and share their views about development priorities. These conversations helped create a shared understanding of the challenges facing the village and the steps needed to address them.

Through collaboration between the Panchayat and the community, development initiatives gained stronger support.

Reflection

For Savithri Loganathan, leadership in the Panchayat is about building a foundation for long-term development.

Each initiative whether related to basic services, community welfare or local planning contributes to the larger goal of improving life in the village.

When governance is guided by a clear vision and supported by community participation, the Panchayat becomes a powerful platform for development.

Leadership Lesson

Effective village governance requires both vision and collaboration. When Panchayat leaders address development in a holistic way, communities move forward together.



From Zero Revenue to a Thriving Panchayat



The Leadership Journey of Jeevitha Ramesh

Name: Smt. Jeevitha Ramesh
Position: Panchayat President
Gram Panchayat: Sembarayanallore
District: Vellore
State: Tamil Nadu

Looking at the Panchayat Accounts

One of the first things Jeevitha Ramesh examined after assuming office as Panchayat President was the Panchayat's financial situation.

Village development requires resources. Roads, sanitation facilities, drinking water systems, and public services all depend on effective financial management. As she reviewed the Panchayat's records, she realized that strengthening revenue generation would be essential for improving development outcomes.

For Jeevitha, this became an important starting point.

Understanding the Governance Challenge

Panchayats play a central role in managing local resources and planning development initiatives. However, effective governance requires not only administrative coordination but also financial discipline and institutional planning.

For newly elected representatives, navigating these responsibilities can be challenging. Understanding how to manage Panchayat finances, coordinate with departments, and engage the community requires both knowledge and experience.

Jeevitha recognized that strengthening the Panchayat meant building a stronger institutional foundation.

The Turning Point

Participation in training programmes for Women Elected Representatives helped deepen her understanding of Panchayat governance.

The training sessions introduced participants to the institutional responsibilities of Panchayats, including planning, resource management, and coordination with government departments. Discussions on governance practices and community participation provided valuable insights into how Panchayats can function more effectively.



For Jeevitha, these sessions reinforced the importance of combining administrative understanding with community engagement.

Strengthening the Panchayat

With greater clarity about governance processes, Jeevitha began focusing on strengthening the functioning of the Panchayat.

She worked to improve administrative coordination and encouraged community participation in discussions about development priorities. By engaging with villagers and Panchayat members, she helped create a more collaborative environment for local governance.

These efforts also contributed to improving financial management and institutional functioning within the Panchayat.

Visible Change

As governance processes became more structured, the Panchayat was better able to address development needs in the village.

Improved coordination and planning allowed development initiatives to move forward more effectively. Community participation in discussions about village priorities also increased, strengthening the Panchayat's role as a platform for participatory governance.

The Panchayat gradually evolved into a more active and responsive institution serving the needs of the community.

Reflection

For Jeevitha Ramesh, the journey reinforced the importance of institutional leadership in local governance.

Strong Panchayats are built not only through individual effort but also through systems that support planning, financial management, and community participation.

By strengthening these foundations, Panchayats can contribute more effectively to the development of rural communities.

Leadership Lesson

When Panchayat leaders strengthen institutional systems planning, participation, and financial management local governance becomes more effective and sustainable.



The Village That Planned Together



The Leadership Journey of Induja

Name: Smt. Induja

Position: Panchayat President

Gram Panchayat: Varaganoor

District: Tenkasi

State: Tamil Nadu

A Different Kind of Meeting

When Induja began presiding over Gram Sabha meetings in Varaganoor Panchayat, she noticed something important.

Villagers attended the meetings regularly, but discussions often moved quickly from one issue to another. Decisions about development sometimes felt disconnected from the everyday experiences of the people who lived in the village.

Induja believed that planning for the future of the Panchayat should involve the voices of the entire community.

For her, governance needed to begin with listening.

Understanding the Challenge

Panchayats are responsible for identifying development priorities and coordinating efforts to improve the quality of life in rural communities.

However, effective planning requires active participation from villagers. Without community involvement, development initiatives can miss important local needs.

When Induja began her tenure as Panchayat President, she recognized that strengthening participatory planning would be essential for guiding the development of the village.

The Turning Point

Her participation in capacity-building programmes for Women Elected Representatives helped developing this understanding.

The training sessions explained how Panchayats can involve communities in planning processes and how the Gram Sabha serves as the foundation of participatory governance.



Through discussions and practical examples, the programme emphasized that village development becomes more effective when community members participate actively in identifying priorities and solutions.

These insights encouraged Induja to approach planning as a collaborative process.

Planning with the Community

After the training, Induja began encouraging greater participation during Gram Sabha meetings.

Villagers were invited to discuss issues affecting their daily lives water, sanitation, livelihoods, and other development concerns. These conversations helped bring different perspectives into the planning process.

Gradually, community members began contributing ideas and suggestions about how the Panchayat could address local challenges. Through these discussions, planning became a shared effort rather than a purely administrative task.

Building Collective Ownership

As participation increased, villagers developed a stronger sense of ownership over development initiatives.

Community members became more involved in discussions about priorities and solutions. This collaborative approach helped strengthen trust between the Panchayat and the residents of the village.

The Gram Sabha evolved into a space where decisions reflected the voices and experiences of the entire community.

Reflection

For Induja, the experience reinforced a simple principle of grassroots governance.

Development becomes more meaningful when it grows from the ideas and participation of the community itself.

When people come together to plan for their village, the Panchayat becomes more than an administrative institution, it becomes a platform for collective progress.

Leadership Lesson

Participatory planning strengthens grassroots democracy. When communities are actively involved in shaping development priorities, Panchayats become more responsive and effective.



From Experience to Empowered Leadership



The Leadership Journey of Purnima Naskar

Name: Smt. Purnima Naskar
Position: Pradhan
Gram Panchayat: Sankarpur-I
Block: Baruipur
District: South 24 Parganas
State: West Bengal

A Panchayat Serving a Large Rural Community

Smt. Purnima Naskar has been serving as the Pradhan since 2018, after earlier working as the Upa-Pradhan from 2013 to 2018. Her experience in Panchayat governance provided her with an understanding of village issues, but leading the Panchayat brought new challenges.

Understanding the Challenges

Despite her experience, Smt. Naskar initially faced difficulties in confidently asserting her leadership within a male-dominated decision-making environment. While she maintained regular contact with villagers, converting community concerns into concrete development actions was challenging.

Limited exposure to leadership training and negotiation skills also affected her ability to mobilize community participation and coordinate effectively with officials and other stakeholders.

The Turning Point

A significant change in her leadership journey came when she participated in the Specialized Training Programme for Women Elected Representatives (WER) at the District Panchayat Training and Resource Centre (DPTRC), Baruipur in August 2025.

The training sessions, which included participatory learning, peer discussions, and interactive exercises, strengthened her understanding of decentralized governance, leadership responsibilities, and communication skills. The programme also helped her recognize her potential as a community leader and boosted her confidence to address local challenges.



Actions and Initiatives

Following the training, Smt. Naskar adopted a more proactive and inclusive leadership approach. Community members, particularly women and marginalized groups, began approaching the Panchayat more confidently with their concerns.

Under her leadership, the Gram Panchayat adopted the vision of creating a “Women-Friendly Village” in its Annual Plan and Budget for FY 2026-27. Initiatives were introduced to support women and child welfare, including strengthening SHG-based livelihoods, improving facilities for pregnant and lactating mothers at health sub-centres, establishing a Mother-Child Corner, and organizing awareness programmes on maternal health, adolescent health, and early marriage. Sanitary napkin vending machines were also installed in schools and health centres.

To strengthen Own Source Revenue (OSR), the Panchayat initiated the construction of a community hall and promoted leasing of ponds and other local assets. Efforts were also made to support farmers through solar-powered irrigation systems and modern agricultural practices in coordination with the Agriculture Department.

Recognizing the problem of arsenic-affected drinking water in the area, Smt. Naskar actively advocated for the establishment of a water treatment plant under the MPLAD scheme, engaging with officials and political representatives to highlight the urgent need for safe drinking water.

Reflection

Through increased confidence, leadership skills, and stronger community engagement, Smt. Naskar has transformed her role into that of an active and responsive local leader. Her initiatives have strengthened community participation and promoted women-focused development within the Gram Panchayat.

Leadership Lesson

The journey of Smt. Purnima Naskar shows how capacity-building and leadership training can empower women elected representatives to overcome social barriers and lead inclusive rural development.





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Section IV

Development that Changes Lives

Effective leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions extends beyond individual initiative. It involves strengthening the systems through which local governance functions.

Panchayats play a crucial role in planning development activities, coordinating with government departments, and ensuring that public resources address the priorities of communities. To perform these responsibilities effectively, elected representatives must understand administrative processes, financial procedures, and participatory planning mechanisms.

Capacity-building programmes help bridge this gap by equipping representatives with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate governance systems. As leaders gain familiarity with these processes, Panchayats begin to function more confidently and transparently.

The stories in this section reflect this transition from individual leadership to institutional strengthening. They show how women representatives have improved the functioning of Gram Sabha meetings, strengthened planning processes, and encouraged collective participation in development decisions.

These journeys demonstrate that strong institutions are built through informed leadership and community engagement.

Reclaiming Land, Rebuilding Hope



The Leadership Journey of

Geetha Udhayakumar

Name: U. Geetha Udhayakumar

Position: Panchayat President

Gram Panchayat: Karanai

Taluk: Uthiramerur

District: Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu

The Problem the Village Could Not Ignore

When Geetha Udhayakumar assumed office as Panchayat President of Karanai, she quickly realized that one of the village's most valuable resources had been lost. Government land meant for community use had gradually been encroached upon.

Without this land, the Panchayat had limited space for essential public infrastructure. Facilities such as healthcare and education were operating in old and deteriorating buildings. The village needed decisive action.

The Turning Point

Training programmes conducted for Women Elected Representatives helped Geetha understand the administrative and legal powers available to Panchayat leaders. For the first time, she gained clarity on procedures related to land management, governance processes, and implementation of development projects.

More importantly, the training strengthened her confidence to engage with administrative systems and pursue solutions for the village.

Taking Action

Using the knowledge gained through training, Geetha initiated efforts to reclaim the encroached government land. The process required coordination with officials and persistence in navigating administrative procedures. Eventually, the Panchayat succeeded in restoring control over the land.

This victory opened the door for a series of development initiatives. A new Panchayat office was constructed, providing a permanent administrative space for local governance. The Panchayat also facilitated the construction of a new Primary Health Centre, replacing an old structure that had served the community for decades.



Similarly, a new primary school building was developed, ensuring a safe and modern learning environment for village children.

Supporting Vulnerable Communities

Geetha's leadership also focused on inclusive development. Special attention was given to marginalized communities such as the Narikuravar and Irular families. Housing initiatives were implemented to provide secure shelter, and educational support was extended to children to encourage continued schooling.

These efforts reflected the Panchayat's commitment to ensuring that development benefits reached every section of society.

Visible Change

The improvements brought a renewed sense of confidence to the village. Public infrastructure became stronger, and the Panchayat office emerged as an active centre of governance. Health and education services improved significantly with the establishment of new facilities.

Most importantly, the community witnessed how effective leadership could translate vision into tangible development.

Reflection

For Geetha Udhayakumar, the journey reinforced a simple truth. Leadership in local governance is not only about implementing schemes, it is about identifying the village's needs and using available powers to address them.

Leadership Lesson

Knowledge of governance processes empowers elected representatives to transform challenges into opportunities for development.



From Homemaker to Village Leader



The Leadership Journey of Ramkali Singh

Name: Smt. Ramkali Singh

Position: Sarpanch

Gram Panchayat: Bhursi

Block: Gohparu

District: Shahdol

State: Madhya Pradesh

A Life Within the Village

For many years, Ramkali Singh's days were spent managing household responsibilities, caring for livestock, and helping with agricultural work. Like many women in the village, her work was constant but largely confined to the home and the fields.

Public meetings, governance discussions, and village decisions seemed distant from her everyday life. At that time, leadership appeared far away.

The First Door Opens

A turning point came in 2015, when Ramkali joined a Self-Help Group (SHG). The meetings were simple gatherings where women discussed savings, household matters, and community issues. For Ramkali, however, these meetings became a space for learning and confidence-building.

Through the Self-Help Group, she began interacting with women beyond her immediate circle. Gradually, she realized that her ideas mattered and that her voice carried value within the community.

Stepping Into the Community

Her growing confidence soon led to new responsibilities. Ramkali started working as a Community Data Collector and later as a Community Resource Person. These roles required her to interact closely with villagers and understand local challenges

For the first time, she was not only participating in village life, she was helping organize and support community initiatives. This experience gradually changed how people in the village perceived her, and it also transformed how she saw herself.



The Decision to Contest

When the Panchayat elections in 2022 approached, members of her Self-Help Group and other villagers encouraged Ramkali to contest for the position of Sarpanch.

The idea initially surprised her. Leadership had once seemed distant, yet the community was now asking her to step forward. With their encouragement, Ramkali decided to contest the election and she was elected as the Sarpanch.

The First Challenges of Leadership

Winning the election brought pride, but it also brought new responsibilities. As Sarpanch, Ramkali had to preside over Gram Sabha meetings, interact with officials, and take decisions affecting the entire village.

Initially, these responsibilities felt challenging. Speaking before large gatherings and managing administrative decisions required confidence that she was still developing.

The Turning Point

Her participation in training programmes for Women Elected Representatives (WER) became a crucial turning point. Through these programmes, Ramkali gained a clearer understanding about Gram Sabha processes, Panchayat governance systems, Participatory planning and development

The training helped transform uncertainty into clarity and strengthened her confidence in performing her leadership role.

Turning Plans into Action

With growing confidence, Ramkali began focusing on key development priorities for the village. The Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) was prepared through community consultations, ensuring that villagers' needs were reflected in development planning.

Several initiatives were undertaken under her leadership like safe drinking water and promotion of water conservation efforts, Construction of a school building with seven classrooms, improving educational facilities, development of boundary walls and toilets in important community centres, promotion of solar irrigation systems to support year-round farming etc.

A New Chapter of Leadership

Today, Ramkali Singh leads her Panchayat with confidence and determination. Her journey from homemaker to Sarpanch did not happen overnight. It evolved through learning, community support, and opportunities created by Self-Help Groups and training programmes.

Her story demonstrates how empowering rural women can lead to stronger community leadership and local development.

Leadership Lesson

When rural women gain confidence, knowledge, and community support, they do not only transform their own lives they contribute to shaping the future of their villages.



Planning for the Future of the Village



The Leadership Journey of Hemlata Warkade

Name: Smt. Hemlata Warkade

Position: Panchayat Leader

District: Mandla

State: Madhya Pradesh

Looking Beyond Today's Problems

In many villages, governance often begins with responding to immediate needs repairing a road, improving water supply, or addressing a local concern raised by residents. When Hemlata Warkade began her journey in Panchayat leadership, she realized that these issues were important, but they were also part of a larger picture.

Every decision taken by the Panchayat had an impact on the long-term development of the village. Planning for the future required understanding the village's natural resources, community needs, and development priorities. For Hemlata, the challenge was to bring these different elements together in a thoughtful way.

Understanding the Challenge

Like many newly elected representatives, Hemlata initially faced the challenge of navigating the responsibilities of local governance. Village development requires coordination with multiple institutions, awareness of government programmes, and the ability to engage community members in planning processes.

Without structured planning, development initiatives can remain fragmented. Hemlata recognized that strengthening the Panchayat meant thinking about development not only in terms of individual projects but also in terms of the village's long-term progress.

The Turning Point

Her participation in the Championing Change training programme for Women Elected Representatives provided valuable insights into the planning role of Panchayats. The training explained how Panchayats can function through participatory planning and coordination with government departments.



Through discussions and practical sessions, participants explored ways to involve communities in identifying priorities and shaping development initiatives. For Hemlata, the training helped clarify the importance of planning as a central function of Panchayat leadership.

Bringing Planning into Governance

After returning to the Panchayat, Hemlata began encouraging discussions about the future development of the village.

Community members were invited to share their views on the needs of the village and the priorities that should guide development initiatives. These conversations helped create a broader understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the community.

Through such discussions, the Panchayat began approaching development with a more structured and forward-looking perspective.

Strengthening Collective Vision

As planning discussions became more frequent, villagers developed a stronger sense of involvement in shaping the future of their community. Instead of focusing only on immediate problems, the Panchayat began considering how different development initiatives could contribute to long-term improvement in village life.

This shift toward planning, strengthened the role of the Panchayat as a platform for collective decision-making.

Reflection

For Hemlata Warkade, the journey reinforced the importance of vision in grassroots leadership. Village development is not only about addressing today's concerns, it is also about preparing the community for the future.

When Panchayat leaders encourage planning and participation, development becomes a shared effort guided by the aspirations of the community.

Leadership Lesson

Effective Panchayat leadership combines community participation with long-term planning, ensuring that development initiatives contribute to the sustained progress of the village.



Rebuilding a Panchayat



The Leadership Journey of Shaik Fazila

Name: Smt. Shaik Fazila

Position: Panchayat Leader

Gram Panchayat: Ithepalli

Mandal: Chandragiri

District: Chittoor

State: Andhra Pradesh

A Panchayat with New Expectations

When Shaik Fazila assumed her role in the Panchayat, she knew that the community expected meaningful change.

Villagers often look to the Panchayat as the institution closest to their everyday lives. Issues such as water supply, sanitation, infrastructure, education, and community welfare frequently shape discussions within the village.

For Shaik Fazila, stepping into leadership meant understanding how the Panchayat could respond to these needs while also strengthening trust between the community and local governance.

Recognizing the Challenge

Local governance involves coordinating many responsibilities working with Panchayat members, engaging with government departments, and addressing issues raised by the community.

For newly elected representatives, managing these responsibilities can initially feel complex. Effective governance requires both institutional understanding and the ability to engage with the community in a constructive way.

Shaik Fazila recognized that strengthening the Panchayat required improving both administrative coordination and community participation.

The Turning Point

Participation in capacity building programmes for Women Elected Representatives helped her to develop understanding of Panchayat governance.



Through the training sessions, she learned more about the structure of Panchayati Raj institutions, the responsibilities of elected leaders, and the importance of participatory governance. The training strengthened her leadership confidence and provided clarity on how Panchayats can address community needs through coordinated efforts.

The programme emphasized that Panchayats function effectively when representatives develop administrative knowledge and actively engaged with the communities. These insights helped shape her approach to leadership.

Strengthening Governance

After the training, Shaik Fazila began focusing on strengthening the functioning of the Panchayat. She encouraged discussions among Panchayat members about development priorities and worked to improve coordination with officials responsible for various government programmes.

Community meetings and interactions with residents helped identify the issues most important to the village. These conversations allowed the Panchayat to approach development initiatives with greater clarity and cooperation.

Gradually, the Panchayat began functioning as a more active platform for addressing community concerns.

A Renewed Sense of Participation

As governance processes became more structured, villagers began to engage more actively with Panchayat discussions.

Community members felt encouraged to share their views on development priorities and contribute to collective decision-making.

This increased participation strengthened the connection between the Panchayat and the people it serves.

Reflection

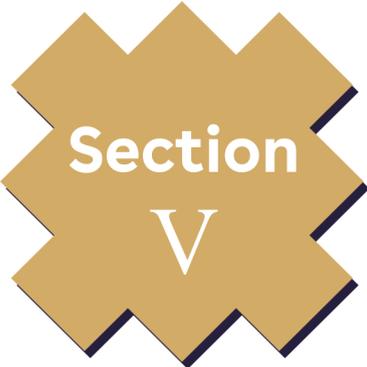
For Shaik Fazila, the journey of leadership has been about building trust between the Panchayat and the community. When governance is transparent, participatory, and responsive, the Panchayat becomes more than an administrative body it becomes a space where communities work together to improve village life.

Leadership Lesson

Rebuilding trust in local governance begins with participation. When Panchayat leaders strengthen communication and coordination, communities become active partners in development.







Section

V

When Leadership Becomes a Movement

Over time, leadership within a Panchayat can evolve into something larger than individual achievement.

When women leaders gain confidence and begin to exercise their authority effectively, their influence often extends beyond administrative decisions. They encourage greater participation by women in community discussions, strengthen social dialogue, and inspire others to take active roles in governance.

In such cases, leadership becomes a catalyst for broader social transformation. Communities begin to rethink long-standing practices, new ideas emerge in village meetings, and governance becomes more inclusive and participatory.

The stories in this final section reflect such journeys. They illustrate how determined leadership can mobilize communities to address social challenges, strengthen collective action, and build new norms of participation.

Together, these narratives show that grassroots democracy is not static. It evolves through the efforts of leaders who encourage communities to imagine and build a more inclusive future.

The Woman Who Challenged Illicit Liquor



The Leadership Journey of **Kakoli Mukherjee**

Name: Kakoli Mukherjee

Position: Mukhiya

Panchayat: Egarkund (North)

District: Dhanbad, Jharkhand

A Village Struggling with a Hidden Problem

For many families in the Panchayat, the presence of illicit liquor had become a silent but persistent problem. It affected household finances, created social tensions, and undermined community wellbeing.

When Kakoli Mukherjee assumed her role as Mukhiya, she understood that addressing this issue would require courage and community support.

The Turning Point

Through training programmes for Women Elected Representatives, Kakoli gained a deeper understanding of her responsibilities as a community leader. The training emphasized leadership, communication, and collective action. It also highlighted the importance of mobilizing communities to address social challenges.

These lessons helped her recognize that meaningful change often begins with collective awareness.

Taking Action

Kakoli began by engaging with women in the community. Meetings were organized where women could openly discuss the challenges they faced due to the presence of illicit liquor in the village. Gradually, a shared determination emerged to address the problem collectively.

Awareness campaigns were conducted, and community discussions encouraged families to support healthier and more productive social practices.

Through continuous dialogue and community mobilization, the Panchayat began to address the issue in a constructive manner.



Visible Change

The efforts led to greater awareness within the village about the social and economic consequences of illicit liquor.

Women became more confident in raising concerns and participating in local governance processes. Community discussions increasingly focused on development, education, and well-being.

Kakoli's leadership demonstrated how local representatives can guide communities toward positive change through dialogue and collective action.

Reflection

For Kakoli Mukherjee, leadership meant listening carefully to the voices of the community and responding with courage.

Her journey showed that even deeply rooted social issues can be addressed when communities come together with determination and support.

Leadership Lesson

Grassroots leadership is strongest when communities participate actively in solving their own challenges.



The Village that Defeated Drought



The Leadership Journey of

Savita Sarangdhar Pandey

Name: Smt. Savita Sarangdhar Pandey

Position: Panchayat Leader

District: Nashik

State: Maharashtra

A Village Shaped by the Landscape

The village lay surrounded by rocky hills and dry terrain. For years, water scarcity had been one of the most persistent challenges faced by the community. During the dry months, water sources would shrink, affecting both household needs and agricultural activities.

For families dependent on farming, the uncertainty of rainfall made daily life difficult. Crops depended heavily on water availability, and every dry season brought fresh concerns.

When Savita Sarangdhar Pandey began her leadership journey, she knew that addressing water challenges would be central to improving life in the village.

Understanding the Challenge

Water scarcity is not only an environmental issue. In rural communities it influences livelihoods, agricultural productivity, and household well-being.

For the Panchayat, managing such challenges requires collective awareness and coordinated action. Solutions often involve both community participation and long-term planning.

Savita recognized that improving the situation would require bringing people together around a shared understanding of the problem.

The Turning Point

Participation in training programmes for Women Elected Representatives helped strengthen her approach to leadership.

The sessions emphasized the role of Panchayat leaders in mobilizing communities and guiding development efforts. Discussions on local governance and community participation reinforced the idea that sustainable solutions emerge when communities work collectively.



For Savita, the training encouraged a broader perspective on how Panchayat leadership could address environmental challenges.

Mobilizing Collective Effort

After the training, Savita began encouraging discussions in the village about water management and environmental conservation.

These conversations helped build awareness among residents about the importance of protecting and improving local water resources.

Community members gradually began participating in efforts to strengthen water conservation practices and improve the village's natural environment.

Signs of Transformation

Over time, these efforts contributed to improvements in the village's water situation. The conservation and restoration of local resources helped support agriculture and reduced the stress that water scarcity once created for families.

The landscape of the village began to show signs of renewal. For many residents, the change represented more than environmental improvement, it symbolized the power of collective action.

Reflection

For Savita Sarangdhar Pandey, the experience demonstrated how leadership can inspire communities to work together toward shared goals.

Environmental challenges may seem overwhelming at first, but when people come together with determination and awareness, meaningful change becomes possible. The journey of the village showed that resilience grows through cooperation.

Leadership Lesson

Sustainable rural development depends on collective stewardship of natural resources. When communities unite to protect their environment, they create stronger foundations for the future.



The Village Where Women Removed the Veil



The Leadership Journey of **Dr Kashmiri**

Name: Dr Kashmiri

Position: Panchayat Leader

Gram Panchayat: Lahali

District: Rohtak

State: Haryana

A Meeting That Looked Different

When visitors arrived in Lahali village for a community meeting, they noticed something unusual.

Women sat in the gathering confidently, participating in discussions about village issues and development priorities. They spoke openly with Panchayat members and shared their views on matters affecting the community.

For many residents, this scene represented a significant change from the past. The transformation had not happened suddenly. It had grown gradually through conversations, awareness, and leadership within the community.

Understanding the Challenge

In many rural areas, social customs often influence how women participate in public spaces. For years, traditions such as the practice of purdah had limited the visibility of women in community discussions. While women contributed actively within their households and communities, their voices were not always heard in public forums.

For Dr Kashmiri, strengthening women's participation became an important part of her leadership journey.

She believed that village governance would become stronger when women confidently participate in discussions and decision making processes.

The Turning Point

Participation in capacity-building programmes for Women Elected Representatives helped reinforce this perspective.



The training sessions emphasized the importance of inclusive governance and encouraged leaders to create spaces where all members of the community could participate.

Through discussions and examples from different villages, the programme highlighted how women's participation could strengthen local governance.

These ideas inspired Dr Kashmiri to encourage greater involvement of women in village meetings and community activities.

Encouraging Change

Gradually, women in the village began participating more actively in community discussions.

Meetings and community gatherings became spaces where women felt more comfortable sharing their views. As confidence grew, more women began contributing to conversations about development priorities and local initiatives.

The change reflected a broader shift in the community's perception of women's participation in governance.

A New Culture of Participation

Over time, the presence and participation of women in village meetings became a normal and accepted part of community life.

The Panchayat began benefiting from a wider range of perspectives, and discussions became more inclusive.

For many residents, this transformation symbolized a broader cultural shift, one that encouraged women to engage confidently in public life.

Reflection

For Dr Kashmiri, leadership meant creating an environment where every member of the community could participate without hesitation.

When social barriers begin to fade, communities become stronger and more inclusive.

The change in Lahali village showed how leadership can gradually influence social norms and open new spaces for participation.

Leadership Lesson

When women gain confidence to participate in public discussions, village governance becomes more inclusive and representative of the entire community.



A Panchayat Designed for Women



The Leadership Journey of **Rajalakshmi Ravi**

Name: Smt. Rajalakshmi Ravi
Position: Panchayat President
Gram Panchayat: Olakkolpattu
District: Kancheepuram
State: Tamil Nadu

A Question About Governance

When Rajalakshmi Ravi began her tenure as Panchayat President, she often asked herself a simple question:

If women form half of the village population, how can governance truly work without fully addressing their needs?

In daily village life, women were central to the functioning of households, education of children, health of families, and management of community relationships. Yet many development discussions had historically overlooked the specific challenges they faced.

Rajalakshmi believed that Panchayat governance could change this.

Understanding the Challenge

Women in rural communities often navigate multiple responsibilities, household work, livelihoods, caregiving, and participation in community life.

Despite these responsibilities, their perspectives do not always receive adequate attention in development planning. For Rajalakshmi, effective governance required understanding how Panchayat decisions affected women's everyday lives.

Strengthening women's participation and addressing their needs became an important part of her leadership approach.

The Turning Point

Her participation in capacity building programmes for Women Elected Representatives helped reinforce this perspective. The training sessions highlighted the importance of inclusive governance and encouraged leaders to consider how Panchayat initiatives could benefit different groups within the community.



Through discussions and shared experiences with other women representatives, Rajalakshmi gained new insights into how Panchayats could create a more supportive environment for women's participation. These ideas helped shape her vision for village governance.

Creating an Inclusive Approach

After returning to the Panchayat, Rajalakshmi began encouraging greater involvement of women in community discussions and decision-making processes.

Village meetings increasingly reflected a broader range of voices, and development discussions began paying closer attention to issues affecting women and families. Through dialogue and participation, the Panchayat gradually developed a more inclusive approach to governance.

Strengthening Women's Participation

As women began engaging more actively in community discussions, their contributions helped broaden the understanding of village development priorities.

Issues related to health, education, sanitation, and community welfare received greater attention in Panchayat discussions.

The increasing participation of women strengthened the Panchayat's ability to address the needs of the entire community.

Reflection

For Rajalakshmi Ravi, leadership in Panchayat governance means building institutions that reflect the voices of all residents.

When women participate actively in decision-making processes, village governance becomes more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable. The journey of the Panchayat showed that inclusive leadership can gradually transform how communities plan and implement development.

Leadership Lesson

A strong Panchayat is one that listens to everyone. When women's perspectives shape governance decisions, development becomes more balanced and community-centered.



Conclusion

The Emerging Landscape of Women-Led Grassroots Governance

The stories presented in this volume represent journeys that begin in different regions of the country but converge around a common theme: the strengthening of leadership at the grassroots level.

Across villages and Panchayats, women elected representatives are gradually redefining the nature of local governance. Their experiences illustrate how leadership evolves when individuals gain confidence, acquire institutional knowledge, and engage actively with their communities.

One of the most striking insights emerging from these stories is the importance of capacity building. For many leaders, the initial challenge was not a lack of commitment but a lack of familiarity with the institutional processes of governance. Training programmes helped bridge this gap by clarifying roles and responsibilities, strengthening communication skills, and providing practical tools for managing Panchayat functions.

With increased confidence and understanding, many women representatives began participating more actively in Gram Sabha meetings, engaging with officials, and guiding development initiatives within their Panchayats. These changes often led to improvements in the functioning of local institutions and greater participation of community members in decision-making processes.

Another recurring theme is the role of leadership in addressing local challenges. In several villages, women representatives worked with their communities to improve participation in governance forums, strengthen social dialogue, or mobilize collective action around development priorities. In other cases, leaders focused on addressing issues related to natural resource management, infrastructure development, or social welfare.

These efforts highlight an important aspect of grassroots governance: meaningful change often emerges from sustained engagement with local realities. Panchayats function most effectively when leaders understand the needs of their communities and work collaboratively with citizens and institutions to address them.



The stories also demonstrate the broader social impact of women's participation in governance. When women take active leadership roles, they often encourage greater participation by other women and marginalized groups in community discussions and decision-making. This contributes to more inclusive governance and strengthens the democratic character of local institutions.

At the same time, these journeys remind us that leadership development is an ongoing process. The effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions depends not only on representation but also on continued investment in capacity building, institutional support, and knowledge sharing among elected representatives.

As India continues to strengthen its decentralized governance framework, the role of women leaders will remain central to the evolution of grassroots democracy. Their experiences offer valuable insights for policymakers, administrators, and development practitioners working to improve the functioning of local institutions.

The stories documented in this compilation are therefore not only accounts of individual achievements. They represent a broader narrative of transformation—one in which women leaders are contributing to more participatory, accountable, and inclusive systems of governance in rural India.

By sharing these experiences, the book seeks to recognize the contributions of women elected representatives and encourage further efforts to support their leadership.

Ultimately, the strength of democracy lies in the ability of citizens to participate meaningfully in shaping their collective future. Panchayati Raj Institutions provide an important platform for such participation, and the growing leadership of women within these institutions continues to enrich and strengthen India's democratic journey.



