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Q7(a)

Enunciate the impediments to women's participation in local governance in the process of political decentralisation

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 1 · 20 marks · Indian Nationalism

Indian Nationalism: Political Strategies of India's Freedom Struggle; Perspectives on Indian National Movement; Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar, and the socialists.

Core demand of the question

- Enunciate impediments to women's participation in local governance under political decentralisation
- Cover the 73rd and 74th Amendments' promise versus practice
- Include patriarchy, **sarpanch-pati**, caste-class, violence, resources, and party gates
- Keep the focus on local bodies, not only Parliament

Revision summary

The 73rd and 74th Amendments reserved local seats for women, which is a structural opening, not yet equal participation.

Sarpanch-pati proxy rule, unpaid care, and a male bureaucracy remain the everyday patriarchal impediments.

Caste and class decide which women can act; Dalit women office-holders face additional violence and veto.

Thin devolution of money and staff makes many local offices ceremonial, so participation has no policy content.

Parties and seat rotation often transfer the reserved ticket to a household rather than building a woman's public career.

Introduction

The Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments promised women a third of seats in panchayats and municipalities, later raised to half in many states. Decentralisation was to bring government to the village and the ward, and to bring women into that government. Participation, however, is more than a reserved chair. The impediments are social, economic, and institutional, and they travel together.

Body

Formal inclusion, informal exclusion

Reservation created a historic cohort of elected women representatives. **Niraja Gopal Jayal**, **Bina Agarwal**, and a large evaluation literature still find the **sarpanch-pati** or adhyaksha-pati pattern: a husband, son, or faction leader sits in front of the file while the woman signs. This is not universal. Where women's collectives, literacy, and a second term exist, chairpersons do learn the budget. The impediment is a patriarchal household and a male bureaucracy that

prefers to talk to a man.

Caste and class structure who among women can sit. A Dalit woman sarpanch may face a double veto: gender in the home and caste in the gram sabha. Upper-caste capture of the panchayat office, and violence when a Dalit woman uses it, are documented in several states. **Ambedkar**'s warning that the village can be a sink of localism is not obsolete. Political decentralisation without social democracy reproduces the old village in a new quorum.

Resources, violence, and the party gate

Local bodies often lack funds, functionaries, and functions in the full **Rajiv Gandhi / G. V. K. Rao / L. M. Singhvi** sense. If the panchayat cannot move a road or a pension, the woman member's participation is ceremonial. State finance commissions are uneven. Parallel bodies and MLAs' local-area funds bypass the elected woman. **James Manor**'s work on patronage reminds us that power follows money, not the 73rd Amendment's text.

Violence and character assassination keep women out of night meetings and out of a second candidacy. Online abuse now adds a municipal layer. Parties remain the gate to the reserved seat: the ticket is often given to a loyal male household, not to a woman with a public record. Rotation of reserved seats can also cut a learning curve just when a woman has mastered the office.

- **The impediments therefore are:** patriarchal proxy rule; caste-class exclusion among women; unpaid care burdens that **Fraser** would call a crisis of social reproduction; thin fiscal decentralisation; criminalised local politics; and party organisations that treat women's reservation as a family entitlement. Education, women's self-help groups, longer tenure, and police response to panchayat violence are the practical counters. Decentralisation opened the door. These impediments still hold the gate.

Flow diagram

73rd / 74th reservation -> Seats
 Seats -> Impediments
 Impediments -> Proxy patriarchy
 Impediments -> Caste class violence
 Impediments -> Funds and parties
 Impediments -> Weak participation

Conclusion

Women's participation in local governance is blocked less by the absence of law than by patriarchy, caste, empty treasuries, violence, and party-mediated proxies. Political decentralisation created seats. Social and fiscal democracy will decide whether those seats are offices or nameplates.

Facts & figures

73rd and 74th Amendments, 1992

Constitutionalised panchayats and municipalities with reserved seats for women, scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes.

Sarpanch-pati

The informal practice of a male relative exercising the powers of an elected woman chairperson.

Fifty per cent reservation

Many states have raised women's reservation in local bodies to one-half, which increases numbers without automatically ending proxy rule.

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