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## Rural women empowerment through local government in Karnataka: An overview

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### Abstract

The World Bank has suggested that women empowerment should be the key aspect of Social Development Programmes (World Bank, 2001). India has also sanctioned several international convention committed to securing equal rights to women. The National Policy for the women empowerment (2001) states that “The women’s movement and a wide spread network of NGOs which have strong grass roots presence and deep in right into women’s concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the women empowerment”.

The Constitution of India has emphasized the need for political decentralization since India is a vast sub-continent which consists of several regions, religions, social groups, occupational groups, political groups and other entities. The rural and urban locals self-government bodies were established in the country consequent on Constitutional Amendments. Women and weaker sections gained adequate representation in these bodies. They also received new opportunities to participate actively in the administrative and developmental activities at the grassroots level. The new legislation on Panchayati Raj came into effect in 1983 thanks to the pioneering efforts made by Ramakrishna Hegde and Abdul Nazir Sab in Karnataka state. The state has also amended the Panchayati Raj Act in 2009 to provide greater representation to women in administration from 33% to 50%. This was a remarkable achievement which ensured adequate participation of women in Panchayat Raj System. The scope of participatory democracy and decentralized development was widened in India. Mandya district has gained prominence over a period of time in terms of decentralization of political power and developmental opportunities. The present study evaluated the women participation in Panchayati Raj and rural development in Mandy district of Karnataka State. The Panchayat Raj in India, rural development in India, women empowerment in India, women participation in Panchayati Raj and rural development, significance of the study, statement of the problem and objectives of the study are furnished in this chapter primarily.

**Keywords:** World Bank, empowerment, national policy, administration, rural development

### Introduction

#### Preamble

The Constitution of India has emphasized the need for political decentralization since India is a vast sub-continent which consists of several regions, religions, social groups, occupational groups, political groups and other entities. The rural and urban locals self-government bodies were established in the country consequent on Constitutional Amendments. Women and weaker sections gained adequate representation in these bodies. They also received new opportunities to participate actively in the administrative and developmental activities at the grassroots level. The new legislation on Panchayati Raj came into effect in 1983 thanks to the pioneering efforts made by Ramakrishna Hegde and Abdul Nazir Sab in Karnataka state. The state has also amended the Panchayati Raj Act in 2009 to provide greater representation to women in administration from 33% to 50%. This was a remarkable achievement which ensured adequate participation of women in Panchayat Raj System. The scope of participatory democracy and decentralized development was widened in India. Mandya district has gained prominence over a period of time in terms of decentralization of political power and developmental opportunities. The present study evaluated the women participation in Panchayati Raj and rural development in Mandy district of Karnataka State. The Panchayat Raj in India, rural development in India, women empowerment in India, women participation in Panchayati Raj and rural development, significance of the study, statement of the problem and objectives of the study are furnished in this chapter primarily.

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### Need for women empowerment

Women empowerment in simple words can be understood as giving power to women to decide for their own lives or inculcating such abilities in them so that they could be able to find their rightful place in the society. According to the United Nations, women's empowerment mainly has five components:

- Generating women's sense of self-worth;
- Women's right to have and to determine their choices;
- Women's right to have access to equal opportunities and all kinds of resources;
- Women's right to have the power to regulate and control their own lives, within and outside the home; and
- Women's ability to contribute in creating a more just social and economic order.

Thus, women empowerment is nothing but recognition of women's basic human rights and creating an environment where they are treated as equals to men.

### Factors Influencing Rural Women's Empowerment

One key factor for the gap in implementation of laws and policies to address discrimination, economic disadvantages, and violence against women at the community level is the largely patriarchal structure that governs the community and households in much of India. As such, women and girls have restricted mobility, access to education, access to health facilities, and lower decision-making power, and experience higher rates of violence. Political participation is also hindered at the Panchayat (local governing bodies) level and at the state and national levels, despite existing reservations for women.

### Impact of Rural Women Empowerment

The impact of the patriarchal structure can be seen in rural and urban India, although women's empowerment in rural India is much less visible than in urban areas. This is of particular concern, since much of India is rural despite the high rate of urbanization and expansion of cities. Rural women, as opposed to women in urban settings, face inequality at much higher rates, and in all spheres of life. Urban women and, in particular, urban educated women enjoy relatively higher access to economic opportunities, health and education, and experience less domestic violence. Women (both urban and rural) who have some level of education have higher decision-making power in the household and the community. Furthermore, the level of women's education also has a direct implication on maternal mortality rates, and nutrition and health indicators among children.

### Historical Practices and Women

Traditions such as Sati, Jauhar, and Devadasi among some communities have been banned and are largely defunct in modern India. However, some instances of these practices are still found in remote parts of India. The purdah is still practiced by Indian women in some communities. Child marriage remains common in rural areas, although it is illegal under current Indian law.

### Sati

Sati is an old, almost completely defunct custom among some communities, in which the widow was immolated

alive on her husband's funeral pyre. Although the act was supposed to be voluntary on the widow's part, its practice is forbidden by the Hindu scriptures in Kali yuga, the current age. After the foreign invasions of Indian subcontinent, this practice started to mark its presence, as women were often raped or kidnapped by the foreign forces. It was abolished by the British in 1829. There have been around forty reported cases of sati since independence. In 1987, the Roop Kanwar case in Rajasthan led to The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act.

### Jauhar

Jauhar refers to the practice of voluntary immolation by wives and daughters of defeated warriors, in order to avoid capture and consequent molestation by the enemy. The practice was followed by the wives of defeated Rajput rulers, who are known to place a high premium on honour. Evidently such practice took place during the Islamic invasions of India.

### Purdah

Purdah is the practice among some Muslim communities requiring women to cover themselves in front of males for the purpose of modesty.

### Devadasis

Devadasi is often misunderstood as religious practice. It was practiced in southern India, in which women were "married" to a deity or temple. The ritual was well-established by the 10th century A.D. By 1988, the practice was outlawed in the country.

### Women Empowerment in Independent India

Women in India now participate fully in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. Indira Gandhi, who served as Prime Minister of India for an aggregate period of fifteen years, is the world's longest serving woman Prime Minister.

The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42).

Feminist activism in India gained momentum in the late 1970s. One of the first national-level issues that brought women's groups together was the Mathura rape case. The acquittal of policemen accused of raping a young girl Mathura in a police station led to country-wide protests in 1979-1980. The protests, widely covered by the national media, forced the Government to amend the Evidence Act, the Criminal Procedure Code, and the Indian Penal Code; and created a new offence, custodial rape. Female activists also united over issues such as female infanticide, gender bias, women's health, women's safety, and women's literacy. Since alcoholism is often associated with violence against women in India, many women groups launched anti-liquor campaigns in Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana,

Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and other states. Many Indian Muslim women have questioned the fundamental leaders' interpretation of women's rights under the Shariat law and have criticised the triple talaq system.

The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (*Swashakti*). The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women came was passed in 2001. The specific objectives of the policy are as follows:

- Creation of an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential.
- Creation of an environment for enjoyments of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all political, economic, social, cultural and civil spheres.
- Providing equal access to participation and decision making of women in social political and economic life of the nation.
- Providing equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public life etc.
- Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.
- Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
- Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child.
- Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

### **Fundamental Rights and Women**

The policy of women empowerment is well entrenched in the Fundamental Rights enshrined in our Constitution. For instance:

- Article 14 ensures to women the right to equality.
- Article 15(1) specifically prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex.
- Article 15(3) empowers the State to take affirmative actions in favour of women.
- Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office.

These rights being fundamental rights are justiciable in court and the Government is obliged to follow the same.

### **Directive Principles of State Policy and Women**

Directive principles of State Policy also contains important provisions regarding women empowerment and it is the duty of the government to apply these principles while making laws or formulating any policy. Though these are not justiciable in the Court but these are essential for governance nonetheless. Some of them are:

- Article 39 (a) provides that the State to direct its policy towards securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood.
- Article 39 (d) mandates equal pay for equal work for both men and women.

- Article 42 provides that the State to make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief.

### **Fundamental Duties**

Fundamental duties are enshrined in Part IV-A of the Constitution and are positive duties for the people of India to follow. It also contains a duty related to women's rights:

Article 51 (A) (e) expects from the citizen of the country to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

### **Constitution of India and Women Empowerment**

India's Constitution makers and our founding fathers were very determined to provide equal rights to both women and men. The Constitution of India is one of the finest equality documents in the world. It provides provisions to secure equality in general and gender equality in particular. Various articles in the Constitution safeguard women's rights by putting them at par with men socially, politically and economically. Article 325 of the Constitution guarantees political equality to women and prohibits exclusion from the electoral rolls on the basis of sex, caste, religion etc. Article 326 of the Constitution guarantees equal political status to every citizen of India including women. Every citizen over 18 years of age has a right to vote. Articles 14, 15, 16 and 19 of the Constitution of India and the Representation of Peoples Act provides for equal participation of women in political process.

The Preamble, the Fundamental Rights, DPSPs and other constitutional provisions provide several general and special safeguards to secure women's human rights.

### **Other Constitutional Provisions for Women Empowerment**

Through 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment of 1993, a very important political right has been given to women which are a landmark in the direction of women empowerment in India. With this amendment women were given 50 percent reservation in seats at different levels of elections in local governance i.e. at Panchayat, Block and Municipality elections. Most of the studies reveal that as high as 95% of the women members are first timers in the field of rural local politics. Most importantly most of the elected women representatives do not belong to politically affiliated family background. This indicates that the reservation policy of government has opened the doors for women to participate in the rural local body's decision making process.

Thus it can be seen that these Constitutional provisions are very empowering for women and the State is duty bound to apply these principles in taking policy decisions as well as in enacting laws.

### **Specific Laws for Women Empowerment in India**

Here is the list of some specific laws which were enacted by the Parliament in order to fulfill Constitutional obligation of women empowerment:

- The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976.
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961.
- The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956.
- The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961.
- The Medical termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971.

- The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987.
- The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006.
- The Pre-Conception & Pre-Natal Diagnostic
- Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994.
- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place (Prevention, Protection and) Act, 2013.

Above mentioned and several other laws are there which not only provide specific legal rights to women but also gives them a sense of security and empowerment.

### **Suggestions for Rural Women Empowerment in PRIs**

The PRIs should become a new platform for the mobilization of ideas, resources and empowerment of women and weaker sections. The PRIs should create social networking for transformational social learning and action among the women and weaker sections. The PRIs should facilitate the development of social networking for the expansion of human collaboration among the women and weaker sections. The PRIs should enable the creation of social networking for political organizing and action for the women and weaker sections. The PRIs should contribute for social networking for better coordination among various agencies at different levels for the women and weaker sections. The PRIs should facilitate social networking development for strategic intervention and lobby action for the women and weaker sections. The PRIs should strengthen the social networking for better transnational advocacy networks for the women and weaker sections.

Social networking development should be undertaken in the PRIs to facilitate greater institutional trust and collaboration for the social capital development. Social networking development should be ensured in the PRIs to facilitate greater inter and trans-disciplinary collaboration for the social capital development. Social networking development should be achieved in the PRIs to promote community preparedness, participation and action for social capital development. Social networking development should be accomplished in the PRIs to ensure consistent collaboration between the government institutions, corporate houses and non-government agencies for social capital development. Social networking development should be ensured in the PRIs to promote creativity, entrepreneurship and leadership opportunities for social capital development. Social networking development should be achieved in the PRIs to promote social entrepreneurship and system dynamics for the social capital development. Social networking development should be accomplished in the PRIs to facilitate a new paradigm shift for the social capital development.

### **Conclusion**

The Panchayati Raj Institutions were established in India to facilitate democratic decentralization, distributive justice, participatory development and empowerment of women and other marginalized sections of the society. The rural masses should be empowered by adopting several constitutional, legal and progressive administrative policies and affirmative actions. The intervention of state for the empowerment of the women and weaker sections fall short due to lack of political will, economic resources, social networking, social activism and inclusive approaches to development. The constitutional provisions and protective measures should be

promptly implemented in the rural areas through revitalizing PRIs which are the prominent platforms for good governance and judicious development of the women and weaker sections of society. Several commissions have suggested certain policy framework and initiatives to enhance the status of PRIs and facilitate the establishment of a true welfare state on the basis of certain human values and constitutional provisions. Women elected representatives have to contribute decisively for the systematic management of PRIs and inclusive development of the marginalized sections in the countryside. The future agenda for the stakeholders of Panchayati Raj and rural development must deal with the reformation of PRIs in general and enhancement of active participation of women elected representatives in various grassroots developmental endeavors.

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