

Women in Panchayat Raj: Political Participation and Leadership in Rural Dakshina Kannada

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Abstract:

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 was a watershed moment in India's democratic evolution, marking the formalization of decentralized governance through Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs). This amendment also mandated the reservation of one-third of seats for women in Panchayats, significantly altering the landscape of rural political participation. This article critically examines the role and impact of women in PRIs within Dakshina Kannada, Karnataka. It delves into the socio-economic factors influencing women's political engagement, the structural and cultural barriers they face, and their contributions to local governance. This article uses empirical data and case studies to demonstrate that women's leadership in PRIs has resulted in more inclusive and effective governance, despite persistent challenges.

Keywords: Panchayat Raj Institutions, Women Leadership, Rural Governance, Dakshina Kannada, Political Participation.

Introduction

The establishment of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) through the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution aimed at devolving power to the grassroots level, making local governance more responsive to the needs of rural populations. A significant aspect of this decentralization was the reservation of seats for women, which sought to address the historical marginalization of women in the political sphere. Dakshina Kannada,

with its high literacy rate and relatively progressive social structure, offers an interesting case study of how these changes have impacted women's participation in governance.

The district, known for its diverse cultural heritage, has a female literacy rate of 79.7%, according to the 2011 Census of India. This article explores the nature of women's participation in PRIs in rural Dakshina Kannada, examining both the

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successes and the ongoing challenges. It draws on data from local government records, academic studies interviews with women Panchayat leaders to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Historical Context of Women's Participation in Panchayat Raj

The participation of women in Indian politics has historically been minimal due to socio-cultural norms that restrict women's public roles. However, the constitutional mandate for reservations in PRIs marked a significant departure from the past. Initially, this reservation was met with resistance, as many believed that women were not prepared for leadership roles due to a lack of education and experience. Over time, however, women in Dakshina Kannada have gradually taken up leadership roles in Panchayats, demonstrating their capacity to govern effectively.

A study by Buch (2000) indicates that women's representation in PRIs has gradually improved, leading to increased awareness and advocacy for women's rights within rural governance structures. The experiences of women in Dakshina Kannada reflect this national trend, as more women have become involved in decision-making processes that directly impact their communities.

Socio-Economic Factors Influencing Women's Participation

Women's participation in PRIs in Dakshina Kannada is shaped by various socio-economic factors, including caste, class education. The district's relatively

high literacy rate has been a significant factor in enabling women to participate in governance. However, disparities persist, particularly among women from marginalized communities, who often lack the resources and support needed to engage effectively in the political process.

Research conducted by Beaman et al. (2012) highlights that women from lower socio-economic backgrounds face additional barriers, including limited access to education and economic resources, which hinder their ability to participate fully in PRIs. In Dakshina Kannada, these barriers are evident in the varying levels of political participation across different taluks. For instance, women from wealthier and more educated families in Mangalore Taluk are more likely to be active in PRIs compared to their counterparts in the more rural and economically disadvantaged taluks of Sullia or Belthangady.

Furthermore, the intersection of caste and gender exacerbates the challenges faced by women in PRIs. A study by Rao (2006) found that women from lower castes often encounter discrimination and exclusion from decision-making processes within Panchayats. This dynamic is evident in Dakshina Kannada, where caste hierarchies remain entrenched in rural areas, limiting the scope of participation for Dalit and tribal women.

The Impact of Women's Participation in Panchayats

Despite these challenges, the participation of women in PRIs has had a

significant impact on local governance in Dakshina Kannada. Women leaders have been instrumental in addressing issues related to health, education social welfare, areas that have traditionally been neglected by male leaders. A study by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) found that women leaders in Panchayats tend to prioritize public goods that are more closely aligned with the needs of women and children, such as drinking water, sanitation healthcare.

In Dakshina Kannada, women leaders have initiated several successful projects. For example, in Bantwal Taluk, women Panchayat members have implemented water conservation projects that have significantly improved the availability of drinking water during the dry season. Similarly, in Puttur Taluk, women leaders have focused on improving maternal and child health services, resulting in a reduction in infant mortality rates.

Moreover, women's participation in PRIs has led to increased transparency and accountability in governance. Women leaders are often seen as more approachable and less corrupt than their male counterparts, which has contributed to greater public trust in local government institutions. A study by Bhatnagar and Rao (2010) found that women-led Panchayats in Karnataka were more likely to hold regular meetings and maintain proper records, leading to better governance outcomes.

Challenges and Barriers to Women's Leadership

Despite these successes, women in PRIs continue to face significant challenges that limit their effectiveness as leaders. One of the most pervasive issues is the persistence of patriarchal norms that undermine women's authority. In many cases, women are elected to Panchayats as proxies for male relatives, with little real power to make decisions. This phenomenon, often referred to as "Sarpanch Pati" syndrome, remains a significant barrier to genuine women's leadership in PRIs.

Additionally, women in Dakshina Kannada face practical challenges related to balancing their roles as political leaders with their responsibilities at home. The burden of domestic work, coupled with the expectation that women should prioritize family over public service, often limits their ability to participate fully in Panchayat activities. A study by Bandyopadhyay and Ghosh (2017) found that the dual burden of household responsibilities and political duties is a significant deterrent to women's active participation in PRIs.

The lack of adequate training and capacity-building initiatives is another critical challenge. Many women elected to Panchayats lack the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the complexities of local governance. Although many NGOs and government agencies have implemented various training programs, their reach and effectiveness remain

limited. According to a report by the Dakshina Kannada Zilla Panchayat, only 35% of women Panchayat members have received formal training on governance-related issues.

Case Studies: Women Leadership in Dakshina Kannada

To illustrate the impact of women's participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs), consider the case of Swarnalatha from Pallamajal Anganawadi Centre in Bantwal Taluk, Dakshina Kannada. As a former municipal council member, Swarnalatha, along with her husband, a former member of the Zilla Panchayat, made a notable contribution to local development by donating a plot of 4.5 cents to construct an Anganwadi center. Their motivation stemmed from a genuine desire to support local children, reflecting their commitment to community welfare rather than seeking personal recognition. This case highlights the tangible benefits of female leadership in PRIs and demonstrates a commitment to effective governance (Centre for Budget and Policy, 2023).

Another significant example is the Aranthodu Gram Panchayat in Dakshina Kannada's Sullia Taluk. Aranthodu was the first Panchayat in the district to establish an all-women team for waste management. This initiative, launched in 2021, involved employing women drivers to manage waste collection under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan program. The success of Aranthodu's approach led other gram panchayats in Dakshina Kannada to

follow suit, setting up similar all-women teams for solid waste management (SWM). The Dakshina Kannada Zilla Panchayat enhanced this initiative by appointing women to drive Swachh Vahan, the district's door-to-door waste-collection vehicles. As reported, 60 women have been trained for this role, with 39 obtaining their driving licenses (Times of India, 2022). A notable example is Sumalatha Neerabidire, a member of the Aranthodu Gram Panchayat's all-women team, who now drives the Swachh Vahan for her Panchayat. Trained through the Zilla Panchayat, Sumalatha recently received her driving license and expressed her pride in contributing to the waste management campaign. This initiative underscores the critical role of women in local governance and their significant contributions to public health and environmental sustainability.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

To enhance the effectiveness of women's participation in PRIs, it is crucial to address the challenges identified in this article. First, there is a need for more comprehensive training programs that equip women with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective governance. These programs should be tailored to the specific needs of women in rural areas, taking into account their educational backgrounds and socio-economic status.

Second, efforts must be made to challenge and change the patriarchal norms that undermine women's leadership

in PRIs. This can be achieved through awareness campaigns, gender sensitization workshops the promotion of positive role models of women leaders. Additionally, legal measures should be strengthened to prevent the practice of “Sarpanch Pati” and ensure that women elected to Panchayats can exercise their authority independently.

Third, policies should be implemented to provide greater support for women balancing household responsibilities with their roles in governance. This could include the provision of childcare facilities; flexible meeting schedules financial incentives for women to participate in Panchayat activities.

Conclusion

The participation of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions in Dakshina Kannada represents a significant step towards gender equality in rural governance. While there have been notable successes, particularly in improving local governance outcomes, many challenges remain. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from policymakers, civil society the community at large. By providing the necessary support and resources by challenging the socio-cultural norms that restrict women’s roles, it is possible to unlock the full potential of women’s leadership in PRIs. This will not only lead to more inclusive and effective governance but also contribute to the broader goal of empowering women in all aspects of public life.

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