

Women Empowerment through Panchayath Raj Institutions:

A Case Study among Tribal Women Ward Members in Kasargod District, Kerala

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ABSTRACT: Kerala state made a legal provision for 50 percent reservation for women in panchayaths and local bodies. Democratic decentralization and Panchayath raj institutions in Kerala have played a lead role in the empowerment of women. The current research seeks to make a closer look into the role of democratic decentralization in women's empowerment in Kerala. Examining tribal women's empowerment through Panchayath raj institutions is the prime focus of the current research. Several women were pushed to achieve their goal of serving as representatives in Panchayath raj institutions through education and kudumbasree activities. Numerous positive developments have resulted after the increased representation of women in the Panchayath raj institutions. Women got the ability to express their demands and concerns, and they have been involved in developing policies and programmes that deal with problems like gender-based violence, sanitation, health etc.

KEYWORDS: Panchayath Raj Institutions, Women Empowerment, Local Self Government Department (LSGD), Education, Kudumbasree.

Introduction

The historical beginning of the modern panchayaths in Kerala can be traced back to the decentralised feudal system of medieval Kerala - Thorakuttam, Desakuttam, Nattukuttam, Munnuthavar, Arunnuthuvar and so on which were the democratic local assemblies that occurred throughout Kerala giving leadership to rural administration (Hall, 1980). The basic unit of local government in ancient and medieval Kerala was

'Tara' with its own assembly 'Kuttam'. It was constituted by the 'Karanvars' or elders of the village known as 'Mukhyastans' or 'Pramanies', the elite members of the locality. The administrative jurisdiction of these assemblies was much limited, their constitution was artificial and resembled ad hoc committees rather than permanent representative institutions. They centred around the temples and met under the presidency of the 'asan' or headman or mukhyastan or 'pramani'. No one dared to disobey the orders of the 'kuttams' (Bhaskar, 1997). The period from the Malayali Memorial in 1891 to 'Nivarathana Prakshobhanam' in 1932 witnessed the emergence of institutionalised elite groups of the rural society including caste elite, landlord, and educated elite, representing the socially backward and minority groups (Rao, 1958). Independence's dawn left behind a new outlook towards society. It demonstrated increased civic awareness and calls for social and economic change. It provided further motivation for the growth of local self-government into farther-flung regions.

In former Kerala, there were two panchayath laws - the Madras Village Panchayat Act 1950 and the Travancore Panchayat Act 1950, respectively, to the Malabar district and the Travancore-Cochin region. The Madras, Village Panchayat Act 1950, like its counterpart in the Travancore-Cochin was regulated by the Travancore-Cochin Panchayat Act (1950) which was in operation for about a decade till it was superseded by the Kerala Panchayat Act of 1960 (Bhaskar, 1997).

Local Self Government Institutions

The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution of India ushered in a new system of governance and gave constitutional status to Local Self Government Institutions (LSGIs) (Mohanty *et al.*, 2021). Following this, Kerala Panchayath Raj Act, 1994 (KPR Act) and the Kerala Municipality Act, 1994 (KM Act) were passed by the State Legislature. Decentralisation of governance and administration in the state started in a campaign mode but later it attained an institutional mode. Under the system, a three-tier structure with Grama Panchayaths at the first level and Block Panchayaths and District Panchayaths at higher levels was formed for rural areas. For urban areas, a single-tier structure of Municipalities and Municipal Corporations was created. Various powers, functions and responsibilities

were transferred to the LSGDs to function as the third tier of government.

Kerala's decentralisation initiative received wide acclamation nationally and internationally. One of the distinguishing features of decentralised governance in the state is the transfer of substantial powers, functions, functionaries and funds to Local Self Government Institutions (LSGIs). Being the government closest to the people, they expect that the services of the LSGIs including those of the institutions managed by them would be delivered in a people-friendly manner (Government of Kerala, 2021). Today Kerala State has 941 Grama Panchayaths, 152 Block Panchayaths, 14 District Panchayaths, 87 Municipalities and 6 Corporations. Consequent to the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, the three-tier system came into existence in India (Jalanidhi, 2022). In Kerala, Local Self-Government Institutions have been meaningfully empowered through massive transfer of resources as well as administrative powers. It has emerged as an effective agency for the implementation of developmental programmes which has implemented through *Grama Sabhas*. With the decentralisation of power, the local administration department has gained an important role in the formulation and implementation of developmental works at the grass-root level (Local Self Government Department, 2022).

Participation of women in Panjayath raj institutions

The local governments are the real promoters of women's empowerment from the grass root level in Kerala. As per the record of (Ministry of Panchati Raj, Government of India, 2019). In 2022 the strength of women in three local self-government intuitions in Kerala is 9630 (52.42 %) and moreover, and 116 of them are tribal women. When comparing their number with the mainstream women which is comparatively less. Somehow, it is considered as a great revolution for tribal women in front of the local self-governance.

Table 1 Number of Women members in LSGD Kerala

Institution	Tribal Women	Total
Grama Panchayat	103	8360
Block Panchayat	11	1102
District Panchayat	2	168
Total	116	9630

Source: Basic Statistics of Panchayathi Raj Institutions, Ministry of Panchati Raj, 2019 & Government of Kerala Department of Panchayat, 2022.

The number of Women in LSGD in Kerala has increased only after the fifty-percentage reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions. In a general sense, these reservations of seats are widely seen as a legitimate means of protecting the interests of socially deprived groups. Therefore, the introduction of quotas at the panchayath level was a natural response to the question of political justice for women. This view is based on the evidence that, in the absence of statutory provisions, women are unable to assume leadership positions through competitive electoral politics. On the other hand, other institutions such as educational institutions and *Kudumbasree* in the tribal areas also influenced the collective empowerment of these women under the local self-governance. Which ensures their financial stability and promotes collective orientation. In that manner, the current research attempts to understand the role of Panchayat Raj institutions in the empowerment of tribal women ward members in Kasaragod District, Kerala.

Methodology

The study primarily focussed on the qualitative method. The objective of the study is to examine tribal women's empowerment through *Panchayath raj* Institutions. Primary data were collected using in-depth case studies from tribal women ward members in Kodom-Belur *grama panchayath* and Balal *grama panchayath* in Kasargod district using unstructured interview schedules. Besides, case studies secondary sources were also used in the research such as books, journals, reports, documents, websites etc. Research opinions established were followed by the thematic qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis

The data collected were mainly composed in the form of narratives. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data obtained as the interviews were all in Malayalam and were translated into English. Exemplary themes and descriptive data were dragged from the field notes to supplement thematic analyses of the narratives. The names of the primary informants were converted to pseudonyms, and all identifiable information was detached.

Selection of Research Area and Sample

Kotom Belur *grama panchayath* and Balal *grama panchayath* in Kasargod district are the major study areas of the current research. Balal *grama panchayath* had a population of 23,670 and has an area of 93.20 sq. km with 5786 households. According to the statistics of 2020, Balal *panchayath* contains 16 wards. Among them, eight are headed by women representatives including two ST women. Kodom-Belur *panchayath* contains 19 wards. Among them, ten are headed by women representatives including two ST women. (Government of Kerala, 2023) Tribal women *panchayath* members were principally focused on the current research and they were interviewed using unstructured interview schedules.

Local Self-Governance and Women Empowerment

Empowerment, especially empowerment of women is very vital for the development of the family, society as well as the nation. It is a process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowerment in the real sense of the term increases the innate ability by way of acquiring knowledge, skill, power and experience. It helps individuals to think and act in an autonomous way (Ramya and Preethi, 2017). According to United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) women empowerment is a broader concept, which includes acquiring knowledge and understanding the gender relations, developing a sense of self-worth, gaining the ability to generate choices by exercising bargaining power, developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change (Dandona, 2015). Empowerment can be

viewed as means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions and make choices either individually or collectively for social transformation. It strengthens the inborn ability by way of acquiring knowledge, power and experience (Hashemi *et al.*,1996).

Traditionally women have low political involvement at the grass root level. After the women's reservation following the implementation of the Panchayath Raj act of 2005 and hence increased the women's representation in LSGDs. Kerala is only the sixth state to have such a law and however, the same is not reflected in the upper levels of governance namely state legislature and parliamentary elections despite Kerala being praised as a forerunner of women empowerment in India. The current state legislature has a mere eight female members out of 141, which was almost the same since the first assembly, which had seven women members (Navaneeth, 2021).

Role of Education and Women Empowerment through Panjayth raj institutions

Education is considered the most important tool for empowering women in society. It is not only limited to developing the personality of an individual but also plays an important role in economic, social and cultural development. It also empowers them to respond to challenges, confront their traditional role and transform their life (Bhaskar, 2021).

Due to their significant contribution to household activities, work and income, women occupy a dominant position in tribal families. However, this dominance is restricted within the family domain and does not extend to various fields like society, education, politics etc. The most unsatisfactory fact is that the country has such a high ratio of women population, the women sector still lack behind in their status and empowerment. The situation is more severe among the tribal or primitive societies, which constitute approximately 8.9 percent of the total population of the country. Schedule Tribes are one of the most backward, exploited and marginalized groups with respect to education. The literacy rate of ST remains much lower than the general population, only 58.96 percent compared to 74 percent (Naik, 2017). Despite all of Kerala, tribal education is much better when comparing other states of

India. The literacy rate of tribals in Kerala is 74.44 percent, but it is still much lower than the state average of 93.91 percent (Census, 2011).

Case studies in the current research display how education became a pathway for tribal women to attain their present social status through their involvement in local self-governance institutions. They were born in an ordinary family background and struggled a lot to accumulate education moreover their education enabled them to gain social identity and aided to achieve a key position in society.

Radha (pseudonym) 41 year old, ward member from the Mavilan community said:

“I was the youngest daughter of my parents. My parents have five kids including me. We migrated here after the death of my father. During that time, we struggled a lot even for food. Mother was once the only breadwinner of our family. Later my brothers take care of all the household matters after getting manual jobs near the village. Due to that, they drop their education more over they supported me in schooling. I am the only one in my family who completed SSLC after a long-struggling period. My education is indeed useful for me and as a part, I participated in political and social activities finally, I became the panchayath ward member from my area.”

The case study shows the role of schooling, which helped them to arise to the forefront of society. Radha (pseudonym) came to politics through her social activities in her community after attaining SSLC education. Through their activities, the above-mentioned person gathered personal strength and confidence and education was the base point.

Pushpa (pseudonym) 40 year old, ward member from the Malavettuva community said:

“I was born as the third daughter of my parents, they all are agricultural labourers. My father occasionally goes for other jobs too. My parents struggled a lot to send my sisters and me to school. During that time school dropout rates are very high in our region. From the primary classes themselves, students quit school. This was primarily caused by family hardship and insufficient income. The same issue has happened in my family too. Both my sisters concluded

their studies in class IV. After marriage at the age of 16, I also stopped my education without finishing SSLC. After marriage, I was unable to go to school. My husband was daily wage labour and he was unable to manage the family's needs alone, I moved along with him in his work to earn more income as a part to support our family. I completed SSLC in 2010 after writing an equivalent examination. I also tried the same for plus two but failed. After achieving SSLC, I have nominated as ST promoter in our area. I strongly believe that educational achievement has given me these positions.”

The case studies demonstrate that due to familial issues and economic hardship, obtaining education is a serious challenge in tribal communities. As the parents of the respondents do not have a proper source of income as a part they are unable to fulfil their basic needs like food, proper clothes and enough shelter. In these situations, they cannot afford the schooling of their children. In order to overcome obstacles, children were forced to stop their education and were required to support their parents. The case studies show that financial independence and self-esteem are two vital factors, which influenced these tribal women to accrue education. The case also displays that after getting educational qualifications they became socially and politically dominant in their communities and they are actively involved in social circles. The case study also exhibits the role of education, which helps them to come to the forefront of society and became elected persons in their local bodies.

Assessment of the two case studies determines that Radha (pseudonym) entered politics through her social activities in her community after receiving her SSLC education, in the case of Pushpa (pseudonym), she got into politics after becoming ST promoter in her area. The foundation of both was their educational empowerment.

Role of Kudumbasree in Women's Empowerment through Panjayth raj institutions

Kudumbashree, the Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission was launched on 17th May 1998. The Mission aims to eradicate absolute poverty and was governed under the leadership of Local Self Governments. It is a community organization of neighbourhood groups

(NHG) of women in Kerala and has been recognized as an effective strategy for the empowerment of women in rural as well as urban areas: bringing women together from all spheres of life to fight for their rights (Kudumabasree, 2023). *Kudumabsree* is very active in tribal regions of the state as well. Under various schemes, *Kudumabsree* initiated various tribal special projects in collaboration with the tribal and other government departments to address the distinct matters of the tribal population of the state. *Kudumabsree* also played a crucial role in the leadership of women ward members across Kerala under LSGD (Kumar & Rakhin, 2016).

In the last local self-government elections held in 2020, a total of 21,854 candidates were elected as representatives in 1,199 local self-government bodies throughout the state, including municipalities, corporations, panchayaths, block panchayaths, and district panchayaths and 7,058 active members of kudumbasree won the polls. Kerala is a unique model of self-help groups and women's empowerment. From this, it is remarkable that *Kudumbashree* has played a crucial role in the empowerment and representation of women through local self-governance in Kerala. The active members of *Kudumbashree* among the elected 7,058 make for 32.30% of the total representatives. This is part of the rising trend in the past few local body elections. In 2015, around 7,376 *Kudumbashree* members won the elections and in 2010 around 4,000 *Kudumbashree* workers were elected. While in 2005, only 848 *Kudumbashree* members won the LSGD elections (News Click, 2020).

Sudha (pseudonym) 46 year old, ward member from the Mavilan community commented:

"I was working with Kudumbasree since 2002. I was a founding member of our SHG near my home. According to my personal experience, Kudumbasree provided me and many other women in our neighbourhood with financial independence. I deposited money in my SHG weekly as a saving. I also used the loan facility for my family's needs such as the education of children and repayment of debts. I received an opportunity to teach the children in a nearby Anaganavadi on a contract basis for one year as I was a member of SHG in Kudumbasree. From

there I learned many things related to ICDS programmes and attended many classes and training programmes in connection with that. Which gave me more exposure in that particular field. I was selected to ADS (area development society) under the Kudumabsree mission. As a member of ADS, I participated in various activities such as conducting regular meetings for the SHG members who come under our ADS, such as monitoring kudumbasree activities, organising training programmes for SHG members, participating in seminars and workshops etc. In 2012, I have nominated to CDS (community development society). As a CDS member, I actively participated in the review and evaluation of various poverty alleviation and Kudumbasree activities implemented in the Panchayat, organizing training for Kudumbasree in the capacity building etc. I performed several positions in Kudumbasree, which finally resulted in my designation as panchayat member.”

The case study shows that the respondent is influenced by the actions in Kudumbasree, which enables them to interact with various social groups and engagements in political activities. Kerala Panchayat Raj Act delivers for the formation of women's development committees at the village, block, and district levels. These committees are exclusively made up of women members and are responsible for identifying and addressing women's issues and needs in their respective areas. Furthermore, the state government of Kerala has implemented a range of schemes and programs to support women's participation in local self-governance. These include training programs for women candidates, financial incentives for women who contest elections, and capacity-building programs for women leaders.

Sneha Latha (pseudonym) 48 year old, ward member from the Malavettuva community pointed:

“I was an active Kudmabsree worker since 2005. Which supported me a lot for entering into active politics. In fact, working in kudumbasree has moulded my passion towards social work. which has given me a great exposure towards the rights and political participation of the ST population at least in my community. From that experience, I joined a dominant political party in my area and finally, I became an elected member in my panchayath”

From the above case analysis, it is found that the above pointed women respondents entered the public service and politics through *Kudumbasree*. They strongly consider that joining *Kudumbasree* has given them a great breakthrough in their current positions. It enables them to get great exposure to the society, in which they reside. In fact, their political ideologies are based on their work experience in *Kudumbasree*. The 50 percent reservation for women in local self-governance helped a lot in fetching the women of backward classes to the forefront, finally, it ensured their participation in the panchayath raj system. Through this, they attained political, social and self-empowerment.

One of the main effects of women's active participation in panchayath raj institutions is their self-empowerment. Through that, they accumulated personal strength and confidence to face the events which they have never gone through. This personal power comes from within oneself and allows them to have awareness of themselves and others, take control of their life, and make decisions for themselves and their own best interest. Political empowerment is a wide area which contains many factors, and it is also considered as a revolution in entire women's empowerment initiatives.

The political empowerment of women derives from their political participation, which includes aspects like their involvement in decision-making, political activism, political consciousness, etc. in addition to the ability to vote. Following the LSGD's seat reservation for women, their participation rate amplified quickly, which aids in the combat against gender inequality in politics. As discussed earlier social empowerment of women comprises various forms of empowerment. It also relies on how often women attend social functions in society. It can be established from prior discussions of the case studies that women who actively participate in *Kudumbasree* learned more about social empowerment and economic freedom.

Conclusion

The Kerala state is known for its unique model of local self-governance, known as the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, which empowers local government bodies at the village, block, and district levels. This model

has played a significant role in empowering women in the state. One of the key features of the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act is that it mandates that at least one-third of all seats in local government bodies be reserved for women. This reservation policy has resulted in a significant increase in women's participation in local self-governance in the state. Women now hold a substantial number of positions at all levels of local government, from village councils to district councils. The increased participation of women in the Local Self Government Department has brought many positive changes. Women have been able to articulate their needs and concerns, and have played a crucial role in shaping policies and programs that address issues such as health, education, sanitation, and gender-based violence. They have also been able to take up leadership roles and participate in decision-making processes that were previously closed to them.

Overall, the empowerment of women through LSGD in Kerala had a transformative impact on the state. Women have been able to play a more active role in shaping their communities and addressing their needs and concerns. This model of local self-governance has become an inspiration for other states in India and countries around the world that are looking to empower women and promote gender equality.

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