CHAPTER VIII

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Having been hailed as the best means of providing equal opportunities to hitherto un-represented sections of the society to participate in leadership roles, the system of decentralisation has come to stay in India since the past two decades. It basically came as an answer or alternative to dissatisfaction with the centralised rule that was poorly rated as far as resolving crucial issues like poverty and unemployment in independent India. What gathered importance in this system was the grassroots significance attached to local bodies by transferring to them fiscal, administrative and political powers. Holistic development was sought to be achieved through the concepts of participation, representation and decision-making. Scholars have addressed it as delegation of powers shifted from higher levels to lower levels.

Decentralisation of governance is practised in India in the form of Panchayat Raj Institutions. Although these were formally established as grassroots political institutions, in the early fifties, Panchayats at only the Village level were nothing new to the country which had experienced them since many centuries. During the rule by kings and chieftans, village panchayats were the system of administration at the local level. From here, till today, the Panchayat Raj System has traveled to reach its destiny of democratic decentralised rule for attaining sustainable development.

As a historical process, the system of Panchayats has evolved what it is today through many trials and corrections. A number of committees and commissions were appointed from time to time to strengthen these
institutions in India. Notable among them were the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee appointed in 1957 to look into the working of PRIs, and the Asoka Mehta Committee of 1983 that was appointed to recommend further reforms in decentralisation.

From here onwards, it is the story of the Panchayats in the state of Karnataka because, at a time when the future of local self-government institutions was uncertain, the bold initiative of the Government of Karnataka led to revived efforts to look at this institution for support and to show the path for development. Sustained efforts by few leaders at the state and the centre paved the way for the introduction of the Karnataka Zilla Parishad, Taluk Panchayat Samitis, Mandal Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats Act, 1983. Hailed as a historic step, "revolutionary in concept and wide in its sweep" and the "most radical measure of decentralisation attempted so far, and if properly implemented will convert Karnataka into something like a federation of districts".

The first elections to the Karnataka Zilla Parishad, Taluk Panchayat Samitis, Mandal Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats Act, 1983, were held in January 1987. The elected bodies assumed office from April the same year. The radical step was to reserve 25 per cent of the seats to women in the various tiers of Panchayats in Karnataka.

In 1992, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments gave added power to the PRIs and also re-established them on a more firm footing. They are important since they gave the PRIs a constitutional status, and made a mandatory provision for conducting elections to these bodies on a regular basis. The 73rd constitutional amendment (1994) changed this system by replacing it with a three-tier one, viz., the village (the Gram Panchayats or GPs), the block or taluk (Taluk Panchayats or TPs) and the
district (Zilla Panchayats or ZPs). The Act declared that women would receive an enhanced reservation of seats in the various tiers of the panchayats up to 33.3 per cent. Besides women, other weaker sections like the SCs, STs and OBCs also received similar reservation of seats in the PRIs.

The reservation facility given to women by the 73rd Amendment has been hailed as a remarkable achievement. Because, despite the provision of opportunities to all citizens to participate in development, it was the societal constraints, in the form of patriarchy, gender based inequality, rural-urban differences, etc., continued to discourage participation of women in the public sphere.

As Mahbub ul Haq (1996) has stated, equity and empowerment are essential components of human resource development. It is true that, owing to socio-structural constraints, women, everywhere, and particularly in a caste-ridden society like India, were underrepresented in public positions including political institutions where they should have exercised authority and participated in community decision-making. Women however, have otherwise, played many important roles in the social, economic and reproductive systems of both in the household as well as the community. Patriarchy has conditioned women's participation in public institutions while it has also laid many conditions through the traditional order against their participation in a number of public roles.

Several studies have shown that women can represent gender concerns far more effectively because of their experiences and interests. Despite being women, they have the potential to become better leaders, inequalities and inequities that marginalise them notwithstanding.
One has to note here that women’s political participation is expected to play a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. Affirmative action led to their political participation, which would not have been possible without it in a traditional society like ours. Examining gender relations in local government is considered as having widespread implications for the effectiveness of both local government reform as well as outcome of social and economic programmes. However, having been elected to positions of power, women, particularly rural women, need to be able to participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect their constituency.

Reserving seats for women in the various tiers of Panchayat bodies has ensured the women of place in the decentralised system as leaders. It is, however a general measure in the long drawn agenda of gender justice. The recent elections to the grama panchayats have shown that women have far excelled the quota prescribed for them by getting represented with over 42 per cent of the seats, much more than the 33.3 per cent of quota against their gender.

One should also remember that numbers on their own will not bring about equal and quality-filled participation in fiscal, administrative, political and social decision-making in the panchayats. Women’s participation is expected to become effective only when they start to possess the requisite skills and knowledge in effectively fulfilling their roles as leaders.

It is in this context that ‘empowerment’ of women elected to positions of power, particularly to the GPs attains significance. Training and capacity building programmes have been involved in improving women’s participation in decentralised bodies (at both rural and urban areas)
since almost two decades. Thus, capacity building is important for women to work well as both present or future candidates. Training can help women to organise and mobilise themselves. It has the capacity to network among similar interest groups as well. Women can gain experience through participation in committees in their neighbourhood, or by organising themselves around income-generating activities.

NGOs working in the field of decentralised governance have been engaged in the task of educating the PRI functionaries and enhance their confidence. Their task is to understand the problems faced by women representatives at grassroots level and enable them to gain knowledge in deliberating on their roles in the Panchayats. They basically work to motivate women beginning with contesting for elections and later to enact their roles properly. In fact they have shifted their ideology from that of charity and service delivery in the early 1970s, to integrated development and empowerment. There has been an increasing number of NGOs in this sector in the last two decades due to a policy shift when the government itself started encouraging their participation.

Despite a wide range of activities by NGOs towards improving the status of women there has been very little academic studies on this theme. Whatever studies that exist confine only to evaluation and monitoring. Moreover, the studies on the interface between PRIs and NGOs, in the context of women's leadership, are few, and often they are the ones taken up by NGOs themselves.

This necessitated the present study to document, scientifically and objectively, the role of NGOs in this area, which are actually partners in development, along with the government, and are no longer competing with the government. The belief that prompted the study was also that
mere constitutional guarantees were not sufficient to strengthen and consolidate the outcome of the amendment and to bring about meaningful empowerment. This is especially so in a patriarchal structure, manifested in the household as well as outside it.

There is not much literature on the question of decentralisation and development, in the context of the role of civil society organisations in development. It has to focus specifically upon the role of women in the context of decentralisation as a means of political empowerment and access to leadership. The growing nexus between NGOs and the government, on the one hand, and the NGOs and the decentralised bodies, on the other, calls for a thorough analysis of the interface. There is also the need to study the emerging third type of alignment, viz., that between the government and the NGOs.

Thus, we find that most of the studies on poverty, empowerment of women and development have stressed considerably upon the constraints for NGOs in bringing about rural development with their pro-poor policies. But what is lacking in them is the concerted effort by the NGOs in achieving political empowerment of women. Secondly, the studies have only captured the impact of the interface between the two at the macro level. Problems faced by the elected members at micro situations have not been attended to by these studies. Constraints to participation have been given priority. Finally, most studies have accepted the NGOs' role, but the impact of such efforts like capacity building, in particular the results or impact of such training on the women leaders has not been duly considered by such studies as a priority issue. It is also not well established as to how far political empowerment of women has occurred, as per the need. Finally, the
socio-economic background of elected women has also not been explored in the light of training provided by the NGOs.

It was therefore, concluded that a comprehensive study should be undertaken to understand the impact of NGOs' involvement in training women leaders that too in the lowest tier, viz., GPs. It was felt necessary to understand also how decentralisation had led to higher stakes in participation, effective leadership, decision-making etc., all caused by the training offered by the NGOs. The study is a response to the felt need to test whether (by systematic and scientific research) the effective changes brought forth by reservation seats for women (and other such weaker sections in the panchayats) had resulted in effective leadership? It was also aimed to see how effectively these neo-leaders encountered and challenged or countered the hurdles in the path of their effective participation.

In other words, the present study has aimed to understand the nexus between decentralised governance, gender, leadership and NGO's role in Karnataka. It has also tried to locate women's political empowerment in the effective and good leadership that they were able to offer in their roles. It has tried also to look into the issues that enabled women to play the triple roles of productive, reproductive and community development along with their new role of being leaders as good and equal to the men.

**Conceptual Framework**

The study depended upon a conceptual framework to shed light upon the fact that decentralisation is the devolution of power to people through their participation in decision-making and leadership roles. It was presumed that developing leadership characteristics was an important step towards achieving political empowerment. Moreover, such
empowerment had to provide for opportunities to participate in and to take suitable decisions in a governing process. Thus, the whole chain of enabling processes has to lead to a situation where gender disparity was decreased and finally eliminated. It should result, in the final analysis, in the creation of equal opportunities for both men and women who experienced power and through it fulfil the desired, goals and plans of development.

**Objectives of the Study**

1. To study the Socio-economic background of women representatives in the panchayats of the study area.

2. To look into the Political processes which motivated them to contest elections and get elected.

3. To identify constraints for their effective Political participation

4. To understand the role of the NGO in empowering women representatives and

5. To critically reflect upon the interface of NGOs and decentralised governance in the context of sustainablility of women’s political empowerment.

**Design of the Study**

The study was aimed to be more qualitative in nature although quantitative information was elicited from primary sources by canvassing a couple of questionnaires. These were administered at the village, household and individual (women elected representatives) levels. For officials, representatives of NGOs and community leaders, there were other forms of questionnaires. Focused group discussions were also held
with women leaders and other stakeholders of the whole exercise like officials, members of local self help groups, etc. Selected cases were developed as case studies, and highlighted as having facilitated good leadership or resulted in failure.

**Sampling**

Respondents were identified based on a cross-section of factors or indices. These included their socio-economic status, and past and present membership in panchayat Raj Institutions, particularly in Gram panchayats.

Sample for the empirical study at village or gram panchayat level comprised of 200 households. From these households, 200 respondents were selected, representing 16 Gram panchayats. Random sampling technique was used to select the respondents of a certain number. 10-15 women elected representatives per one GP. Care was taken to see that the study covered women representatives from across different age groups, social categories, castes and from a varied economic background. In addition to the questionnaire method for collection of data from the respondents, quasi-participant observation method and informal discussions were also held to get qualitative data.

A number of important Voluntary Organisations/NGOs, are at work right from year 1985, struggling hard to fulfill their objectives of rural development. Some of them have been focusing on the political empowerment of GP members and among them, women representatives, at least since a decade or so.

For this study thirty two such GP officials were selected. From the NGO organisations we selected 18 such officials/resource persons or
representatives or officials, working both at the grassroots level and block and district levels.

In addition, ten households were selected on a purposive basis, from each of the gram panchayat, to study the role of women leaders in the task of community development. The hidden objective was to understand how such performance was enabled by the training imparted by the NGOs. Data were elicited regarding how they utilised the training skills in participation and decision-making.

**Universe of the Study**

The study was carried out in sixteen GPs in the four taluks or blocks of Haveri District in central Karnataka. Fieldwork was carried out in two stages, viz., pilot study and main study. The study district was selected based on development indicators as suggested in the D M Nanjundappa Committee report on Regional Imbalance in Karnataka.

**Presentation of Findings**

The findings of the study have been presented in seven chapters. In the first chapter, a detailed discussion on the need for the study is made along with details of the selection of the problem and its rationale, and the relevant works that are available have been reviewed. It also gives the research objectives and outline of the study.

The second chapter has attempted to trace the historical development of decentralised governance in India, in general, and in Karnataka, in particular. The growth and emergence of NGOs and their interface with local self-government in capacity building has also been highlighted in the same chapter.
The third chapter has provided a discussion of the methodology, sampling and the fourth chapter profile of the study area.

The fifth and sixth chapters have aimed at core research objectives of the study i.e. understanding the role of NGOs in promoting sustainable political empowerment. In the sixth chapter a comparative assessment of those members who have undergone training programme with that of those who have not undergone this training programme has been made to evaluate in the in community development. It also has assessed their access to leadership roles after getting trained and has looked into the involvement on non-trained members in community development. In the concluding chapter, a summary of the findings has been given along with policy perspectives to improve upon a woman representative role decentralisation and effectiveness and efficacy of training programmes developed by the NGOs.

**Major Findings of the Study**

**Socio-Economic Status of Members**
The study has shown that age is an important determinant of selection of candidates for contesting elections to the GP. A majority of our respondents had hailed from the age group of 46 to 55 years, i.e., from the adult age group. Especially younger women not participating actively because of the socio and rural factors, a hurdle for effective participation. Overall, we came across only 14 per cent of the women members who were from 26-35 age group.

Likewise, even the marital status of members was important in determining their candidature. Almost all members were married with the husbands living. There were few widows and one or two members
were unmarried/devadasi women. This shows that women's marital status was crucial for her public performance.

However, in their class status, not many members were from land-owing or rich classes. Most of our respondents belonged to the poor and landless or marginal landowning categories of households. Here, earlier situation where a majority of GP members used to hail from relatively better off background like upper class, or landlords, business class etc. but ethical, political and social values characterising political leadership and participation had influence them negatively. Hence, the families were not allowing their women members to such political leadership roles as before. Reservation of seats on the one hand for the SCs and STs and the fact that the rich had developed a hatred to the trends in politics from being bad to worse, have led to restrictions on women from better off communities/households from participating in leadership. On the contrary, for the middle and lower caste groups, there was encouragement to participate since such representation is a mark of social mobility for them. Therefore, whether male or female, the middle and lower castes had taken an interest in participating in the elections and got the satisfaction of becoming leaders over the upper classes.

Our study has shown that most of the (79.5 per cent) respondents were illiterate and only few members i.e., 6 per cent only had completed elementary education. And they were not in a position to put, their signatures but also depended on their family members for everything. Because of illiteracy and lack of communication skills, they were hesitant to go forward in GP functionaries or to fulfill their duties.
Professionalism among Elected Women Members in Gram Panchayats

Our study has shown that most of the women belonged to agricultural labour, vendor and housewife. These women members opined that they had socially changed, but not economically, socially.

Motivation to Contest Elections

Despite the fact that the constitutional amendment facilitated representation of women in PRIs, most of the women members in our study area felt that they had been sponsored by their husbands/fathers or village elders. Many were still unaware of the fact that their presence was their right and they had the right to contest and win elections to gain access to leadership.

Another finding was that women were not enthusiastic about contesting elections because there was too much of politics and lobbying work had to be done before even thinking of contesting i.e., to get a ticket to contest. It was as good as political party based elections to the Assembly and the Parliament. This had forced them to depend upon male members particularly their husbands.

The innumerable programmes and schemes that elected representatives had to design and implement had forced the women members to run around politicians. This was done to seek favors and support in elections despite these activities being looked down upon by people. The people would accept the leadership of a woman but not her running behind politicians and neglecting her domestic chores or becoming independent of her husband. Therefore, only married women were selected for the contest. Occasionally a widow was also chosen to contest, that too if she
was old enough to do so. It was her sons who managed the canvassing and even the work/role of a member after her victory and gaining access to leadership roles.

Another significant finding is that those women who hailed from households with prior political experience have tended to show better leadership traits. They were also actively involved in working for getting programmes sanctioned to their respective GP as well as in their implementation, other roles like attending meetings etc.

Another significant finding of the study was that instead of self motivation, many women members were influenced by the decision of their husbands or fathers or brothers (a male of the family) to contest elections as well as to withdraw whenever they were asked to do so.

Further, it was found that many GPs had unanimous choice of candidates based on a prior understanding of who should be contesting during that particular elections, from which household, caste or village in the GP's jurisdiction. Thus, questions like 'who motivated to contest?' were meaningless. Women were simply nodding their heads to whatever the traditional leaders or village elders were asking them to be.

Thus, the study has established that the women were not empowered in the true sense of the term. The male members were continuing to control them and use them to meet their own ends.

**Women GP Members' Opinion on Electoral Success**

The study has shown that only reservations provided opportunities to enter politics but not for securing equal opportunities in decentralisation. Most of the males had back their names in GP elections. This trend has been developed in the way of negative.
Constraints to Participation

As noted above, the socio-economic condition of the members and lack of motivation obstructed participation. Thus, there was no effective participation either in gram sabha meetings or in executive meetings of the GP. Women's ignorance was glaring here. Women were as they used to be earlier, and were not participating much in public activities.

Women who were assertive and dominant to a little extent at least, were teased and ridiculed by men and even women. Their behaviour was treated as something unbecoming of a woman. This was another factor in their low participation. Those women who dared to become members or head of GPs despite this traditional outlook, were criticised for being rough persons and those who did not care for men, who tended to mix freely with any strange man with no shame and so on.

The study successfully unearthed problems relating to continued constraints upon women's participation in public activities. Even today, women face restrictions placed on their behaviour, interaction with members of opposite sex. Thus, women were just proxy members in such participation. And male members accompanied women members and participated wherever it was possible.

Awareness about Meeting and Proceedings

Most of the women members confessed that they could not find time to attend meetings or take all decisions in the GP. Thus their husband, brother-in-law, father-in-law had to help them in delivering these functions.
Decision-Making in GP

While comparing trained and un-trained members, trained members, attitude regarding participating was slightly changing. Although some of the issues like participated election and it did not differ.

Reasons behind Contesting & Winning for the Second Time

Women, those who contested and won the election have stated that their second term of winning election was through family support and ability. Here we could find that without family support it was impossible to win. And if the woman deserved to contest she had to take permission from the family, without the permission she could not contest elections.

NGOs provide several advantages to a society and it is their work made them popular institutions and considered as replacement. Some of the empirical studies had shown that training and capacity-building had really worked effectively in participation, decision-making, women's empowerment (political). In the sector of political empowerment many NGOs were working. They are not themselves trained as leaders but only as trainers.

Outcome of Representation

Even when women were elected to power positions on a mandatory basis, their participation was invariably confined to their own community limits. For example, Lingayat women members catered to the needs of only Lingayats in the constituency, SC women members towards SCs and so on and so forth.

Critical Review of NGO's Role (Outcome of Capacity Building)

While training given by NGOs and the capacity imparted by them to women members were rated as being quite useful, the members had felt
that the duration of timing was not at all enough. There was not transparency in financial allocations in this matter. Quite a lot of dissatisfaction was expressed by members that what was told or taught in the training programme was nothing new but it was already known to them. The resource persons were none other than the officials who were feared by the members. They were afraid that any questions raised or comment made on the training input would lead to contempt as well as delay in the clearance of their financial bills or release of funds for implementing development works.

Further, the number of trainers or the staff of the NGO was perceived as being not at all sufficient to act as resource persons. In other words, the student teacher ratio was highly unequal. This curbed the transfer of knowledge in a fair and free atmosphere.

The respondents strongly felt that the NGOs, as trainers, were giving priority to social and economic empowerment than political empowerment. This was because the NGOs were basically afraid of officials and also the local leaders who came from dominant social and political background besides being rich landlords.

The content of training programme or schedule of lessons was not comprised of what was sought by women members as to fill the gap in their knowledge. The women members perceived that the training was not at all demand-driven, but that it was only supply-driven. Members did not know much of the jargon used in such training programmes. Thus, they either did not understand, nor had the courage to question the authority of the NGO. The audio-visual aids and accessories like plays, drama, music etc., were considered only for their face value, and not as a token of what needed to be imparted. Women members had
often considered this to be mere fun and play, and not anything beyond it.

Referring to the critical review of NGOs' role in this matter, the members had told us that poverty reduction, health; infrastructure development and so on was never covered appropriately by the trainers. In fact, these were the areas where they (trainers) evinced neither awareness nor interest. Their own knowledge was unfortunately tragically poor on these programmes. Their dependence on officials and NGOs was high. Thus, whenever a NGO gave training to them in the direction of implementing certain programmes, they simply did not know what to do. Neither the channel of implementation nor the need about it was not at all explained by the NGOs in these training programmes. They, on their part, only strove to keep both the politicians and the officials happy.

**Perception on the Training Programme**

Women members lacked practical approach, and lack of continuous training. In many cases the NGO failed in gender training and creating awareness among women members. Those who had undergone training their perception had not strengthened in participation. Some of them told that the training was not at all useful the reasons being firstly, women members who got elected for the first time were pushed into public life. Training that NGOs gave was new thing for them. Secondly, illiteracy was also a major hurdle for them. In the empirical study we came across inferiority complex and their hesitancy to talk about others, because of the fear, whether they were talking properly or not. This type of attitude was seen in most of the cases.
**Role of Political Rights and Awareness**

Most of the NGOs preferred giving training on rights and panchayat functions but some of them emphasised more on leadership, some of on community organisation.

**Leadership and Community Development**

The government introduced Community Development Programmes to change the socio-economic conditions of the people. However, development cannot progress when the community does not understand its own problems. Without community development, good governance will not be effective. As Harsh Mander, social activist, writer has stated to reduce vulnerability towards food security creating awareness about existing welfare schemes is the better method. In order to give the local government institutions the necessary status and dignity, certain basic and essential features have been enshrined in the constitution. However, our empirical study has the role of women GP members in alleviating poverty programmes like identification of BPL beneficiaries, food security programme are very poor when compared to trained and un-trained members. Although awareness in those aspects in case of trained members were much better.

Political decisions among trained and un-trained members we found that at least trained women could do it tactically (because of secret ballet) while voting and supporting an election candidate but we could not see this in un-trained women members. Either directly or indirectly, we could not see women working opposite their husbands' or other male members.

Some GP functionaries and other members like MLA and officials had been involved as per rules but sometimes they were not aware of the
ground realities which GP members especially woman can knew (distribution of water resource) but she failed to influence her decision-making. From these attitudes women members got slight negative opinion from the community. Not only community even from the NGOs and officials.

The above discussion shows that women’s role was still poor in the community development, many reasons being education, caste, family background, economic and social status effects for to hold a leadership as a GP representatives.

Policy Suggestions

1. Since a large number of studies on PRIs and women have considered education as a primary factor for empowerment, it may not be possible to fix a minimum educational level because of rural women illiteracy. So, attempts should be made to educate them through evening schools from government owned institutions or NGOs at least to know what is on the paper.

2. There is an established interface between government and the NGOs to design and implement development programmes in rural areas. But the study has shown that there was severe resource constraint to undertake such a joint or collaborative venture. So there should be proper identification of NGOs for training to GP women members.

3. There are certain findings relating to wrong practices during elections. These need to be set right through training programme or campaign about elections in the rural areas involving rural women’s since they are inhibiting free and fearless participation by them in both voting and in contesting.
4. Despite the fact that PRIs have to be managed without any political interference by MLAs or ministers and others, there is a need for effective participation training to women members.

5. Gram Sabha is the democratic body for collecting people's opinion on problems and to choose the right beneficiaries. In this regard, women members have to be given more training to take their own decisions in selecting beneficiaries with transparency. This forum should be developed.

6. Strict rules should be enforced in such situations when women presidents are forcibly pulled down from their seats.

7. The eligibility to contest for GP seats is that a contestant should have sanitation facility but a majority of the elected members did not have the facility.

8. Groupism was found among the GP members who belonged to different political parties, interest groups of dominant local leaders, elected representatives (MLA), apart from officials all this pressure was reflected in development works and in release of government grants.

9. NGOs should instill to the members make awareness on schemes, grants and programmes provided by the state and central and make them avoid overlapping or duplication of work in their constituencies.

10. The government has to ensure that the NGOs or other trainers have to be self-skilled, and understand the needs of the trainees better before imparting the training.
11. Retraining programmes may be useful to test the amount of knowledge the trainees have grasped and also to cover the gap between time periods.

12. The trainers have to use simple language, teaching material and other aids.

13. Place and timing of training should be gender-friendly. Since women are not permitted to go out of villages for long periods, close venue should be chosen for training.

14. Training material or kit should be appropriately prepared and given after a briefing.

It is concluded that, in a comparative analysis between trained and untrained members, role in participation, decision-making and community development through GPS, trained women are far better in their performance. Women from lower castes are also picking up active participation as compared to those from higher castes and classes. Despite much work by the NGOs, capacity building has not been fully accomplished.