

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

AND

FINDINGS

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The spirit of democratic decentralization as evolved over the years could be practiced only in a limited way. The 73rd Constitution Amendment was a logical step towards integration of the concept of people's participation and taking democracy closer to the people. Democratic decentralization was accepted as the key to the planning process in the country. Rural development programmes started in the Ninth plan have reckoned with this reality and made mandatory provisions that the rural, local and participatory bodies should play a key role in planning, implementation, and beneficiary selection. It may also be noted that the nineties witnessed a universal trend in favour of greater decentralization. The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1992 provided a constitutional status to the PRIs and ensured their durability and continuity. In consonance with the objective of realizing social justice, it has also provided reservations for women and weaker sections. The Act provided for a statutory GS. It is believed that such a measure will herald a new beginning in the history of decentralization in the country.

Decentralization is no doubt a multi-dimensional concept. For a developing country like India, the possibility of an alternative organizational structure which incorporates the peoples' sector into the existing mixed economic system needs to be explored. In this context, the people's self-governing institutions such as the Panchayat Raj System appear to be suitable. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution reflect this aspiration. In the recent experiments with institutional reforms in the PR, the relevance of democratic planning that may incorporate the participation of beneficiaries has been acknowledged. While

responsiveness and accountability are positive features of a decentralized system, participation is a pre-condition to the success of decentralized decision-making.

In fact, decentralization, which is often identified with ‘devolution’ and ‘deconcentration’ of power or administration is viewed as a precondition for democracy. Incidentally this argument came at a time when globalization was enveloping the world by way of capital. The course for decentralization came largely as a part of the prescription offered by international institutions to the problems afflicting the developing countries. However, contemporary debates on decentralization have revolved around three important issues: issues of historicity, issues of expanding democratic spaces, and finally inclusive growth as well as inclusive politics of social categories. One of the categories which is often neglected in the discourse of decentralization is the women’s category. It is largely seen as either an indifferent or apathetic category. The participation of women in politics is basically essential for four important reasons: one, it would empower women as a political category; two, it would lead to the creation of an egalitarian society; thirdly, it would help in gradual progress; and finally, it would enable the making of ‘autonomous women’, both in the social as well as political spheres. Meanwhile, there are apprehensions expressed that given the prevalence of gender bias, and also in the absence of property rights, women will continue to remain ‘non-political’ in nature and that they would not emerge as autonomous social identities in the overall politics.

Decentralization is a concomitant of democracy. The underlying idea behind democratic decentralization is to widen the area of democracy by granting both authority and autonomy to the people at the lower levels. Democratic decentralization is not merely devolution of

power. It must also comprise devolution of responsibility. There are two major responsibilities, which the institution of democracy must exercise. The first is financial discipline. The second major responsibility which devolves on PRIs is protecting and safeguarding the interests of the weaker sections of the society—the SCs and STs, the minorities, women, and other disadvantaged or potentially disadvantaged sections of society.

In Gandhi's view the village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any exterior relations. Gandhi's concept of democratic decentralization bears the stamp of his passionate belief in non-violence, truth, and human freedom. He calls it PR or Gram Swaraj. Gandhi made it very clear that concentration of either economic or political power would violate all the essential principles of participatory democracy. To check centralization, Gandhi suggested the institution of village republics both as institutions of parallel polities and as units of economic autonomy. A village is the lowest unit of a decentralized system. Politically, a village has to be small enough to permit everyone to participate directly in the decision-making process. It is the basic institution of participatory democracy. The technical skills of the villages will be fully developed; there will be no dearth of men with high degree of skills and artistic talent. There will be village poets, village artists, village architects, linguists, and research workers.

The need of decentralization is felt everywhere. However, the right kind of decentralization is becoming difficult for a variety of reasons, the most important being the unwillingness of the power elites to share their power with those from whom they derive it. Gandhian decentralization is a process of limiting the power of the state as well as the creation of people's institutions and processes. Gandhian concept of PR envisaged

the generation of power from below. However, PR as has been conceived and implemented in the country has made the local institution dependent on regional governments in numerous ways. Decentralization is seen as an initiative coming from above, as a generosity of the state government. Furthermore, Gandhian approach to decentralization implies the creation of Panchayats that can achieve self-sufficiency and self-reliance as a bulwark against exploitation. Gandhi has seen PR as not just a political arrangement but as a way of life, one in which the highest human qualities can be nurtured and attained.

Over the past several decades women's issues have become a part of global public agenda. While it is due to their ceaseless struggles that women have acquired visibility at the global level. Women's assertion assumes distinctive expression by operating on a specific terrain shaped by forces of a particular country. The scenario of the Women's Movement in India, particularly in context of the Beijing Conference (1995) is featured by a simultaneous mobilization of women by different autonomous feminist groups as well as by groups affiliated to formal political formations.

In India, dalits have the right to be seen as subjects rather than objects, who need to play an active role in an attempt to better their own lives. Thus far, dalit voices have been muted and their issues obscured. Their attempts to communicate, in their own language, using their own mediums have not been given the hearing and audience they deserve. For instance, their voices have to be heard not only at the decision-making levels in policies, programmes and funding for projects for economic or social development, but also in questions of identity formation, in the struggles for the entire gamut of civil, political, economic, and cultural rights and their fullest participation at all levels in the institutions of

society at large. Dalits have a greater right to be heard than the privileged ones – in fact, justice and equity make it imperative that their voices be heard and their articulations publicized.

The Constitution of India is based on principles of equality. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth. It envisages political equality for men and women for which no concrete step was taken by the Government before 1993. The Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974) observed, that the rights guaranteed by the Constitution have helped to build an illusion of equality and power which is frequently used as an argument to resist protective and accelerative measures to enable women to achieve their just and equal position in the society.

In general, participation at the local level can be viewed from two angles—quality and quantity. As far as the qualitative aspect is concerned, there are three levels of quality of participation: passive participation, active participation, and decision-making participation. Same logical explanations can also be applied in the case of dalit women candidates who participated as members in the GPs of Coastal Karnataka. A constitutional provision is only a theoretical step which should be practically followed by effective measures for women's upliftment in rural areas. To make 'Women's Empowerment' in society and politics a reality, a lot of work remains to be done, given their present socio-economic conditions.

Given this context, 'Empowerment of Dalit Women' is essentially the process of upliftment of the economic, social and political status of dalit women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It involves the building up of a society wherein dalit women can breathe

without fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination, and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. One major therapy prescribed by dalit women empowerment advocates is empowering dalit women through legislation for ensuring their participation in the political decision-making. Such an approach provides the dalit women with a constitutional platform to stand up to men, to raise their voices on issues concerning women oppression, subjugation and related issues, and thus in effect, providing them with an identity in an orthodox – male – dominated – socio - political set up, in addition to providing a much needed forum to seek redressal of the problems directly affecting them: the true essence of empowerment. In a decentralized federal structure, with growing emphasis on the implementation of various employment and income generating schemes, participation of women in the decision - making process at the PRI level becomes imperative, if they are to seek any significant gains for themselves. The adoption of a legislative approach to women empowerment through the reservation of seats in PRIs and that too at a time when the government has shown a keen commitment to implementing various employment and poverty eradication schemes at the very grassroot levels and increasing the role of local self- governments in the implementation of plans, is definitely a desirable and welcome move and should ideally prove to be effective.

GS was a model for democracy at the grassroots, based on direct participation by the people. Democracy has been defined as, “a government where everybody has a say”. A democratic administration by a Panchayat cannot be a good substitute for it. The extension of the process of democracy to the people in the real sense should mean that the Panchayat functions as the executive body to give concrete shape to the

wishes and aspirations of the village community as represented by the GS.

GS provides an institutional basis for popular participation. It provides a base for the three-tier structure of the PRIs. For Jayaprakash Narayan, an eminent Indian thinker, GS signified village democracy. To him, a representative Government from the village to Delhi was no good substitute for direct democracy. GS, being a primary body would be a face to face organ of direct democracy, not made up of representatives, but comprising of all adult residents. Similar bodies, which he called “communities of work”, should be founded in factories, offices, educational institutions, and other work places. The primary body of people's democracy has to be an active body, meeting regularly, discussing common problems, and evolving cooperative and collective forms of action to manage their affairs. Speed was the essence of the strategy and people's participation would be the index of its success. In a seminar in 1970, Jayaprakash Narayan suggested that societies for the defense of democracy should be set up in every city and voters' education societies be established throughout the country. In this context, GSs no doubt could be used as a centre for voter's education in people central politics.

In fact, women's participation in politics has given rise to different perspectives. The Incrementalist Perspective dominating the Indian political discourse believes that gender equality is possible, only in a phased manner. This particular discourse has been contested by a large number of women's movements on the ground that it might take hundreds of years to achieve gender equality in politics. Since gender bias still prevails in all societies, participation of women, particularly 'dalit women' in politics is abysmally low. Interestingly, women's participation

has a long history in India, dating back to the pre-colonial period. This is where one can demystify the stereotype: that decentralization is a gift of international institutions; that, women participation in politics is a recent trend. The 73rd Amendment itself is an offshoot of such a struggle.

Indeed, what changed the character of Indian politics is the introduction of the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1993. This Act is often hailed as a trendsetter, a paradigm shift, a revolution, etc. for the simple reason that it enabled thousands of women to participate in the grassroots politics. In many places, women representation went beyond the prescribed percentage. This does not mean that political empowerment of women through the Panchayat Raj Act has been complete. If the objective of local representative governments is to play a more effective role in the political process of a society, constant efforts will have to be made to strengthen dalit women leaders in the direction of decentralization of powers and functions. This will afford greater opportunities for people's involvement in the management of local affairs. PRIs should be viewed as training grounds for future statesmen and politicians as well as an arena of political education of citizens, in general.

PRIs are the most important channels for popular participation in the development process. As they deal with the day-to-day affairs of the rural masses, they should have close links with the people and continue to think of new ways and means to serve them. Decentralization and whole scale people's participation for which these institutions have already laid the foundation will go a long way in bridging the existing class, caste, and gender disparities. This is a promising start for a just and egalitarian society.

There is no other socio-political programme launched by the government in independent India which has generated as much

enthusiasm and participation of the people as the PRIs. The experiment of grassroots politics and governance through PRIs after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment received new impetus with emphasis on regular elections, financial resource generation, three-tier PRIs, more effective GSs, reservation to women at all the three levels, and increased participation of dalits and other marginalized sections of society. This break in the social and political structures was primarily meant to enhance the participation and recognition of new social formations that have taken place after independence, more particularly in the rural society.

Towards this end, we tried to understand the possibilities of the empowerment process of dalit women in Coastal Karnataka. The present study is carried out in the Coastal districts of Karnataka. Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts are hailed as progressive districts of the state. And Uttara Kannada district not so. These districts have got a high literacy percentage amongst women, including the rural women as compared to other districts of the state. The sex ratio is positive and the number of females is more than males. These districts are known for their matrilineal pattern of family system. The awareness level of women is high and the position of dalit women is comparatively better. A large number of women are employed in jobs and self-employment ventures, including dalits. There is a remarkable difference in the discrimination of a girl child in these places as compared to other parts of Karnataka. The atrocities recorded against women are comparatively less in these districts.

The review of Coastal Karnataka GPs as they have evolved suggests that better institutional arrangements have been created, yet they need more effective co-ordination at the grassroot level. The relationship between political leadership at the state and national levels has to be

developed in a more positive way where a sense of more viable PRIs has to evolve with a view that this process in turn will strengthen the democratic working and institutions at the grassroot level. The social implications of the new grassroots movement are showing some signs towards socio-economic change and the assertive women groups in post-reservation situations have altered the political and social environment which may have some impact on the overall status of the women in society. The emergence of dalit women, in spite of her weak social and economic position, proved that political positioning of this group will slowly change their social status, which in an unequal society means that new social equations will ultimately emerge.

The Coastal districts are hailed as one of the most progressive districts in the state with regard to women and their empowerment. The matriarchal family system which is in vogue in the coastal areas has given lot of importance for women in the family and property rights. Whatever may be the historical background, as compared to other districts in the state, women in coastal districts are in a better position with regard to property rights and their participation in the social and economic processes. The revolution which took place in the field of education also benefited the women in the districts immensely. This is reflected in the high sex ratio and more number of women in both self and wage employment, more of women entrepreneurs, number of organizations run by women, etc.

Owing to the influence of education, improved infrastructural facilities, and the emergence of labour intensive and gender sensitive industries and service sector in the coast, the women from weaker sections are found to be better placed compared to other districts in the state. The coast has the lowest SC and ST population in the state. Through various

occupations, these women have improved their standard of living. The facilities that are available in the districts have enabled them to rise from the age old traditional status and better their conditions. Various initiatives by the government have also enabled them to improve their socio-economic conditions. The majority of these women have entered the main stream of living.

In a democratic set up, political space belongs to all citizens. The equity in the political process and decision-making is very important. From the field data, it is evident that a sufficient percentage of elected representatives have participated in the decision making process at the level of GPs in the coastal areas. This indicates ‘empowerment’ of people’s representatives. Political participation of women in the coastal areas is relatively impressive. Various enabling factors such as the matriarchal system, higher literacy amongst men and women, awareness level, scope for entrepreneurial drives, political and social set up, apart from historical background, have contributed to the overall empowerment of women in the coastal areas, thus making it one of the leading districts in the state with regard to the ‘empowerment of women’.

It is also observed that the economic condition of women in these districts is relatively better. This is because women are getting gender-specific job opportunities in various industries such as beedi rolling, cashew processing, readymade garments, fish processing, dairying, jasmine cultivation, etc. Restrictions on mobility and social participation of women are relatively less in these districts, hence, better prospects of their emancipation. The NGOs also have contributed to the progress of women. The wage differential between men and women is relatively less in the coastal areas compared to other districts.

The empowerment factors of the coast do not represent the empowerment of women of the whole state. The districts of the coastal areas are very close to the state of Kerala and its culture and living traditions. No doubt the process of decentralization has the potential to empower the excluded communities, including dalit women and men. However, by the experience documented in the present study, it can be observed that decentralization is not a universal remedy and does not automatically benefit women and men equally unless specific measures are introduced by the state to address the women's unequal position and power imbalances in the society, including those of caste hierarchies.

It is important to recognize that decentralization in India through PRIs came into force in 1993. This coincided with the global trend for decentralization. In other words, decentralization is also a product of globalization just like similar trends as good governance, civil society, decentralized governance, etc. Therefore, the historical evolution of the philosophy of PR in India appears only as an adjunct to the post 1993 resurgence of PRIs and democratic decentralization.

INFERENCES

The field study conducted in Coastal Karnataka with reference to 'Empowerment of Dalit Women' in GPs lead to the following inferences:

- ❖ SC women representatives were slightly more in number compared to STs.
- ❖ Majority of the dalit women representatives were in the age group 36-59, where their contribution to GPs and their individual self could be more.

- ❖ A majority of the respondents were from nuclear families, and maximum numbers of respondents were married with family responsibilities.
- ❖ The level of literacy of dalit women representatives was relatively better in the coastal districts compared with other districts of the state, which gives greater scope for dalit women to get politically empowered.
- ❖ Economically, most respondents came from a poor background; many were agricultural wage earners.
- ❖ The respondents had good conditioned dwelling houses with power and sanitation facilities.
- ❖ It was observed from the field survey that in majority of the households belonging to dalits, decisions were being taken jointly after consultations with the womenfolk, similar with management of funds.
- ❖ Majority of the respondents, though poor, did not migrate to other villages or places.
- ❖ It was clear from the study that though the dalits in the coastal districts are relatively better in literacy level compared to other districts, their awareness level about the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act was low, despite their training in all these issues. However, a substantial percentage of the respondents knew about the reservation provided for SCs and STs.

- ❖ Majority of the SC women and less of the STs knew about the ‘no confidence motion’.
- ❖ It was observed from the study that quite a substantial number of respondents knew about ‘type of meetings’, standing committees, etc. However, issues pertaining to dalits discussed during the presidentship of dalit women were less.
- ❖ Majority of the respondents had a minimum understanding about the government schemes.
- ❖ A small percentage of the respondents were observed to be serving GPs for the second term; remaining were first timers.
- ❖ It can be concluded that given the socio-economic background, age, literacy level, etc. these dalit representatives knew the issues which were required for the day to day functioning of the GPs, though not more.
- ❖ It was learnt from the study that a very small percentage of respondents had held the office of the President.
- ❖ Majority of the respondents had attended training programmes; mainly those conducted by the ANSSIRD-Mysore.
- ❖ Decision making or participating in the process of decision making is one of the measures of empowerment. It was recorded from the field study that a majority of the respondents could take part in the process of decision making, though, not independently.
- ❖ Given their historical and socio-economic background, it is very satisfying to note that the dalit women have started participating in GP discussions, just after two decades of their entry into politics.

- ❖ The study also threw light on the other parameters of empowerment such as speaking at the GP meeting, getting problems solved, availing assistance from others, etc.
- ❖ However, they are yet to raise their voices against certain oppressions.
- ❖ It was also clear from the study that the ‘confidence level’ of dalit women representatives has raised substantially. They could talk to officials, move around, and discuss issues with males with a very positive outlook.
- ❖ It was observed that the identity of these women in the society was visible. They were aware of the various issues connected with women such as gender equity, and programmes run by the Department of Women and Child Development. They were aware of the organizations, which are fighting for the cause of dalits.

All the above listed issues very clearly denote the positive change occurring amongst dalit women representatives of GPs of Coastal Karnataka. The positioning of the dalit women in Coastal districts of the State, from the point of view of their literacy level, level of awareness, better execution of government programmes meant for dalits, etc. may have added to the present level of ‘Dalit Women’s Empowerment’. However, reversing or trying to reverse the centuries old situation of dalits, especially dalit women is no mean achievement. The fruits of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment have started trickling down. In the coming years, the process of ‘Political Empowerment of Dalit Women’ will pick up its pace and substantial changes in the socio-economic and political horizons of the dalit population would be visible.

SUGGESTIONS

To improve the pace of process of the dalit women representatives' political empowerment, the following suggestions may be useful:

- Special training and awareness programmes for dalit women representatives may be organized in various areas and required inputs be given.
- NGOs involved in the sector may be given more responsibilities to groom dalit women politicians.
- A team of young women belonging to SC, ST category may be carefully groomed to enter the GPs. NGOs can take up this work with the assistance of the SC, ST Corporation or Cell.
- Special awards or incentives must be given to successful dalit representatives.
- Organisations fighting for the cause of dalits must take special interest in the 'Political Empowerment of Dalit Women' representatives.
- During training programmes, dalit women representatives should be trained alongside other community members.