

# Empowering Women in *Panchayati Raj* Institutions: Role of Media

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**Abstract** *The state of Karnataka has been a pioneer in engendering local governance. As early as in 1987, Karnataka was the first state in the country to implement the Panchayat Raj Act, which set apart 25 percent reservation for women. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments set the stage for large scale entry of women into both rural and urban local bodies. In the very first round of elections held in 1993-94 nearly 80,000 women entered India's grassroots political decision making process. With effect from August 27, 2009 the representation for women in PRIs has been raised to 50 %, thus giving credence to the view that women must get their due share in politics. Giving representation is tangential. That means, mere increase in numbers per se does not empower either elected women representatives or influence their style of functioning. Support structures that constantly inform, sensitize and train them must be in place for ensuring an effective delivery mechanism. It is here that the role of media emerges as a critical input. This paper makes an attempt to review the role of print and electronic media in empowering elected women representatives in PRIs, with a special focus on Taluk Panchayat members in Bellary district of Karnataka.*

**Key Words:** *Empowerment, Women, Panchayat Raj, Media*

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## INTRODUCTION

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments set the stage for large scale entry of women into both rural and urban local bodies. The provision of 33 % reservation of seats was the first major step at engendering at least grassroots level institutions of governance. In the very first round of elections held in 1993-94 nearly 80,000 women entered India's political decision making process. The rise of Indian women as *Panchayat* leaders is a spectacular achievement given that India has one of the worst records with respect to the way it treats the female sex.

Malnourished, suppressed, uneducated, violated and discriminated against, Indian women have the odds stacked against them. Even birth is a hurdle, thanks to widespread female infanticide in rural areas. But for every *Saroja* who will be married at 13 because her mother, a *Devadasi* (an orthodox social practice of converting women into prostitutes all in the name of God and is banned

under the Law) in Chikanahalli Village, Karnataka, cannot afford to pay a dowry, there is a *Lakshmi*, who is serving her second term as the *Panchayat* leader of Kadinamala village in Kotagiri district. There is a *Kenchamma* of Nereleke *Gram Panchayat* in rural Karnataka, who survived life threats during her two terms as council leader. An illiterate *Dalit* (formerly called traditional low caste people. Now the law treats all citizens equal and are given fundamental rights with no low or upper caste categorization under law), *Kenchamma* could not read or write. Perhaps as a result of her personal travails, she made sure that she brought education to all the children in her village, including a disabled child, says researcher Shoba Narayan.

Since then there has been a steady increase in the number of women entering power politics, especially in *Panchayati Raj*

Institutions (PRIs). In fact in many states the number of elected women representatives has crossed 33%. Talking to these women is a lesson in humility. Instead of the outrage and anger that urban feminists project, these women *panchayat* leaders speak with clear-minded realism about opportunities and costs. For many women, attending a *panchayat* meeting means sacrificing a day's wage. It means assuming leadership for the first time in their lives and then subsuming it at home to serve in-laws and husband. For *Kenchamma*, it meant leaving her one-year-old son to other caregivers while she learned the ropes of politics, says Narayan. With effect from August 27, 2009 the representation for women in PRIs has been raised to 50 %, thus giving credence to the view that women must get their due share in power politics. But we have to quickly admit that increase in numbers per se does not empower either elected women representatives or influence their style of functioning. Support structures that constantly inform, sensitize and train them must be in place for ensuring an effective delivery mechanism. It is here that the role of media emerges as a critical input. This paper makes an attempt to review the role of print and electronic media in empowering elected women representatives in PRIs, with a special focus on *Taluk Panchayat* members in Bellary district of Karnataka.

### **Engendering *Panchayati Raj* Institutions: Karnataka as a Pioneer**

The state of Karnataka has been a pioneer in engendering local governance. As early as in 1987, much before the 73rd Constitutional amendment Karnataka was the first state in the country to implement the *Panchayat Raj* Act, which set apart 25 percent reservation for women. Today the state has emerged as a leader in its efforts at bringing women into mainstream governance, at least at the village level and the study of how this initiative has translated into action assumes importance.

In Karnataka, the location for the present study, the *Panchayati Raj* functions as a three tier structure and have three components. The *Gram Panchayat* or *Village Panchayat* is the lowest unit, followed by *Taluk Panchayats* (also known as *Block Panchayat* in some regions) and the *Zilla Panchayat* or the *District Panchayat*. The *Gram Panchayat* covers a village or group of villages, the *Taluk Panchayat* an entire taluk and the *Zilla Panchayat* an entire district. The state has 5,628 *Village Panchayats*, 175 *taluk Panchayats* and 30 *Zilla Panchayats*.

### **Media as a Key Input for Ensuring Effective Participation of Women in Governance**

The way the media portray women and addresses issues of special concern to women has a major impact on women's participation in politics. "Even more important than the amount of media coverage devoted to women is the quality of such coverage. The media often perpetuates stereotypes of women in their traditional roles rather than conveying a positive image of women as political leaders. The quality of media coverage can have a major impact on the advancement of women as candidates and as voters" (see Ukrainian Women's Fund, 2011, pp.17-18).

Given the fact that most women who enter PRIs are first time entrants into the field of power politics and have virtually little or no exposure to the functioning of the political system, the media have a very crucial role to play in not only keeping them 'informed', but also training them to live up to the expectations of their positions. Since quotas for women in politics is not one of numbers only, they are expected to empower themselves besides enhancing the quality of their lives, and those of their communities. However, such a goal can be addressed only if they are given an opportunity to understand the complexities that are part of both political and social life. It is in the process of building this understanding that media can play a decisive role.

Hitherto mainstream media have by and large not really addressed the issue of empowering elected women or their voters to handle their political responsibilities effectively. What is missing is a concerted effort to involve local communities in active governance. It is not that such efforts have not been made in this direction. Even as way back in 1991, attempts were made in Philippines to raise awareness, through media networking within local communities about their right to participate in local governance and also empower people to demand good governance. Advocacy networks were built through media intervention among local communities and their representatives to address issues that were of relevance to them. What was of importance was the realization that media are not simply

communicators of facts, but they can influence public policy and also ensure effective governance (see United Nations, 2007: p 15).

The underrepresentation of women in governance institutions by the media is a stumbling block for their gaining visibility in the public space. Negative portrayals of women that highlight gender stereotypes often characterize media coverage of women in politics or with political aspirations. One of the key issues which influence women's decision to enter politics is the relative lack of role models, not just viewed in terms of women's physical presence but also in terms of their public presence in media discourses. Barring a few exceptions, women's entry into politics is often determined by circumstances beyond their control and one can see that their political fortunes are controlled by either parties or those already in power. In such a set up, women need strong motivation to gear themselves up to break patriarchal as well as other barriers. It is thus very important to take a critical view of the role that media can play in strengthening women's political capacities. The present paper is placed in this framework.

### **Field Realities**

The data presented in this paper are based on field work carried out among elected women representatives of 7 *Taluk Panchayats* in Bellary district, one of the regions selected for my doctoral research entitled "Engendering Governance at the Grassroots: An Analytical Study of the Role of media in Empowering Women in *Gram Panchayats* in Karnataka". Though women in *Gram Panchayats* form the core group in the study, their counterparts in *Taluk* and *Zilla panchayats* have been chosen as an experimental group to facilitate a comparative analysis.

### **OBJECTIVES**

This paper addresses the following two primary objectives:

- Study the media habits of women members of *Taluk Panchayats* in Bellary district and their impact.
- Analyse the constraints in full scale political participation of women, and the ways by which media can help them overcome these constraints.

## METHODOLOGY

FGD- Focused Group Discussion method was found appropriate for this study. Survey method was also adopted to collect data from the respondents. Instead of a questionnaire, the researcher used interview schedule as a tool of data collection.

### Sample

Bellary is one of the districts in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region, which has recently been conferred with a special status under the provisions of article 371(1) of the Constitution because it is a region severely affected by regional imbalances. It has 7 *Taluk Panchayats* (Bellary, Hagari Bommaanahalli, Huvina Hadagali, Siraguppa, Sandur and Hospet) and the total number of elected women members from the seven *taluk panchayats* is 76. For the purpose of eliciting empirical data for this paper, a purposive sample of a little more than 55 % of the members (42/76) have been chosen. Data for the study were elicited through personal interviews and focused group discussions.

## ANALYSIS

### Socio-Economic Profile

Since the socio-economic background (SEB) of women in politics has a close influence on their media usage pattern, we first took up a study of some of the key indicators of their SEB, which is briefly presented in this section. Compared to women members of *Gram Panchayats*, their counterparts in *Taluk* and *Zilla Panchayats* generally are drawn from a relatively higher socio-economic background. This is noticeable even in our sample of *Taluk Panchayat* members. From among these, only 7% are illiterate, and the majority (57%) has at least completed their high school education. Of these nearly one-fourth has obtained an undergraduate degree.

An age wise classification of members showed that nearly 70 % are in the age group 30-40 years. The remaining 30 % are between 40 and 60 years. As far as the caste composition of this sample, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes constitute 45 %, Other Backward Classes 50 % and the remaining 5 % belong to other castes

An examination of the marital status showed that 88 % are married and living with spouse. While about 5% are *Devadasi* women, 7% are widowed. When we collected data on the occupational background of women in the sample, it could be seen that 36% and 21%, respectively were involved in farming and petty trade, and the remaining 43% declared themselves as home makers. After

presenting a brief profile of the SES background of our sample members, we first take up their media habits.

### **Media Exposure and Media Consumption**

From among the 42 *Taluk Panchayat* members nearly 71 % read Kannada newspapers. The remaining 29 % have said that they do not read newspapers. Given the fact that electronic media have now captured the imagination of audiences, and have thrown a serious challenge to print media, it is worth noting that the majority of women in our study sample at least read newspapers.

As compared to those who read newspapers, all the *Taluk Panchayat* members own colour TV sets in their homes and hence watch a wide range of TV programmes, telecast in Kannada channels. When we asked them about the type of programmes that they watch, majority (40 %) said that they watch news programmes and old movies. Only 3 % watch programmes with a special thrust on politics. The remaining members (57%) mostly watch programmes such as serials, family oriented discussions, crime stories or sports based programmes.

The fact that majority of elected women representatives read newspapers is to be seen as a positive factor. These women said that they had realized the need to keep themselves informed of what was going on around them if they had to understand their roles and responsibilities. As for TV programmes, except the news items that cover political events, most of the programmes are entertainment centric and one has to admit that even if PRI members wish to strengthen their political orientation, they do not have much of a choice.

### **Coverage of Issues of Importance to Elected Women Representatives in Media**

While commenting on the media habits of women representatives, it becomes important to discuss the coverage of political affairs or efforts made at training or orienting women members by mainstream media. In our interactions with them, it became evident that those of our elected women representatives with a better educational level had taken to reading newspapers seriously because they had realized the need to stay 'informed' about day-to-day events. The others (except the illiterate members) browsed through newspapers but it could not be considered serious reading. As for TV programmes, with multi-channel television constantly beaming serials, and a virtual sense of

addiction that has developed for these serials that are mostly family oriented, political aspirants or novices hardly get an opportunity for political socialization.

Women members interviewed for our study said that during election time, both print and electronic media gave some coverage to contestant profiles, their strengths or limitations, but once the voting was over, and the results declared, their performance or problems did not receive much attention. It was only when a certain issue in a given constituency attracted public gaze or created a controversy that media seemed to pay attention.

About 54 % of the members, however noted that media often covers development activities that are initiated by them, in their constituencies such as road works, drainage, building repairs or other government schemes. But this coverage is limited to local newspapers or local stations of TV channels, if any. Also, media attention is bestowed when there are local members of State Legislative bodies or Parliament, and PRI members are generally sidelined. A regular coverage of activities of PRIs in national dailies or national TV networks is limited.

### **How can Media be Responsive to the Needs and Problems of Elected Women Representatives?**

During the course of interviews and focused group discussions, *Taluk Panchayat* members shared their concerns with us and also gave us their views on their expectations from the media. In a socio-political system dominated by patriarchal values and practices, setting apart quotas for women has not removed the constraints they face in using opportunities for their development. The most pronounced among these is lack of access to information about not only the world-at-large, but also about the rights and responsibilities associated with their roles. It is in such a situation that the media emerges as a crucial information source to women, especially in grass root level governance.

During the course of our group discussions it emerged that many elected women representatives expected the media to give a regular coverage to the developmental works they undertook in their respective constituencies, besides giving peoples' perceptions on the impact of these initiatives. From local to national level governance performance review of political parties is hardly done, and voters' responsibilities seem to end after elections. Given the enormous growth that has taken place in the field of the media in all languages, it becomes very important for both electronic and print media to constantly monitor performance of politicians.

It is not out of place to mention here that many women PRI members in different parts of the state are not even aware of all the schemes and programmes that are entitled to implement through their *Panchayats*. Unless they are given a pre-orientation programme which gives them knowledge about their entitlements and expectations, their performance is severely hampered. It is true that both state and civil society groups are organizing training programs for PRI members, but not all of them get this exposure. In view of the above, it is very important for the media to constantly give updates about not only the goals of PRIs, but also critically review their functioning and its impact on development.

Besides desiring that media convey peoples' perceptions about their work, the *Taluk Panchayat* members whom we met also said that media programmes / writings must concentrate more on educational programs with a thrust on politics and health. Legal literacy was another input that they wanted from the media. A very important point that they brought forth was the need to not only educate PRI members about their responsibilities, but also let citizens know the obligations of *Panchayat* members towards them. This creates an interactive system of public governance.

Our study group also felt that commercials have started dominating the media, especially TV channels in the recent past. They felt that many of these had a negative impact on society, especially those that portrayed women as sex objects. Such programmes, according to them must be scrapped. By showing positive role models of women, our members felt that the media would not only help them to derive personal inspiration, but also convey to society-at-large the message that women are capable of performing the tasks assigned to them effectively.

### **Media- Governance Interface-Few Experiences**

The provision of quotas has no doubt brought more than a million women into institutions of local self-government in India, but the path for entering these institutions is beset with hurdles for most women. Being politically inexperienced they require constant exposure to the ever growing demands of a world that is caught in the surge of an 'information revolution'. In fact there have been a number of experiments carried out in different parts of the world in using media for empowering women in governance and local communities to ensure that their representatives function effectively.

The efforts at creating a gender sensitive media dates back to the Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing held in September 1995. The participants decided on creating a



HYPERLINK “<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/Planactn.htm>” Plan of Action, in which they included several resolutions that urged the media not to indulge in stereotyped representations of women, but also take concrete steps to instill among the public the idea that women’s participation in politics actually strengthens the development process. The plan actually stated that any stereotyped presentation of the image of women by any media should actually be prohibited by law.

Following the Conference women in the Inter Parliamentary Union organized Round tables on Image of Women in Politicians in the Media and followed it up with a conference “Towards Partnership between Men and Women in Politics”, in which both media representatives and politicians took part to discuss how mainstream

Role of New Media for Increased Political Participation” (European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, 2013) the possible ways by which new media can empower women in governance were discussed. Based on an inter-country study this research came out with the following recommendations (p108):

- Individual Members of European Parliament and others involved with supporting women in politics may learn from the good practice points of the case studies, including tips on design and usability but also engagement on Twitter and Face book.
- Individual MEPs and others involved with supporting women in politics should consider gaining professional advice from social media marketing agencies on how to build and engage networks of supporters.
- Political parties should actively search for women who may be interested in running for selection through social media networks.
- All new media projects including large institutional projects should avoid duplicating existing platforms and instead develop strategies for making the best use of existing ones such as twitter and face book.
- Direct projects with lean business models which support political activities in the field of women’s rights and issues may be encouraged and supported through seed funding but should not be over-managed. Projects that address cultural and social barriers to women’s involvement in politics would be suitable for initial funding.

- New media projects should be developed using a gender mainstreaming approach but this should avoid marginalizing women's online communication.

The studies cited here are only a few and give some leads as to how different forms of media could be used for both enhancing women's political participation and also empowering them to function effectively as peoples' representatives. What is actually required is a concerted action between the media agencies, state, civil society and the political machinery for putting a system in place for different forms of media to emerge as support systems for women in PRI institutions to discharge their new found 'power' and 'responsibilities' in true standards of democratic governance.

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