



DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: A STUDY BASED ON CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Decentralized governance means the transfer of power from central government or state government to the local government or local autonomous authorities. Decentralized governance has been increasingly seen as an instrument to develop democratic participation and get better the service delivery of the system of governance. In India, decentralized governance has been familiar with the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment act 1992. The 73rd constitutional amendment act 1992 deal with rural decentralized governance which is popularly known as Panchayati raj institutions and 74th constitutional amendment act 1992 is also known Municipalities or urban decentralized governance. Throughout the process of decentralized governance in India, the grassroots level people has got opportunity to involved in decision making process and raise their issues and demand to the grassroots level authorities. Majority of the people living in rural areas of India and the women are also victim of carelessness mostly in rural areas. Decentralized governance gives women an opportunity to involve in politics, participate in the decision making process, present their views to the society, enhanced their socio-economic and political status. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment act 1992 has mandate 33 percent seats reservation for women in India, which is marked a new chapter in the conception of women empowerment in India. Therefore decentralized governance has playing a key role to making women empowerment in India. However, the main objectives of this paper are to study about the decentralized governance and women empowerment through the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment act 1992 in contemporary India.

Keywords: Decentralization, Governance, Rural Governance, Urban Governance, Women Empowerment, 73rd Amendment Act and 74th Amendment Act

Introduction

Decentralized governance in India refers to the distribution of authority and responsibility from central and state governments to local levels authority, particularly to Panchayati raj system in rural area and municipalities for urban areas. In India, decentralized governance was formally established through the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments Act 1992, which aimed to strengthen grassroots democracy and ensure that the voices of the grassroots people, particularly marginalized sections are heard in the decision-making process. These amendments empowered decentralized governing bodies by granting them the authority to plan, implement, and monitor government's developmental schemes, projects. Decentralized governance is working as a bridge between the central government to the grassroots level people. The interconnectedness of decentralized governance and women's empowerment is crucial, as decentralized governance structures are often the closest to women in rural and urban areas. Decentralized governance by promoting grassroots people participation, especially marginalized sections, and it is also ensures the woman issues; including healthcare, education, safety, and economic opportunities, receive more attention and resources. The inclusion of women in decision-making processes at the grassroots level has resulted in tangible improvements in their social and economic status. When we are thinking about the women empowerment in India then question come to our mind that 'Is women are empowered?' Answer is yes women's are empowered but not as per expectation. If we compare between the women of urban and rural women empowerment then rural women are not empowered as per the governments' expectation. Majority percentages of women are empowered basically from urban areas and women from village areas are still fighting with their backwardness. Decentralized governance has been helping both of the urban and rural women's to become empowerment but in contemporary India rural women are still need more helps to become empowerment compare to urban woman and decentralized governance has playing a crucial role on it.

Meaning of Decentralized Governance

The Concept of decentralized governance is consist two words such as decentralization and governance. The term decentralization means the opposite of the concept of centralization and governance means the process as well as the result of making authoritative decisions for the benefits of the society. The World Bank was defined governance as “the exercise of political authorities, and the use of institutional resources to manage the society’s problems and affairs.” Decentralization is the process by which an institution’s activities, particularly those connected with planning and decision-making, are dispersed or delegated to smaller groups within the institution rather than to a central, authoritative location. Decentralization concepts have been used in political science, technology, economics, law, and public administration, social interactions as well as management science in private companies and organizations. Decentralizing governance is the process of rearranging power in a way that establishes a system of shared accountability among central, regional, and local government institutions in accordance with the subsidiary principle. This enhances the overall efficacy and quality of the system of governance while increasing the power and capabilities of sub-national levels.

Meaning of Rural and Urban Governance

Decentralized governance are two types including rural decentralized governance and urban decentralized. Rural decentralized governance is the process by which grassroots people or rural communities get decision-making authority, resources, and responsibilities from the central or state government. Empowering grassroots people, increasing their involvement in the developmental sectors and improving administration’s responsiveness to their unique needs and circumstances are the most important goals of this strategy. As part of this, decentralized local government bodies like panchayati raj institutions are given financial, political, and functional responsibility and community participation in development projects is encouraged. On the other hand, Urban decentralized governance also refers to the transfer of decision-making authority and resources from a central authority to local level administrations. This strategy seeks to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery, increase people’s participation and bring governance closer to the people.

Meaning of Women Empowerment

The meaning of Women’s empowerment cannot be explained in single sentence. It can be describe in multiple ways, such as accepting women’s perspectives, actively seeking them out, and improving women’s status by education, awareness, literacy, social equality, improved livelihood, and training. We may also define that “Women empowerment means liberation of women from the cruel grips of social, economical, political, caste and gender-based discrimination. In simple words, Women empowerment means granting women the autonomy to make life choices. However, Women empowerment is various types like political empowerment, social empowerment, and economic empowerment, and cultural and educational empowerment.

A. Political Empowerment: Women are politically empowered with the help of reservation of seats in decentralized governance institutions in India. The reservation of seats for women in rural decentralized governance has led to an increase in the number of women in decision-making process. Women Gram Panchayat Pradhan, Upa-Pradhan, and Panchayat members are now have a direct say in policy decisions that affect their communities. Political empowerment allows women to challenge traditional gender norms, assert their voices in public spaces, and influence decentralized governance policies.

B. Social Empowerment: Through the decentralized governance, women have gain visibility and social status in their communities. Participation in decentralized governance increases their social capital and self-esteem, which in turn influences their roles within the family and society. Women who hold leadership positions regularly become role models for Women itself as well as others and contribute to changing community attitudes toward gender roles.

C. Economic Empowerment: Decentralized governance has provides women with access to resources that were before inaccessible to them. The Women Gram Panchayat Pandhan in particular has the power to allocate funds for village development projects, which may incorporate schemes for women’s economic empowerment. This can include promoting self-help groups (SHGs), providing vocational training, and facilitating access to government schemes aimed at women’s financial strong.

D. Cultural and Educational Empowerment: Women’s participation in decentralized governance can also promote cultural and educational empowerment. Through participating in the decision making process of decentralized governance, women be able to ensure that education, particularly for girls, becomes a priority. Many women leaders have championed the cause of female education in rural areas and have been instrumental in building awareness about the importance of education and skill development for women and girls.

Decentralized Governance and Women Empowerment in India

Decentralized governance has plays a significant role in women’s empowerment in India by promoting greater participation, decision-making, and control at the grassroots level. However, we are going to details discussion about the role of decentralized governance for women empowerment in India;

1. Increased Political Representation: Decentralization governance has allows women to actively participate at grassroots level decision-making processes, specially through the rural decentralized government institutions like Gram

Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) mandated a certain percentage of seats (at least one-third generally and 50% in some states particularly) for women in decentralized government institutions, which has led to an able to be seen increase in female political representation in rural and urban decentralized local government bodies. This has helped women voice their concerns and become decision-makers at the grassroots level.

2. Access to Resources and Services: Decentralized governance empowers women by enabling them to directly engage with the allocation and distribution of resources, particularly in sectors such as education, health, and sanitation. Decentralized governance structures are more attuned to the specific needs of women and can cater to issues like maternal health, school enrollment for girls, or women-centric infrastructure, ensuring that they are not overlooked in policymaking.

3. Promotion of Gender-Responsive Policies: Through the process of decentralized governance at the grassroots level, elected women representatives can push for gender sensitive policies that reflect the requirements of women in the community. These can include schemes for economic empowerment, addressing violence against women, and improving access to public services. Decentralized governance structures can adapt policies based on the social, economic and cultural realities of women in different regions, making them more effective.

4. Social Mobilization and Community Awareness: Decentralized governance facilitates greater interaction with the community. Women leaders, often from the same community, can organize awareness programs about women's rights, health education, and legal literacy. This fosters an environment where women are better prepared to challenge patriarchal norms and claim their rights.

5. Leadership Development: Decentralized governance structures have provides opportunities for women to take on leadership roles, which they may not be able to access at higher levels of government. The experience gained through positions in Panchayats, Municipalities, or Village Committees helps build women's leadership skills and confidence, encouraging them to pursue leadership in other spheres, including politics, business, and civil society.

6. Empowerment through Economic Participation: Decentralization governance enables women to engage in grassroots level economic decision-making, including fund allocation for income generating programs, self-help groups, and micro-credit schemes. Through participation in such initiatives, women gain access to financial resources, training, and markets, thus enhancing their economic independence and social status.

7. Cultural Change and Breaking Stereotypes: Decentralized governance challenges the traditional gender roles by placing women in positions of authority. The active presence of women in decision-making bodies encourages the broader community to reconsider entrenched patriarchal norms and supports the idea that women are capable leaders. This shifts the cultural narrative, demonstrating that women can contribute effectively to governance and public service.

8. Conflict Resolution and Strengthened Social Fabric: Women leaders in decentralized governance often serve as key figures in conflict resolution, particularly in communities where women are directly affected by issues such as land rights, water disputes, and domestic violence. Women tend to bring a unique perspective to resolving conflicts that prioritize social harmony and family well-being, thereby creating a more cohesive society.

9. Empowerment of Marginalized Women: Decentralization governance has also provides a platform for women from marginalized communities such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes to participate in decision-making process of grassroots level authorities. This empowers them to raise issues particular to their communities such as caste based discrimination or tribal rights, and to demand policies that cater to their needs.

However, in this study now we have to focuses on various national and state level schemes for women which are implemented through the system of decentralized governance to benefit women directly in contemporary India. These are Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, One-Stop Centres (OSCs). Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) has aimed at providing LPG connections to women in rural households to reduce the health risks of using traditional cooking methods. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has provides wage employment to rural women, enhancing their economic independence and providing them hundred days working opportunities in infrastructure and environmental development. And Beti Bachao Beti Padhao is a nationwide program focusing on the protection and education of girls, which is frequently implemented with active participation from decentralized local government bodies. Lastly, One-Stop Centres (OSCs) is set up by the government to provide integrated services to women affected by violence, including medical care, legal aid, and counseling.

Challenges of Women at Decentralized Governance in India

Decentralized governance in contemporary India has playing very important role for grassroots level development, specially women empowerment but it is also not deniable that women has been faces several challenges at decentralized local government institutions. The challenges for women at decentralized governance are followings;

1. Patriarchal Resistance: The first challenges for women representatives are primarily seen in some rural areas, where women face resistance from male counterparts, either from family members or from the community leaders, which limits their ability to act and work freely within decentralized local government institutions in India.

2. Lack of Education and Awareness: After the seven decades of independence of the country, still we have seen that women representative at decentralized local government institutions in rural India have been elected from the background that have lack of higher education, lack of skill, lack of proper knowledge on administrative works of decentralized government institutions. This not natural, it is a manmade policy to continue male domination over female representatives at decentralized local government institutions. So, it is also a big challenge for women.

3. Limited Resources and Support: There is no doubt that when women are elected to the decentralized local government bodies, they survive with lack the financial and logistical support needed to carry out their responsibilities successfully.

4. Reservation of Seat: Elected male representatives were got opportunity to contest elections more than once whereas the members of elected women generally once. It is also an issue for women representatives at decentralized local government bodies.

5. Gender Discrimination: Most of the women representatives still facing gender-based discrimination in the decentralized government institutions due to their gender. Political representatives like Pradhan, Upa-pradhan, and other female members are still dominated by men but its number is less compare to earlier. The elected women representatives find it difficult to deal with block level and district level administration and police officers due to limited contact to public life. Male representatives compare to the women members play a more dominant role in interactions with external bodies and actors. A major apprehension remains that in many regions across India, women leaders in reserved seats are elected as proxy candidates who are controlled by male members of their family and community.

6. Lack of Technical Knowledge: The lack of technical knowledge which predominantly affects women in contemporary rural India, it is also making hampers the work of women representatives. This is relevant because decentralized governments institutions are adopting digital platform nationwide for smooth public service delivery and redressal. Low digital literacy among rural women and representatives remains a major challenge for women leaders in discharging their administrative functions more efficiently in the decentralized government institutions.

7. Two Child Norms and Educational Qualification: Some states in India like Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana has following the 'Two-Child' norm which is barring candidates with more than two children from contesting decentralized local government elections especially at Gram Panchayat level. The Supreme Court has also validated this legal provision. In India, States like Haryana and Rajasthan have also set minimum education qualifications for candidates to contesting decentralized local government elections. These policies have making huge challenges for women's entry into grassroots level decision making and politics as they are likely to lack access to education and choices in family planning. Women leaders at the gram panchayat level have also implicit their worry over being adversely impacted due to such provisions.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that decentralized governance has playing important role on women's empowerment through the system of decentralized governance in contemporary India by enabling women to take part in the grassroots politics, decision-making process, access resources and lead initiatives in favour of their communities. However, to fully realize its potential, it is essential to address challenges like patriarchal attitudes, lack of education, lack of skill, two child norms, lack of knowledge on technology, lack of administrative experiences and limited resources. By strengthening decentralized governance and empowering women at the grassroots level, India can take significant steps toward achieving top to bottom development accordingly.

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