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**WOMEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL
GOVERNANCE : A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

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Abstract: *Women's in politics at the local bodies is considered important for women's empowerment. The recent wave of decentralization in the late 1990s in India and Pakistan promised to solve women-related community problems at the grassroots level and more importantly, to empower them socially, economically and politically. This paper explains the extent to which such aspirations could be realized in India and Pakistan*

Keywords: *Women in Political Participation, Local Governance, India, Pakistan*

Introduction

The decentralisation approach was based on the assumption that bringing decision making closer to grassroots communities, would strengthen electoral institutions, democracy and civil society making bureaucracy more efficient and less corrupt. Also, priority was given to more female representation in local government institutions. It was believed that decentralisation would empower women as well.

However, what the empirical evidence suggests is that the predatory interests had managed to reinvent themselves in the new democracy at the local level. Thus, decentralisation could not produce 'good governance' idealized in the neo-institutionalist scheme of the international financial institutions and the donor countries. With few exceptions, this is most vividly illustrated by the rise of political gangsters in the leadership of parties, parliaments and executive bodies at the local level in most countries. The failure of decentralizing was due to inadequate local government framework, ineffective implementation or capture of local government by interest groups or a combination of these factors.

There are, of course, limits to the way the examples of local governance experiments can be generalised across all countries within the less-developed world. Local officials can certainly be found who have performed relatively well compared to other governments in developing countries in India and Porto Alegre in Brazil. However, in most cases in developing countries, the reforms that took place, in the absence of any reforms in the power structures, did not allow for them to be sustained. They were dissipated under pressures of money politics and political thuggery, which underpinned the working of democracy in most of these countries at the local and national levels. In some cases, this has led to the re-centralisation of governance.

The cases of decentralisation in India and Pakistan present an interesting comparison. After independence, India formed a republican polity with the universal adult franchise and initiated the process of political modernisation and democratisation in the country. However, political modernisation remained confined to state and national level politics. The democratic decentralisation was conceived in the form of Panchayat Raj Institutions. This provided opportunities for rural women to take leadership roles in the panchayats.

This, however, did not mean that women were necessarily politically empowered throughout India. In most cases, they were used as proxies for their male members of the family who represented them in panchayats. Nevertheless, the process provided space for women to learn politics and achieve a certain level of independence gradually.

The case of Pakistan demonstrates that right from the outset, the purpose of decentralisation was not to decentralize power and authority but to meet two prime objectives. First, strengthening of civil and military bureaucracies to establish the most centralized and coercive government structures through the political marginalisation of mainstream political parties and; second to co-opt newly emerging politicians from local councils who could act as conduits between the local constituencies and military established governments.

The history of decentralisation in Pakistan reveals that the central tendency underlying major experiments with local governments primarily conducted by military regimes was to accumulate power further. The civilian governments, on the other hand, were reluctant to establish strong local governments because provincial ministers and members of provincial parliaments wanted to keep development funds in their hands to build their networks of personalised patronage. Such a situation existed because of continuous and long periods of military rule that systematically weakened political parties and democratic political culture that could bring any meaningful change.

In this context, despite a long history of women's struggle in Pakistan since the pre-partition period, women were not given significant representation in the national and provincial assemblies or local governments. The few women in the national and

provincial assemblies have been usually from the upper classes and inherited their seats in the national and provincial legislatures from families or because of the blessings of male political leaders. Moreover, women's issues were never given precedence in their agenda. In local governments, women hardly had any significant representation. However, in 2000, the military regime of General Musharraf provided substantial representation (33%) to women in local governments. This was an outcome of the long-standing demand and struggle of women's organisations, such as Women Action Forum, Aurat Foundation, Shirkat Gah, and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan along with a worldwide trend towards decentralisation and women empowerment and international donors' pressures.

Overall, one of the major reasons for keeping women away from the corridors of state institutions and politics was due to Pakistan's identity as a Muslim state, which the military according to the notion of Two Nation Theory tried to maintain to distinguish Pakistan's identity from India. The Two Nation Theory was an ideological weapon used by the Muslim League during its struggle for the formation of a separate homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent. It was professed that Hindus and Muslims are two different nations, as they have different religions and therefore could not live together. This theory had no utility after the formation of Pakistan for the Muslims as the other nation was no more. However, the first military government in Pakistan revived this theory to subvert the very concept of Pakistan as a federation having different nationalities. According to the Two-Nation Theory, it was emphasized that Pakistan is not a federation but one nation as the majority of the population is Muslim. The concept of a nation was thus explained in communal terms. This also had a significant impact on women's rights and political representation. It was professed that the Islamic interpretation of social relations stressed women's role within the household. Women's participation outside the home, therefore, was always considered to be against the very identity of the Muslims of Pakistan.

Women Political Participation in Local Governance in India

It is generally acknowledged that democratic decentralisation has widened the base of democracy in India by involving the marginalized and women in the process of governance. Democratic decentralization has given way to the emergence of women's representation and leadership in the panchayats. Previously, the patriarchal society had confined women to household chores. The traditional caste panchayats which were the decision-making bodies of the villages denied access to women as well as the low caste Dalits. Women lacked a voice in upper-caste rural socio-political life. However, lower caste women had several opportunities to participate in local governments. The constitutional mandate making one-third of the seats in the panchayat reserved for women facilitated the process of incorporating more women. It is noteworthy that there are more than 1 million elected women panchayat members in the country, which is 42% of the total elected panchayat members. Thus, in some of the states, the number of women panchayat members exceeds the proportion that is provided in the law.

The increased presence of Elected Women Representatives in Panchayat Raj Institutions which had otherwise been an exclusively male domain, brought about by the vigorous implementation of State initiatives has given a semblance of political identity for women in the landscape of governance across the State. One of the underlying philosophies of the State towards engendering governance is to empower women—a process that to some extent enabled them to overcome the traditional barriers which place certain handicaps in their participation and performance as elected representatives.

However, it is observed that the caste background of women is an important factor in their emergence as panchayat leaders. Unlike in the case of male leaders, the dominant caste has not facilitated the emergence of women political leaders in their communities. It is noteworthy that most of the panchayats' women political leaders are from the lower social order. The fact that in some states, the number of women political leaders in panchayats has exceeded the one-third provision can be explained very convincingly concerning the caste system and its bearing upon the rise of women's leadership. It is observed that the upper castes because of their stronger thrust on patriarchy are reluctant to let their womenfolk enter the village politics. Therefore, the representation of women from upper castes is restricted only to whatever is provided by the law, i.e., one-third. The situation is quite encouraging in the case of representation from the lower castes. The number of women political leaders in panchayats from lower castes is considerably higher than the one-third reservation provided by the law. The high caste women are restricted to domestic activities. They rarely come forward to take up work in the various government schemes operated in the village. Their families are highly patriarchal, and therefore women are not allowed to participate in public affairs. This is the reason for the overwhelming representations of lower caste women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. She opines that the higher castes have not allowed their women to enter Panchayati Raj Institutions due to the rigid caste values and the fear of being marginalised if their women exercise political power by holding village-level political offices

In other words, the lower castes are electing more women to represent them in the panchayats, whereas the upper caste is just adhering to the legal provision of one-third. It can be argued that contradictory to the earlier picture' wherein the dominant upper castes used dummy lower-caste women to contest elections from the seats reserved for general women, the lower caste women have wrested more seats from their male counterparts than from the upper caste women.

In spite the prevalence of patriarchy and a male-dominated political system, an increasing number of women are entering the electoral fray at the local level. There is a significant improvement in the support extended by the families to their females. However, when we look at their participation in politics vis-à-vis their political affiliation, there has only been a marginal increase in the number of households with female

members having affiliation with political parties. Even those having political affiliation, a very small percentage of women are the office bearers of political parties at local levels.

It is significant to note here that despite being drawn into village politics consequent to their entry into Gram Panchayats and despite enjoying better support from the family members to join any political party, women have, by and large, remained alienated from the mainstream politics or continue to remain obscure in the larger politics. This is not to suggest that women contesting Gram Panchayats elections have remained non-partisan or were above political leanings; a vast majority do have clear political leanings. The picture that emerges from the preceding discussion suggests an overwhelmingly male-dominated political process where women continue to play a 'useful' but non-descriptor secondary role in the larger politics.

Women Political Participation in Local Governance in Pakistan

After the formation of Pakistan, the Government of Pakistan took some measures such as universal franchise, equal rights to education and employment and reserved seats for women in the national and provincial legislatures. Three military regimes made the most significant attempts to introduce local governments:

1. Basic Democracy Ordinance, 1959 by General Ayub Khan,
2. Local Government Ordinance, 1979 by General Zia-ul-Haq and
3. Devolution Plan, 2001 by General Musharraf.

Ayub Khan and General Zia-ul-Haq regimes did not provide women to be part of local governments. General Musharraf, however, for the first time, provided 33% reserved seats to women in local governments. This was possible because of the worldwide wave of good governance and decentralisation paradigms informed by neoliberalism that saw an intensification of labour by women in the South as the 'solution' to poverty as well as gender inequality.

Overall, successive governments did little to improve women's political participation. According to Shaheed, Zia and Warraich (1998), the Constitutions of 1955–58 provided ten reserved seats to women members for 10 years. Women's territorial constituencies were delimited for this, giving a double vote to women in these constituencies, one for a general seat and one for a reserved seat. However, no elections were held under this Constitution, and the Constituent Assembly was dissolved in 1954. The decade of the military government that followed subverted the democratic process and barred women from political representation. The 1962 Constitution introduced by General Ayub Khan discontinued territorial representation and indirect elections were introduced. The elected college that was comprised of members of the National Assembly elected women on reserved seats. The number of reserved seats for women was six. This trend continued until 1969 when Ayub's regime was overthrown by a mass political movement. The trend of Ayub's measure of indirect

elections of women through reserved seats continued in each subsequent Constitution framed in later years, which harmed women's political participation. In Ayub's era, the right of women representation was neglected in the first local bodies elections, held in 1959 under the Basic Democracy Ordinance.

It was not until 1971 when the first democratic government of Pakistan People's Party led by the late Zulfikar Bhutto took overpower that the state accorded a better status to women. It was the Pakistan People's Party's government that introduced the Constitution of Pakistan in 1973. The Constitution, for the first time, accorded a much better status to women, stating that there would be no discrimination based on sex. Other measures were also taken by the Pakistan People's Party; for instance, the formation of a Women's Wing in the party. The Constitution of 1973 increased women's reserved seats to 5% in the national and provincial assemblies but maintained the earlier principle of indirect elections. Regarding women's participation in local governments, Article 32 of the 1973 Constitution made special provisions for the representation of peasants, workers and women in local government institutions. However, during this period, local government elections were not held, and no opportunities were available to women to participate.

In 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq took control of the state of Pakistan in a military coup and imposed martial law in Pakistan. He ruled for 11 years (1977–1988). Zia's period was marked by brutal military rule. He declared that earlier governments were too liberal and western in their thinking and ostensibly pledged to Islamize the Pakistani state and society. Women suffered most during the Islamization period. The government authorities during this period were actively mobilised against women's political participation in all spheres of public life and accompanied this with measures rescinding women's rights and reducing their public visibility. It was during this period that anti-women laws such as the Hudood Ordinance were introduced in the constitution of Pakistan. The Council of Islamic Ideology was formed, which was known for disseminating some of the more retrogressive opinions regarding women rights. Set up in 1962, the Council of Islamic Ideology did not have any teeth before Zia-ul-Haq's period. The Parliament had the absolute authority to completely ignore the advice if it is so willed. However, the Islamic Council of Ideology formed by Zia-ul-Haq not only reconstituted the earlier versions of the council but also increased its membership to make it effective. The function of the council was to review the laws and make them according to Quran and Sunnah. The recommend-donations made by the council included fixation of prayers, the interval during working hours, the promulgation of Hadood Laws, interest-free banking, Nazim-e-Zakat, the appointment of Nazimeen-e-Salat, to make the teaching of Islamic and Pakistan Studies as compulsory subjects on B.A/B.Sc., level, the introduction of the Laws of Qisas, Diyet, Evidence, and Shufa and to promote Islamic teachings through media. When martial law was lifted in 1985, the Eighth Amendment was introduced in the constitutions, which validated all ordinances passed by the martial law regime. The problems faced by women in many areas of law were left unresolved.

Zia formed the Ansari Commission in July 1983 to formulate an Islamic political framework. The Commission suggested limits to women's political participation and made recommendations including separate electorates for women and men; the barring of women and non-Muslims from becoming head of state; and ensuring that women candidates to the assembly be above 50 years of age and have written permission from their husbands to contest for seats in the national and provincial assemblies. Interestingly, Zia never acted upon these recommendations and instead doubled the quota of reserved seats for women to 10% in 1984.

The NWFP government had a different policy. It gave two seats to women only at the District Council level. Although there were variations within different provinces, women had some representation in the district and urban councils, but because they were elected indirectly, they could never enjoy the same authority, financial power and voice within the councils as the male representatives. Moreover, under the previous system, there was hardly any possibility of females becoming chairpersons in the local government institutions. This was because women were nominated and elected by male councillors. Since NWFP's government did not allocate any reserved seats for women in the Union Council (the lowest level of local government), it failed on the province level in terms of more representation of women.

The 1988 general elections brought Benazir Bhutto to power. Given the low number of women who contested for general seats in 1988, it was clear that women's presence in the assemblies would require special affirmative action. In 1989, a few Senators belonging to the Pakistan People's Party moved a bill to enable this in the Upper House; but before the bill could be acted upon, Bhutto's government was dismissed in August 1990, and the Constitution could not be amended in favour of more reserved seats for women. The IslamiJamhuriIttihad's government, led by Mian Nawaz Sharif that followed did not take any affirmative action to increase women's reserved seats and provided 10.4% representation to women in local governments. In 1993, Benazir Bhutto's government again came to power but was again dismissed by the President of Pakistan under the provision of the Eighth Constitutional Amendment that provides the President with the power to dismiss an elected government. The dismissal of Bhutto's government once again brought Nawaz Sharif to power. During the period 1988–1998, women, therefore, continued to be grossly under-represented in Pakistan's legislative bodies.

Unlike the military regime of Zia-ul-Haq who had pledged for the Islamization of the Pakistani state and society during the Cold War period, General Musharraf's stance was ostensibly liberal in a post-Cold War period characterized by a transition from military dictatorship to democracy. For the first time in 2002, Musharraf reserved 60 of the 342 seats for women in the national assembly (17.5% of seats, three times more than the previous 20 seats). These seats were allocated to the political parties proportionally, according to their electoral results. The names were picked from the

top of a list of 60 women that each party presented to the electoral authorities before the election. For the Provincial Assemblies, 128 out of the 728 were reserved for women, i.e., 17.6%. On the whole, 21% of seats in the national legislature belong to women. Furthermore, four out of 100 seats in the Senate were reserved for women.

In General Musharraf's period, it was generally assumed that women achieved a breakthrough in the form of a new local government system, where for the first time in the political history of Pakistan they were granted a direct mode of an election at the union council level. The government had allocated one-third of seats to women at the local level claiming that this would bring them into the mainstream of socio-economic activity. The exciting feature of the new system was not only that women were given 33% representation at three different levels (the district, *tehsil* and the union levels), but they could also be directly elected at the union council level.

The participation of a large number of women in local governments was considered a bold expression of new realities in national politics. The unprecedented success of women in this election was considered a milestone achievement in the struggle for political rights. It was also considered a healthy sign that would give birth to a balanced and prosperous society based on good governance and strong democracy. The quality of service in health and education departments showed some improvement, particularly by women. Women councillors had worked a lot in facilitating the poor to access safety nets such as Zakat and Bait-ul-mal. They had served their community by arranging funds for dowry, marriage; enhance literacy and getting identity cards.

The women councillors, however, did not have enough skills to accomplish their role. Moreover, cultural constraints and stereotypical gender roles assigned to them as mothers and wives posed barriers to participate in public affairs effectively. Some other barriers they faced were the discouraging attitude of the community, lack of information, lack of power, domestic work, children, and family pressures.

Overall, Women's political participation was strictly dominated by male politics. Their participation at the decision-making level was not considered important. Political parties did not encourage women for election campaigns. Some other related issues were the discouraging attitude of male councillors and the hostile behaviour of Nazims and Naib Nazims. Moreover, no specific resources were allocated to women's development. They were not encouraged to supervise the civil work of their schemes.

On the whole, there were three major factors associated with women's participation in the special interest seats reserved for women in the local government in the past. First, the women elected on reserved seats were accountable to the male councillors through whom they were elected. Two, the women candidates were merely names on papers having no actual powers. Three, most of them belonged to the dominant political party in the area and followed the party mandate rather than focusing on women's issues. However, the Devolution Plan if continued, could have

brought significant improvement in women's participation and empowerment in the long run. This was the only political scheme that brought a huge number of women in politics at the local level and was a significant achievement in quantitative terms that could gradually turn into quality.

However, the later governments abandoned General Musharraf's Devolution plan that had constitutional protection until 2013. The subsequent LG elections were held across Pakistan in 2014 & 2015. While, unlike Musharraf, the later governments held local government elections on a party basis, the legal remit of each law was limited in scope, excessively deferential to provincial governments, and devoid of any meaningful devolution of financial, political and administrative powers (as required by Article 140- A and Article 37). Each provincial law vests provincial governments with overriding authority over all tiers of elected local governments through control over funds, allocation of functions and powers, both municipal and fiscal, and stringent supervision and oversight, including the right of suspension, of elected local governments and office-bearers. Each provincial, local government legislation appeared to insulate the provincial government against the exercise of any power or authority by elected local governments. Another limiting feature of the new local government system was reduced seats for women.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis shows that although Constitutional provisions relating to women have done substantial good for their exposure and empowerment in local governments in Karnataka, women continue to encounter several challenges and constraints in their participation at the national level of politics. The secret behind Karnataka's success is strong governance based on a competitive party system, free press, professional civil service and a sustained mechanism of public scrutiny of those in power. In short, Karnataka has a public culture of accountability.

Nevertheless, the above prerequisites for successful decentralization were present in Karnataka before decentralization reforms and were not an outcome of the latter, which proves that societies with a more developed public culture of accountability and strong civil society have a better chance of successful decentralization including women's empowerment.

In contrast, the history of decentralization in Pakistan reveals that the central tendency underlying major experiments with local governments primarily conducted by non-representative military regimes was to accumulate power further. Military dominance never allowed a public culture of accountability to flourish. The civilian governments, on the other hand, were reluctant to establish strong local governments because provincial ministers and members of provincial parliaments wanted to keep development funds in their hands to build their networks of personalized patronage. Such a situation existed because of continuous and long periods of military rule that

systematically weakened political parties and democratic political culture that could bring any meaningful change. Women in local governments, therefore, could also not gain empowerment. Musharraf's Devolution Plan and reservation of 33% reserved seats for women did promise better prospects to women for more participation and empowerment in the long run, but the later governments abandoned the Plan.

The upshot is that societies with a more developed public culture of accountability and strong civil society have a better chance of successful decentralization, including enhancing women's participation and empowerment.

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