

Mainstreaming the Marginalised: Inequality and Democratisation at Grassroots of India

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Abstract

With the transforming scenario between state led development and decentralized institutions at both the national and global levels, followed by introduction of neoliberal agenda in working of public sector enterprises; the country's democracy, its local governance structures, marginalized and deprived sections of the society get the most affected. And, in India, it impacted positively to some dimensions while leaving something for the future. Thus, this paper examines the role of decentralization at grassroots of India for making more of a representative, participative and resilient democracy for mainstreaming of deprived sections of society especially in context of women. Social inequality and inadequate political engagement often impairs not only the mainstreaming of the neglected but also integrity of democracy is hampered. Therefore, political participation of the marginalized by means of capacity building, affirmative action, representative elections and right to vote legitimizes any political system as democratic making decentralization as a potent instrument to overcome the handicaps.

Keywords: Decentralization; Local Governance; Marginalized and deprived sections of society; Women empowerment; Political participation; Mainstreaming.

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INTRODUCTION

"Power tends to corrupt but absolute power corrupts absolutely". *Lord John Acton*

Following the consolidation of the neoliberal agenda pushed through by international financial institutions, administrative and political systems at the grassroot and central levels of developing countries have undergone fundamental transformations, bringing with it new public

management in public institutions to ingrain values of efficiency, economy, and effectiveness in their performance, as well as increased citizen participation in political processes by downsizing government institutions, nature of public servants move from generalist to specialist, with allocation of relatively more finances for rural and urban development now the functioning of local level governments in terms of outcomes vis-a-vis outlays, dismantled the overstretched reach of the state, sought to divest the bureaucracy and dovetail that into hands of democratic institutions, people and especially thus empowerment of marginalised.

The trend since then in India's democratisation and local governance structures is the vast political empowerment of ordinary people through active engagement in governance structures and processes. The political process was highly restrictive and dominated by the erstwhile elite sectors of society, such as former princely monarchs or foreign-educated topmost attorneys, when the country's parliamentary democracy was established in the aftermath of independence from colonial rule. Though there were some proponents of reserving seats in Parliament and state legislatures for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, even the representatives of these groups came from a typically well-off background. As a result, the general public's participation in key political processes for the growth of democracy looked to be limited to the ritual of voting in elections every now and then. They appeared to have little possibility of participating actively in decision making processes, even at the local level, let alone being elected to these bodies. As a result, the country's democratic process was limited to a few families or sections of society, with the entire public excluded. The elite bedrock of Indian democracy was first seriously eroded during the JP movement, when a huge number of students from marginalised groups joined the movement and eventually were elected to higher representative bodies riding the wave of the movement. However, this experiment in extending the democratic base did not survive long, and political power returned to the conventional political class soon after. The next wave of political empowerment occurred during the Mandal commission dispute, when people from various backward groups became strongly polarised and voted en masse in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to elect their representatives to power. The actual political empowerment of the populace, however, came as a result of constitutional amendments providing constitutional status to local governmental bodies

and mandating their proportional representation in local governance institutions at all levels. With the constitutional guarantee of their election to these organisations, India's democratic social basis has become truly diverse, with fair representation of many groups. This set the groundwork for true political empowerment of the masses by requiring them to participate in local governance procedures.

In three ways, municipal institutions have recently become a venue for political empowerment of the masses. One, because the composition of local governing institutions at all levels in all parts of the country is guaranteed, a large number of individuals become involved in these bodies in some capacity. That manner, they develop a sense of being a part of the political process, boosting the legitimacy of the country's democratic political system. Two, when people see their role in such activities as worthwhile, their spirit of political participation transforms into one of political empowerment. As a result, local governance institutions provide a learning environment for political newcomers to learn how to make a meaningful and substantive contribution to the governance process. Three, providing options for key decision-making in the governance of their places strengthens the people's sense of political empowerment. As a result, in terms of democratisation and local governance, political empowerment of the public has been a major trend in recent years. This has significantly increased the social base of Indian democracy, as well as its legitimacy and acceptability among the general public.

Thus, decentralization is not just devolution of power at local levels but also strengthens the local governance structures through fiscal decentralization, functional decentralization and administrative decentralization. Moreover, decentralization promotes a more empowered deliberative democracy by directing government structures toward practical issues such as public safety, worker training, environmental stewardship, and the construction of sound municipal budgets, and by encouraging bottom-up participation to facilitate popular deliberative decision-making and to leverage synergies between professional and citizen insights rather than pre-empting citizen input, thus facilitating deliberative democracy. As a result of decentralization, citizen participation in decision-making can be encouraged, institutional flaws can be addressed, public budget constraints can be alleviated, government management capability can be improved, strategic vision can be developed, and cooperative governance can

flourish.

Nehru, Ambedkar, and Gandhi were all political thinkers who, despite some ideological differences, shared the belief that decentralized democracy could enable the new transformation of Indian society from thousands of years of oppressive, status-quo history to further progress of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and women in their social status, leadership role, economic position, education level, and political awareness. This will allow them to stake a valid claim to a share of the power structure. Fair elections and vibrant local government provide a breeding ground for leadership and hence empowerment of marginalised people, particularly women, irrespective of deeper ingrained discriminatory factors such as religion, caste, creed, and so on becomes a reality. Political empowerment is one such tool that allows marginalised of the marginalised section of the society to have a voice and participate in politics, thereby gives a trickle down effect in other socio economic dimensions of empowerment of the same, for which many measures were taken by Indian government.

The Indian Constitution contains a number of general and specific clauses aimed at advancing the high ideal of gender fairness. In general, the provisions of Articles 14, 15, 16, and 23 aim to establish equality, ban discrimination against women, ensure equal chances in public employment, and prevent human trafficking, respectively. These broad rules are supplemented by a number of specific measures aimed at offering special privileges to women and establishing an obligation to respect women's dignity. Article 42, for example, states that the state must make measures for just and humane working conditions and maternity leave for women. Furthermore, Article 51A(e) demands on Indian people to abstain from disparaging practices to the dignity of women. However, these provisions did not result in any significant improvement in women's precarious situation when it came to involvement in crucial decision-making processes. Faced with massive exclusion from political and economic power structures, women continued to be marginalized in the country's political processes in the j era. The demand for reservation of seats for women in representative bodies such as Parliament, state legislative assemblies, and institutions of local governance has been raised as the master stroke for releasing women from the age-old shackles of patriarchy, given the country's democratic system, which places power in the hands participatory of elected representatives of the people at various

levels of government. Despite the male-dominated mainstream political parties' initial resistance, the demand for seat reservations for women in elected bodies persisted. Despite the fact that the demand for women's seats in Parliament and state legislatures was met with resistance from those in power, a broad agreement was reached in 1992 to offer at least 33 percent of seats for women in local government organizations in both rural and urban areas.

In the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts, detailed provisions were introduced for the reservation of at least one-third of seats in elected bodies at various levels of local governance bodies for women. Such rotational seat reservations may be of great benefit both in terms of ensuring women's participation in panchayat bodies and in terms of raising awareness and interest in other women to join the electoral fray sooner or later. Furthermore, the programme of seat reservation for women, including those from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities, has been extended to the offices of chairpersons of elected bodies at all levels. As a result, these constitutional provisions have proven to be a useful tool for gender mainstreaming in local government in the country. However, gender mainstreaming is a complicated and all encompassing concept that cannot be achieved solely through the presence of women in elected bodies. Nonetheless, given the historical absence of women from political power structures, the significance of these protections cannot be overstated.

Clearly, these measures are significant because, for the first time in the country, women are expected to have assured participation in elected bodies in a significant number, allowing them to effectively influence decision-making processes in these bodies. Three basic ramifications of women's significant participation in elected entities at the municipal level can be outlined. One, the presence of a large contingent of women representatives in elected bodies has gone a long way toward ensuring that gender mainstreaming informs all of these bodies' policies and decisions, because when comparing outlays with outcomes, the inexplicable impact of all decisions remains in the back of people's minds of all members of the urban governmental institutions. Two, the women members of the panchayats have been able to articulate their 'felt experiences' of life as women, which would otherwise have remained unarticulated on the floor of these bodies, leaving them devoid of valuable inputs on 'women interests' in conceptualizing

and framing engendered policies and programmes for the locality's development. Three, 'women have attempted to effect change by bringing up topics such as health, sanitation, education, water, alcohol, and domestic abuse.' Women's participation in Panchayat institutions has allowed them to mobilize struggle at a level where it is most needed.' They've also been able to inspire and lead others to take risks with electoral democracy at the grassroots level and change makers of the society.

POLITICAL RESERVATION

The constitutionally guaranteed requirements of reservation of seats for women in representative institutions in rural and urban areas have been the country's key strategy for mainstreaming gender in local administration. The political leadership's understanding that other parts of gender mainstreaming would take up speed once women themselves are at the helm of activities in local government organisations was most likely the driving force for this historic decision. As a result, in September 1991, the Seventy third and Seventy fourth Amendment Bills relating to panchayats and municipalities, respectively, were introduced in Parliament to provide a constitutional remedy for the inadequacies plaguing these bodies, which were unable to function effectively as vibrant democratic units of self-government. The Bills were referred to two joint committees of Parliament and were reintroduced in July 1992, after required revisions, and enacted by Parliament in December 1992. Both Bills received the required number of State ratifications [Article 368(ii)], and the President signed them in April 1993. On April 24, 1993, the Seventy-third Amendment Act relating to panchayats went into effect. The Municipalities Section of the Seventy-fourth Amendment Act went into effect on June 1, 1993. The constitutional amendments of the seventy-third and seventy-fourth amendments were significant in history. In brief, panchayats and municipalities are now constitutional bodies that make up India's third tier of government. The Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments, which decentralize India, present both obstacles and opportunities. In recent years, legislative changes have drastically increased women's access to decision-making institutions. The Constitutional Amendments of the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments, ratified in 1993, provide for the reservation of 33 percent of elected seats for women at various levels of local government, including rural and urban. In addition, women will be given a one-third reservation for

chairperson positions in these boards. A third of the seats are also set aside for women from the SC/ST community. Women's participation in municipal bodies has risen considerably as a result of this. Around 1 million women are elected to panchayats and local councils every five years in local governments. The number of elected women in several states surpasses the one-third limit. The Constitution mandates that seats reserved for women be rotated, however it does not specify the number of periods for which seats may be rotated. Seats are reserved for one, two, or three terms, depending on the stipulations of state legislation approved by the state legislature. The option of reserving seats for more than one term is available, but the number of terms for which seats will be held is up to the State Legislature. The Constitution mandated that on a rotating basis, not less than one-third of seats in elected bodies in both rural and urban areas be designated for women, including those from underprivileged groups. Surprisingly, the legal restriction of one-third of seats has been cited as the lower limit beyond which governments cannot go when it comes to reserving seats for women. However, there appears to be no upper limit in terms of the number of seats reserved for women. In some ways, the one-third cut-off is an illustrative statistic, given that women account for about half of the country's population. As a result, states have been given the authority to enhance the percentage of seats reserved for women in local government organisations according on their wisdom and circumstances. As a result of this provision, states have been able to go above the nationally mandated 33 percent and provide for even more seats for women in local government elected bodies.

In general, three patterns may be detected when it comes to the number of seats to be designated for women in the country's local government organisations. One, many states saw the opportunity provided by the 73rd Constitution Amendment to reserve seats for women as a great opportunity to radicalise the structure and operation of the state's local governance institutions by setting a quota of 50% as the cut-off for reservation of seats for women in local bodies. In this backdrop, states like Haryana and Karnataka stand out as trailblazers in terms of increasing the number of seats reserved for women. They set a new benchmark in political empowerment of women by guaranteeing their representation in panchayats and urban local bodies by reserving half of the seats in local bodies for women. Women have been on the perimeter of political representation in elected entities until

recently, and now they are poised to become the masters of public life in their communities. In a male-dominated society, such a significant step would have far-reaching implications for the government's efforts to mainstream gender in various developmental and empowerment activities at all levels.

The second pattern of seat reservation reflects efforts in some states to increase the number of seats reserved for women in local elected bodies from 33 to 50 per cent. These are the states that promote progressive attitudes toward women's empowerment but have not been able to overcome patriarchal dominance in local governance institutions. In fact, given the central ceiling of 33 per cent seats must be reserved in all local government entities at all levels, no state could avoid executing this constitutional requirement. However, when it came to demonstrating magnanimity in the cause of women's liberation, these states could only go so far. The third pattern, which has been followed by the majority of states in the country, is to follow the central legislative indicator in its entirety without making any adjustments based on the states' concerns. In this case, the majority of states preferred to stick to the constitutional provision of reserving one-third of the seats without making any changes in terms of increasing the number of seats to higher levels. In conclusion, the patterns of reserving of seats for women in elected bodies of local government differed depending on the prevailing social orientations in a state, as well as the state government's political intention to empower women.

Variations in the pattern of reserving of seats for women in local government institutions testify to the fact that the country's diversity has gone so far as to betray disparities even on matters that could have required consensual solutions or opinions from many stakeholders. Many states, in fact, have forged ahead of the pack in terms of political empowerment for women, ensuring them what could have been their rightful place in the political arena despite national legislation specifying only one-third of the seats. Apart from the number of seats available, two related concerns appear to be equally important in terms of making reservations, such as the tremendous march towards women's political empowerment. One, given women's lower economic and educational achievements in general in states like Bihar, special care must be taken to ensure that women participate in the activities of local governance institutions more from the perspective of gender mainstreaming rather than

perpetuating patriarchal orientations by acting as puppets in the hands of their male family members. Two, with the massive induction of women into local governance institutions, many of whom are first-timers with little exposure to public life and the nitty-gritty of deliberations and decision-making by local bodies, special training programmes and study tours to experience the working of such institutions in other places would help them gain political insights and administrative acumen to do justice to their given responsibilities as people's representatives.

NATURE OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Reservation of at least one-third of seats in elected bodies at the municipal level, in both rural and urban areas, has unquestionably transformed the structural features of these bodies. However, there appear to be differences in different sections of the country when it comes to assessing the genuine workings of local governing organisations, particularly with women at the head. In several states, women have taken full use of the reservation option, ushering in a new era of gender mainstreaming in their area's developmental operations. However, in some other states, the provision of reservation has failed to catalyse women's power into a powerful force capable of reorienting elected bodies of local administration and transforming them into lively institutions of self-governance that cater to the people's felt needs. The working of the women's reservation in local bodies has not been uniformly successful nor has it been a complete failure. In the following paragraphs, a cross-state examination of the nature and status of women's participation in local bodies will be presented.

In Gujarat, a 33% reservation of seats for women has ensured that women participate as a significant bloc in the proceedings of local authorities and influence their decision-making processes. Despite certain disadvantages relating to education and previous public exposure, studies conducted on the nature and effectiveness of women's participation in the Pitts have found that women are well aware of the challenges facing their areas and participate in the decision-making of the elected bodies to effectively meet those challenges. In the case of Madhya Pradesh, though women have been pioneers in their active participation in Panchayati Raj bodies, their functioning in the Pitts has been questioned. According to a researcher, women have demonstrated that the powers bestowed upon them and the faith placed in their ability to work were

not misplaced, and that the issues they experience are due more to a lack of funds and power granted to panchayats than to women's ability to function.

Haryana is also one of the states where the central threshold of one-third of seats reserved for women in local bodies has been maintained. Following that, a considerable number of women participated in panchayat proceedings at all levels, raising hopes of bringing about a fresh perspective and line of action in the state's unabashedly patriarchal society. However, further research on the nature and efficacy of the work of women members of local government institutions have highlighted the limited achievement of the expected outcomes. The state's current state of affairs has been attributed to women's social and political backgrounds, which have reportedly hindered them from emerging as self-sufficient decision-makers. Another study on the role of women leaders in the state's panchayats supports the previous study's findings, stating that "the underlying social structure of Haryana does not appreciate and encourage women taking up activities in the public domain, which has a debilitating impact on the effectiveness of the women leaders' work in the PRIS."

Initially, the position of women's participation in panchayats in Haryana's neighbouring states of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh was not encouraging. In Rajasthan, for example, patriarchy was so strong in the early years of the implementation of the constitutional provisions on the reservation of seats for women in local bodies that, despite the fact that women were elected to panchayats, their husbands took the oath of membership on their behalf. In Uttar Pradesh, almost identical findings have been observed in terms of women's admission into local government organisations. Women's engagement in the PRIs in the state has been said to be more as a proxy for their husbands or other male relatives than as independent decision makers actively participating in panchayat proceedings.

The position and character of women's engagement in PRIs in the southern states has been determined to be considerably better, effective, and result oriented than in the northern states. When one considers the situation of Karnataka, one is astounded to learn that it was one of the first states to allow for the reservation of seats for women in elected bodies of local government, even before federal legislation mandating the same for all states in the country. So, even before the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act was introduced in the state, Karnataka women had a fair amount of exposure to and experience working as change agents in their

communities. The newly legally mandated clauses regulating local bodies' rights and functions only fuel their determination to be more aggressive and accountable in carrying out the tasks entrusted to them by their constituents.

The southern section of the country's success story continues, if to a lesser level, in the north-eastern state of Tripura, where the (Tripura) Panchayati Raj Act of 1903 extended the Constitution's provisions to the state as well. Despite the fact that state legislation in the Panchayati Raj has largely followed the pattern of central legislation, public enthusiasm for establishing local government organisations viable institutions of self-rule has converted it into a good example of people controlling their own affairs. The ensured representation of women in Panchayati Raj bodies aided them in gaining control of the situation and directing the functioning of these bodies toward topics that are central to their daily lives. However, despite the presence of a large number of women Panchayat Pradhans in Gram Panchayats and chairpersons in the other tiers of the PRIS, the state government's and bureaucracy's support has not been in proportion, as a result, women's programmes have not gained relevance."

Overall, the goal of gender mainstreaming in India through the granting of seats for women in local government organisations has been a mixed bag. While assured representation of women has aided them in grasping the issues and challenges that form the core of women's emancipation in their societies in a few states, the strangulating clutches of patriarchy have effectively stifled the tide of women's onward march to become equal partners with men in effective participation in political processes and making decisions of their own choices in the majority of states. The only saving grace in the entire storey has been the magical provision of women's seat reservations, which has ensured that, despite not being allowed to make independent decisions or usher in revolutionary changes, women have made their presence felt by speaking up for women's interests in local governance deliberations. The situation is still tense today due to the fact that gender discrimination in India is such a complicated issue that no simple or one-size fits all solution can be applied in all sections of the country. Every state has its own unique socioeconomic and cultural framework for women's empowerment, and gender mainstreaming must be understood in that setting alone. Despite these differences, certain common difficulties to gender mainstreaming and women's effective participation in local governing institutions may be identified,

and feasible solutions for them might be imagined in the long run.

Constraints of Mainstreaming the Marginalised

Given the complexity and diversity of Indian society, gender mainstreaming poses numerous hurdles. Lack of human and financial resources for training and advocacy for political careers, gender sensitive attitudes towards women in society, lack of accountability of elected officials and political parties for imparting gender equality and women's participation in public life, lack of social awareness of equal participation at decision making institutions, lack of willingness on part of men to share power, lack of sufficient deliberations and cooperation with women's non governmental organisations, along with organisational and political structures, which enable political empowerment of women in society. Different parts of people's public and private lives, particularly those of women, are so interconnected that it appears impossible to disentangle the isolated causes of their continuous subjection to male whims and fancies. Individual inadequacies of women, on the other hand, are a significant role in their inability to carry out their newly acquired responsibilities in an efficient and effective manner. The sorry state of affairs is made worse by the state's lukewarm support for empowering women by providing them with the necessary education and administrative skills. To summarise, gender mainstreaming is a goal that has proven difficult to achieve in India. Constitutional laws and legislative stipulations may not be the most effective technique for improving the status of women in the country's political processes. As a result, a precise diagnosis of the maladies impeding gender mainstreaming is essential, as is the development of a complete and holistic treatment plan.

The most formidable issue in mainstreaming gender in local governance institutions appears to be social restrictions. Given the stereotyped position of women in Indian society, it does not appear to be simple for them to break free and come out in the open to fulfil their responsibilities as representatives of their ilk, if not the entire population. The societal restrictions are exacerbated by widespread poverty and economic backwardness in the country's large rural areas, where women get preoccupied in obtaining basic necessities of life and their position in public life becomes secondary. They are discouraged from attending meetings of the bodies to which they have been elected, preferring instead to focus on their daily tasks in order to settle their livelihood concerns. At the same time, many women

representatives are discouraged from participating effectively in local body deliberations due to a lack of education and an inability to convey their viewpoints convincingly.

Many of the newly elected women lack confidence, feel lonely, and have no prior political experience. They must hone their natural leadership abilities. According to studies conducted around the country, 95 percent of elected women representatives (EWRs) are first timers in politics who get involved because their male family/village members urge them to. Many of the elected women lack the competence to operate efficiently in the panchayats and municipalities since they are first-timers with no prior experience in politics, and as a result, they are not taken seriously by their colleagues. Government and non-government organisations are working together to strengthen women's participation ability through ongoing training and networking. Women have emerged as articulate, motivated leaders across the country with only a few years of experience. Gender budgeting, which involves elected women from the grassroots, is being used for advocacy in a number of countries. Women's leadership has been strengthened by increased networking and the development of confederations of elected women delegates. This strategy has proven to be particularly effective in southern and western India. The establishment of these networks fosters unity among elected women politicians who might otherwise be divided by caste, religion, and regional borders. As a result, forming these networks is the first step toward women's empowerment which adds to their ability to intervene and negotiate in political process. Thus, networks support capacity building.

Aside from constitutional provisions, there have been complaints from all throughout the country about the lack of effective participation of women in local governing systems. Proxy politics, power brokers, and gender discrimination persist, and many women sarpanches fear violence as a result of questioning society power centers. In other circumstances, women are just enrolled in PRI by name. In actuality, it is the male members of the family who wield power. Despite panchayati raj's affirmative action in favour of underprivileged communities, caste, poverty, tribal status, gender, and caste clearly separate those with political power from those without. Devolution and decentralization of powers from higher authorities (Government of India or State Governments) to lower ones should not be delayed any longer. Currently, practically all states are trailing in terms

of devolution. Most states are still in the same situation as they were before 1993 when it comes to the three Fs: funding, functions, and functionaries. The Constitutional provisions are not only infringed in the absence of this basic necessity, but there is also a lack of clarity on the ground, which leads to dysfunctional circumstances. To secure women's representation in decision-making bodies, India has traditionally depended on the method of reservation. *De jure*, but not necessarily *de facto*, involvement has increased as a result of this. There is a need to encourage women's engagement in different types of organisations and associations that contribute to a climate of female leadership, as well as to support elected women's training and networking.

To summarise, gender mainstreaming in the country's local governance institutions is a monumental endeavour whose successful execution necessitates a multi pronged approach that addresses all facets of the problem. While capacity building among women representatives through mechanisms such as education, training, development of soft skills, and providing information on the issues and challenges confronting their areas, among other things, becomes the primary concern, this must be supplemented with political support from the government in the form of protection, encouragement, and incentives in the event that they become harbingers of change in their communities.

CONCLUSION

Mainstreaming the marginalised, more specifically women has been one of the weakest links in the Indian polity's democratic structure. With electoral politics for national and state legislative bodies increasingly becoming a man's game, there are limited avenues for women to enter these bodies. The demand for a 33 percent reservation of seats in Parliament and state legislatures has become so entangled in political parties and caste politics that, despite overt agreement on the issue, concrete efforts on the ground appear unlikely. In such a scenario, the only ray of hope for gender mainstreaming has come from the fact that a reservation of at least 33 percent of seats has been provided so far in the anticipation of women in local governance. This is, without a doubt, the most radical action taken by these governments in terms of gender mainstreaming. But the real issue here isn't simply saving seats for them; it's also making

them powerful voices in the articulation of people's interests, notably the interests of women, who have long been at the forefront of the movement against chauvinism in society. In this perspective, it appears that reserving seats for them in local government organisations is just half of the equation, with the remaining half secured only by making them competent decision-makers in these bodies.

In fact, despite the reserve of seats for women in local government organisations, the legislation has failed to produce the desired outcome due to the manoeuvring of their male family members. In many circumstances, even if a woman member of the dominant family is elected in the name of the family, her independence in decision-making appears to be completely missing, as it is the male member of the family who imposes conditions to them. Similarly, while the provision of reserved seats for women from lower socioeconomic groups has aided their entry into domains of democratic decision-making, they are frequently left out of the deliberations and decision-making processes of these bodies due to the joining of hands by members of the dominant socioeconomic groups, both male and female. In such circumstances, women become a countervailing force to themselves, based on caste and communal considerations rather than gender mainstreaming issues. This unfavourable status of the women's reservation in the country's local governance institutions necessitates substantial efforts on the part of both the government and women's organisations to eliminate the barriers that women experience in becoming effective participants in these bodies' debates. Unless this occurs, the goal of gender mainstreaming in the country will remain a pipe dream.

Democracy is a form of government that is run by, for, and by the people, and it empowers everyone involved in the political system. As a result of empowering the marginalised by addressing the issues such as male proxies, incompetent training, social restrictions through beforehand capacity building measures and awareness programs; governance becomes smart, democracy becomes true to its spirit, and the development of such a diverse nation as India thrives. That much importance decentralisation holds within itself for empowering all, maintaining equity and justice as virtues, making governmental institutions just, representative, and vibrant, increasing efficiency and effectiveness of governance, and thus realizing the goals of democracy in the truest sense by choosing not to ignore the fact that half of the

population is still not empowered enough.

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