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## Women and Political Empowerment: A Study with reference to Udupi District

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### Introduction:

Udupi, otherwise spelt Udipi and also known as Odipu, is a city in the Indian state of Karnataka. Udupi is situated about 55 km (34 mi) north of the educational, commercial & industrial hub Mangalore and about 422 km (262 mi) west of state capital Bangalore by road. It is the administrative headquarters of Udupi District, and one of the fastest growing cities in Karnataka. Udupi is one of the top tourist attractions in Karnataka and has various educational institutions. It is notable for the Krishna Temple and is also known as the temple city.

In fact decentralization, which is often identified with “devolution” “deconcentration” of power or administration is seen and viewed as precursor for democracy to exist and operate. Incidentally this argument came at a time when globalization was enveloping the world through the mediation of capital, cultural symbols, even through the market. Incidentally the discourse of decentralization came largely as part of prescription by the international institutions to the problems afflicting the developing countries. However Contemporary debates on decentralization have revolved around three important issues: issues of historicity, issues of expanding democratic spaces, and finally inclusive growth as well as inclusive politics of social categories. One of the categories which is often neglected in the discourse of decentralization is the women categories. They are largely seen either as indifferent categories or apathetic categories. The participation of women in politics is largely essentialized for four important reasons: one, it would empower women as political category, two, it would lead to the creation of an egalitarian society and thirdly it would help in gradual progress. Finally it would help in the creation of “autonomous women”, both as social category as well as political category. Meanwhile there are apprehension being expressed on the ground that given the prevalence of gender bias, and also absence of property rights, women continues to remain “non-political” in nature and that they would not emergence as autonomous categories in the overall politics. In fact women’s participation in politics has given rise to different perspectives.

The Incrementalist Perspective dominating the Indian political discourse believes that gender equality is possible however it will come through phased manner. This particular discourse 194 has been contested by large number of women's movement on the ground that it might take hundreds of years to achieve gender equality in politics. Gender bias still prevailing in all societies, participation of women in politics is negligible. Interestingly women's participation has a long history in India, dating back to the pre-colonial period. This is where one can demystify the stereotypes: that decentralization is a gift of international institutions, that, women participation in the politics is a recent trend. In fact what changed the character of Indian politics is the introduction of 73rd amendment to Indian constitution in 1993. This Act, is often hailed as a trend setter, paradigm shift, revolution etc. for the simple reason that it enabled thousands of women to participate in the grass root politics. In many places the women representation went beyond the prescribed percentage. This does not mean that political empowerment of women through the Panchayati Raj act has been complete. Towards this end we tried to understand the possibility of constructing what is called "Udupi Model of Women's Political Empowerment"- did it really exist? Or can we visualize the presence of Udupi Model of Women's Political Empowerment or is it emerging in the context of Women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institution. The present study is carried out in Udupi which is one of the coastal districts of the state of Karnataka. Udupi district is hailed as one of the progressive districts of the state with a very high Human Development Index and Gender Development Index. (Udupi District Human Development Report-2008). The district has significant and positive indicators in the area of women empowerment. This enables to construct 'Udupi Model of Women's Political Empowerment'.

The district has got a high literacy percentage amongst women including the rural women compared to other districts of the state. The sex ratio is positive and number of females is more than males. The district is known for its matrilineal pattern of family system. 195 The awareness level of women is high. A large number of women are employed in jobs and self employment ventures. There is least discrimination for girl child. The atrocities recorded against women are minimum. Under such a backdrop, the study threw light on certain 'enabling' and 'disabling' factors which had positive or negative impact on the political empowerment of women in the district. Certain general information pertaining to the profiles of the respondents revealed that majority of the respondents were in the age group of 25-45 years which is an appropriate 'age range' where women will be able and responsible enough to take decisions apart from participating in the administration of the local government. In other words, this is a favorable age range where women, amidst various limitations can get empowered politically. It was observed from the study that a major section of elected women representatives were not that well educated. This is obvious as under reservation policy, majority women who belong to lower echelons of society who are economically and otherwise backward get into gram panchayats as members and their level of education is not that high. Though this inadequate level of education will have some impact on the intensity of political emancipation of women, it may be observed here that it has not totally stunted their growth as members. It is also clear from other studies that women belonging to lower echelons are almost on par with other social classes. (Learning Status of Dalit Children in Udupi District, Karnataka-2009). It must be appreciated here that in the context of providing social justice to the vulnerable sections of society the reservation policy has been implemented through the 73rd Constitution Amendment. The study recorded that more than 50% respondents were not from higher income brackets for obvious reasons (SCs, STs, OBCs etc). It was also observed in the study that few 196 elected women representatives were so poor that they could not forego their daily wage in lieu of attending panchayat meetings or undertaking any other activity connected with their ward or gram panchayat. This situation naturally comes in the way of such women getting politically empowered. One of the most important and critical factors observed in the context of political empowerment of women was the role played by education/ literacy. It was clear from the field data that literate/ educated women were better disposed in terms of various issues such as decision making, participation in the panchayat activities,

following up of developmental projects, having a proper perspective and vision etc. In other words it was clear from the study that the contribution of education to women getting politically empowered was positive and highly satisfactory. As an evidence for their empowerment, more than 50% of women representatives effectively represented the problems of their wards in proper forums.

The study also recorded through the analysis of field data that by and large, elected women representatives were learning the art of decision making which is an important indicator of political empowerment of women. It has to be appreciated that given the milieu of women (including those from lower socio-economic strata) need time to join mainstream politics. Nevertheless, the process of political empowerment was on a right track given the various limitations under which the rural women live and function. Another factor which proves the success of the empowerment process is that majority of the respondents expressed their desire to contest the elections again. They were of the opinion that given an opportunity they would like to complete their unfinished agenda at the gram panchayat in the ensuing term with more vigor. This idea of the representatives speaks 197 about the level of motivation they have achieved and the consequent empowerment they could garner. Study threw some light on the level of political empowerment that was possible with the women from lower echelons including those from SCs, STs OBCs etc. It was clear from the study that the level of empowerment amongst women belonging to lower strata was much less than those who are from the higher social classes. The very essence of 73rd Constitutional Amendment is to provide social justice to these downtrodden who are backward educationally, economically and otherwise. Given the said limitations, these women representatives could not participate in various activities of gram panchayats on par with others. Nevertheless, it could be seen from the study that even these women were getting empowered in the district which by any standard is a significant achievement. It was observed in the study that the women members from the under privileged categories had started feeling their worth as responsible citizens of the village democracy after serving the gram panchayats. This was seldom the situation earlier. Understanding and appreciating the innate worth is again an indicator of empowerment which was observed in the study area. It was recorded from the field observations that the confidence level of these women had increased quite satisfactorily and they were feeling proud to be a part of the Local Self Government.

It was observed that a substantial percentage of respondents were the members of self help groups (SHG). The SHG platforms must have groomed them to get into the Local Self Governments. This is a positive trend as SHGs are women's organizations which can empower them economically and otherwise. The SHG members are more suited to be the members of gram panchayats as they will have received some training to manage 198 organizations and participate in various activities. It can be inferred that the level of awareness of SHG members is higher. The study revealed that in the district the male elected representatives by and large supported the cause of women getting politically empowered. A majority of the male respondents spoke positive things about the women representatives. However, majority of men were against the policy of reservation for the post of presidents and vice-presidents. They did not object to the women becoming members of gram panchayats. It was also clear from the study that a large section of male respondents considered their women counterparts as equal to them. Considering the history of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the country and state, this is a favorable trend where men consider women as equals. Some of the 'disabling' factors for the political empowerment of women observed in the study included the following: As per the Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act 1993, at the gram panchayats level, no political parties are allowed to interfere in the administration of the gram panchayats. Contrary to this, it was observed in the study that political parties interfered at various levels of functioning of the Local Self Government starting with the identification of the candidates.

It was observed that many women members were made to contest the elections at the instance of political parties. This came in the way of women taking independent decisions at the level of contesting the elections. The interference was observed at later stages also which was totally uncalled for. It has to be understood here that such interferences takes away the freedom of women and will have its negative impact on women getting politically empowered. 199 It was observed that the male politicians for want of occupying political power introduce their women family members as dummy candidates and wanted to wield power through them which would naturally come in the way of women getting empowered politically in the absence of required independence and autonomy. Such instances were also observed during the field study. The summation of above findings gives an idea that amidst the listed limitations, the women elected representatives of gram panchayats in Udupi district have been performing quite satisfactorily as the members and are progressing ahead with a very positive attitude.

The various reasons including the percentage literacy amongst rural women may have contributed a great lot to this achievement. It can be rightly deduced from the above that the logic of 'Udupi Model of Women's Political Empowerment' can be construed or visualized with a tinge of rider. It is emerging and growing. At the same time its success to create an "autonomous or emancipated women" is not complete. It also depends upon the social empowerment of women on the one hand, absence of gender bias on the other. However, it is hoped that Incrementalist Perspective would enable the paradigm shift to take place in due course. The following suggestions may be considered for the better performance of women politicians and create women as an autonomous category. Programmes could be drafted keeping in view the limitations of the women and the inputs to be given. Special training programmes may be organized periodically for the elected women representatives giving importance for the women belonging to scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and OBCs. This has to be done in addition to the regular programmes under taken at the district. 200 Non-governmental organizations/government which are running SHGs may motivate enthusiastic women members to get into the local administration as these members would be better representatives taking their experience from the SHG flat form.

The NGO,s working in the area could also organize training /awareness programmes on empowerment of women and Importance of becoming a member may be made clear. Possible efforts should be directed to avoid proxy membership by women through the exploitation of the policy of reservation, as this comes in the way of independence and autonomy of women. The rural population and all the others concerned should understand the cause of women empowerment and should work to achieve the same. In other words, there must be a multi thronged approach to alleviate the problems of women and bring them to the mainstream.

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