

Development Initiative

**Governance at the Grassroots:
Innovative Leadership of a Woman
Panchayat President in Kerala**

Celine Sunny¹

Abstract

This paper is based on a study of women governance choosing a Gramapanchayat president in the state of Kerala. The objective of the study is to find out the contributions of women in governance by identifying the best woman pradhans/sarpanches who has shown remarkable improvement in local governance. The best Panchayat president was selected on the basis of specific parameters of assessment adopted for the study. The data were collected from the primary sources through interviews and informal discussions with the Panchayat president/officials/public and from the secondary sources of relevant documents. The paper deals with the innovative practices adopted and implemented by the Gramapanchayat president of Chemancheri in Kozhikkode district, in some of the important but neglected aspects of development such as education, health and sanitation, rural infrastructure, and gainful employment in the rural areas. The study shows that the woman leader has contributed towards qualitative differences in governance at the grassroot level by using the tangible and intangible technologies of blueprints, models, consultancy and problems solving methods. The constraints and hindrances faced by the Panchayat president in implementing these innovative practices are highlighted.

Keywords

governance; innovative practices; leadership; Kerala

Introduction

Gender issues are globally important and there has been an increased focus on gender equality and development in recent decades. It is often said that gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.

In India, of the total population of 1,210 million, 586.7 million (48.5%) are women. Sex ratio is 940/1000, female literacy ratio is 65.5 per cent against the male ratio of 82.1 per cent (Census2011), life expectancy of females is 64.2 years as against 62.6 of males (Government of India, 2013), work participation rate is 21.9 per cent (Jayaram, 2013), and maternal mortality rate (per 100,000 live births) is 212 (Government of India). The changing paradigms of social development are beginning to pay greater attention to gender strategies and initiating processes to bring women to the mainstream. The World Economic Forum has placed India in the 101st position among 136 countries in the 2013 edition of an annual report that makes a global assessment of the progress made in bridging the gender gap. But India has fared better in terms of the political empowerment of women (Ramachandran, 2013).

¹Centre for Women's Studies and Development, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Rajagiri. P.O, Kalamassery, Kochi, Kerala. Email: researchrajagiri@gmail.com

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the preamble, the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution. The Constitution empowers the states to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women and to ensure their rightful place in society. From the fifth (1974-78) Five-Year Plan onwards, there has been a marked shift in the approach to women issues from “welfare” to “development.”

Women are increasingly involved in the governance in India. Good governance is primarily a function of incorporating the virtues of administration and eliminating the vices of dysfunction. Good governance means participation of all sections of the society including women, and also the poor in decision making processes at all stages in order to strengthen the capabilities / capacities of these stages for the purpose. While, equality or higher level representation may still be eluding at the national level, there has been significant strengthening of women empowerment at the grassroot level, only due to the efforts made to strengthen the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). PRI is a system through which democracy, decentralisation and development are implemented for the welfare of the masses. PRI is a system of governance in which Gramapanchayats are the basic units of administration. It has three levels: village, block and district. The term Panchayat Raj is not new, having originated during the British administration. Raj literally means governance or government. Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayati Raj, a decentralised form of government where each village is responsible for its own affairs, as the foundation of India's political system. His term for such a vision was ultimately the Gram Swaraj.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments in 1993 became important steps for the empowerment of women. These amendments increased the level of participation of women in decision making by reserving 33 per cent seats for women in the PRI. This paved the way for the election of around one million women at the village, block and district levels.

It is quite clear from the documents viz., *Citizens Right Document* (Chemancheri Gramapanchayat, 2003), *Commemorative Document* (Chemancheri Gramapanchayat, 2002), *Integrated Development Document* (Chemancheri Gramapanchayat, 2005) of previous years that when conditions conducive for women to play a leading role in the decision making of the village exists, then the entire community benefits. This increased participation of women is often associated with better utilisation of financial resources, increased harmony in village and prioritisation of important but neglected aspects of development such as girls' education and sanitation. (Chemmancherry Gramapanchayath, 2002; 2003; 2005).

Status of Women in Kerala

According to the Human Development Report (Government of Kerala, 2005) Kerala is ranked at the top in gender-related development index (GDI) among the major States of India., Kerala has consistently maintained a favourable sex ratio for women (1084/1000) as against the all India figures of 940/1000 (Census 2011). On parameters such as life expectancy of females 76.3 (Government of Kerala, 2011), infant mortality rate (IMR) for females, 13 per 1000 live birth (Government of Kerala, 2011), and maternal mortality rate (MMR) 66 per 100,000 live births (Service, 2014), Kerala is far ahead of the other states in India. Further, Kerala stands second in women's enrollment in higher education (Nair, 2012) and the mean age of marriage for women is 22.1 (IIPS, 2010) which is comparatively on the higher side. Kerala presents a positive picture insofar as women's development is concerned. Women's awareness, women movements at the grassroot level, greater mobility, education and women and child health interventions have led to the overall development of women in Kerala.

As per the 73rd amendment, Kerala was in an advantageous position of facilitating opportunities for more women to partake in governance. The political atmosphere was also conducive in this regard. Hence, the state with the highest female literacy rate –92 per cent (Census 2011) in India had the privilege of fielding more educated women in the fray and they were able to impart good governance during their tenure of office. The other factors included political consciousness of women, their involvement in kudumbasree (a Kerala government initiative for eradication of poverty and empowerment of women) and self-help groups (SHGs) and the entrepreneurship skills exhibited by these women.

R.P Valsala, an educated and politically empowered woman of Chemancheri Gramapanchayat in the Panthalayani block, Koyilandi taluk of Kozhikode district had got the opportunity of entering into governance through the provision of the 73rd amendment. The Chemancheri Gramapanchayat too had the right ambiance essential for the promotion of women governance. Bringing women into politics was an impartial /act of positive discrimination. It was the pressure of law agencies combined with

the political imperative of winning elections that changed political parties' perception of women's limited capacity for public office. But crucially PRI helped change women's perception of themselves by providing opportunities for making them participate in the decision making process in governance. PRI has also given many women greater understanding of the workings of politics, in particular the importance of political parties. Women's involvement in PRI has helped them affirm their identity as women.

Over the years, women are being elected to local councils in unprecedented numbers. As a result of the 73rd amendment many of them emerged at the forefront of the decision making powers of the state. In the past, their roles were subjugated to that of men. They have now assumed roles and responsibilities of immense significance. A great deal of innovative programmes have been visualised and implemented by them. Some examples include improvement in education through better school buildings, improved bus schedules, innovative revenue generation strategies, innovative measures for fund raising, the achievement of total sanitation, and electrification of the 95 per cent of the villages.

Methodology

Women leaders are emerging. However, how the entry of these women into the formal structures of government is promoting good governance has not been analysed. The objective of this paper is to describe how the entry of an empowered woman into government structures reshaped governance at the grassroots. The paper is based on the study of the innovative programmes/best practices initiated and implemented by women leaders in local governance, their impact on the lives of the people, challenges faced by them and the lessons learnt from it. This paper focuses on the efforts/best practices followed by R.P.Valsala, the best president of the Gramapanchayat.

The study was conducted in Kerala by taking into consideration all the 331 Gramapanchayats having women presidents across 14 districts. A three-pronged approach was used to select the best Panchayat and president for an in-depth analysis, which included: a survey of all the 331 Gramapanchayats with detailed information; shortlisting the best Panchayats using specific parameters of assessment viz., number of awards won by the presidents, innovative programmes implemented and the quantum of support received from the public; and the elimination and selection of the best Panchayat and the best woman Panchayat president from the shortlisted ones by an expert committee. The tools used were interviews/informal discussions with the Panchayat president/officials/public and verification of relevant documents. Thus, the Panchayat of the Chemancheri of Koyilandi taluk of Kozhikode, was adjudged as the best Panchayat and R.P. Valsala was regarded as the Best Woman Panchayat President.

Findings

Chemancheri Gramapanchayat is situated in the Panthalayani block, Koyilandi taluk of Kozhikode district in northern Kerala. Spread over an area of 16.76 sq. km the Panchayat is flanked by the Arabian Sea on its Western side. Its southern and eastern boundaries are marked by the Korapuzha river. The Panchayat has a population of 32,532 and 6,433 households, out of which 2,387 are below the poverty line (US\$1/day). Eleven households in the Panchayat are homeless (Chemancheri Gramapanchayat, 2004). The people are mainly into farming and fishing. A few have secondary occupations in the handloom and coir sectors. The decline in agricultural output due mainly to fragmentation of land holdings, lack of irrigation facilities and the fall in prices of agricultural products has led to unemployment. Consequently, the economy of the Panchayat has suffered in recent years (Chemancheri Gramapanchayat, 2003; 2005).

R.P.Valsala, the president of the Chemancheri Gramapanchayath was part of the political scene from her early years. Her emergence as a political leader was during the school and college years. Her active role in political parties resulted in her candidacy in the 1995 Panchayat elections. She became a ward member. In the election that followed (2000-05) she contested and became a ward member again. Through consensus she was elected president as the post was reserved for women. For the third consecutive time in 2006 she won again. She is a ward member at present.

Innovative Programmes and Best Practices

Innovation is generally understood as the successful introduction of a new means or method. The innovative programmes carried out by the Chemancheri Gramapanchayat under the leadership of Valsala are different from what is going on today with technological interventions such as the use of high cost machinery or sophisticated technical know-how. There were no advanced technologies

involved and there were no top level professionals hired as consultants. The technology used was mainly people's participation. The innovative programmes carried out by the Chemancheri Gramapanchayat under the leadership of Valsala are categorised under three headings: production sector, service sector, infrastructure sector, and other sectors.

Production Sector

The activities that were carried out under the production sector include: 1) The renovation of traditional water resources; 2) the promotion of agriculture products; and 3) animal husbandry. With the intention of enhancing agricultural cultivation, the Panchayat reconstructed the water resources in Poomkulam, Meppayikulam and Thiruvangoorparakulam, Chathanadath and Poovaceherry. The renovation thus had assisted in accelerating the agricultural cultivation and earning a decent livelihood for many of the families (Chemancheri Gramapanchayat, 2002; 2005). The maintenance and renovation of the bunds and canals especially in Chathanad, Valiyakettu and Poovachery resulted in the rejuvenation of paddy cultivation. Manure was distributed to all the farmers in the Panchayat. In order to promote coconut cultivation, the prime agricultural cultivation in the area, the Panchayat initiated a project called Kalpatharu through which production increased from 30 to 80 coconuts per tree per year. The Panchayat also distributed goats and chickens to those living below the poverty line. Assistance in the construction of cattle sheds was also provided to them. These efforts resulted in high milk production that augmented income (Chemancheri Gramapanchayat, 2005). For the fisher folk a number of initiatives were carried out: renovation of the fish market, and financial assistance for the houses, and for toilet construction in their communities.

Undoubtedly, the Panchayat president's efforts to restore the dwindling employment opportunities in paddy cultivation are commendable. Developing the available sources with least expenditure and with the participation of the people make these efforts long lasting. The promotion of animal husbandry is a welcome development at a time when people tend to migrate out of the state in search for jobs (Chemancheri Gramapanchayat, 2005).

Service Sector

The innovative programmes under the service sector go side by side with provisions for education. The Panchayat with the help of anganwadi teachers and volunteers began an awareness campaign on the importance of education and for holding night classes. Accordingly, the passing rate of Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) students increased remarkably from 45 per cent in 2000 to 89 per cent in 2005 (Chemancheri Gramapanchayat, 2005). Similarly, a computer centre was opened by the president even before the introduction of the Akshaya projects in the state. A number of women from poor households earned substantial income from doing data entry and other computer jobs. In an effort to bring the mentally retarded and the disabled into the mainstream of the society, Abhayam, a Chemancheri Panchayat institution, was established. The Panchayat committee, headed by Valsala upon the realisation of the fact that the objective of the institution could be achieved only through a committed and dedicated work of an independent agency, Panchayats handed over the institution to an independent agency.

For the environment, the Clean Chemancheri Project was pursued. The aim of the project was to bring about change in solid waste management through the selfless co-operation of everyone irrespective of the political, religious and socio-economic differences. The kudumbasree members of the Panchayat collected waste from around 7,000 households of the Panchayat and deposited in a common area. With strong support from the Panchayat, the people were able to put in proper place several tons of solid waste that destroy the environment. School students of the Gramapanchayat especially of Thiruvangur Higher Secondary School also played a role in this clean project campaign. In addition to the solid management project, Chemancheri pioneered the publication of Kuruthola, a booklet of paintings and writings of primary school students in the Panchayat. Chemancheri developed a good reference library with books in different educational branches worth around Rs. 100,000.

Infrastructure Sector

The major infrastructure projects in the area include the construction of houses, roads and pathways. Roads and pathways were needed in the Panchayat. Within her five-year term, Valsala was able to provide financial assistance for the construction of 192 houses. However, the fund allocation was very limited. The Panchayat authorities collected taxes by joining hands with other government officials to form a pooled fund. With this, the Panchayat repaired 82 stretches of the road network.

And tarring was done for about 7,850 meters and soling for 7,600 meters. New roads of about 8,000 meters were also constructed.

Other Sectors

Other innovative activities were collection of taxes and implementation of government schemes and formation of kudumbasree units. The elected representatives of the Panchayat collected taxes with the help of the government officials. Taxes were collected even from big businesses like the Kappad Beach resort. The figures of 2001-05 showed that 100 per cent of the taxes were collected in the Chemancheri Gramapanchayat. The president has displayed active leadership in the timely completion of the central government-sponsored schemes.

As regards expenditures, the Panchayat was able to spend 100 per cent of the fund allocation during 2001-05. During the last few years, 193 kudumbasree units have been formed. Income-generating programmes like cultivation of oyster, horticulture, banana plantation, and repairs of electrical instruments and electronics were initiated. Under the special project scheme, a hotel was constructed. It started functioning for the Gramapanchayat. In addition, five copra-processing units were built under the kudumbasree as an income generating initiative.

To sum up, the Panchayat Council, under the leadership of the president Valsala had done a commendable job with regard to governance. The Panchayat won many awards during her tenure. The Swaraj trophy given by the Ministry of Local Self Government of Kerala and the District Collector's Trophy for completing the central government sponsored schemes in a time bound manner are some of them. During this period, the Panchayat also achieved 100 per cent tax collection and 100 per cent utilisation of state and central government sponsored schemes.

Table 1
Challenges and adopted strategies

Challenges Faced	Adopted Strategies
Lack of co-operation from the different committees of the Panchayat	Arriving at consensus through discussions
Constraints in prioritisation of projects	Discussions with people at ward level
Difficulties in co-ordinating the various activities of the various departments of the Panchayat	Holding meetings of the concerned
Local issues	Discussion with the local leaders as well as those who were directly affected by the issues
Problems in implementation of the projects due to lack of awareness among the public regarding the benefits of the projects	Massive campaigns on Awareness Generation about the projects
Mobilisation of people's participation	Frequent Interactions with the people

Lessons Learnt

A few of the prominent lessons learnt by the president while performing her roles were: Developing the skill of team work by involving other ward members and officials concerned in both decision making and implementation of the projects; importance of drawing people's participation in decision making process for sustainability of the programmes undertaken; facing the challenges/problems confidently by interacting with stalwarts/ role models/ senior officials and activists who had confronted with similar situations and managed the same successfully; timely follow up of the activities for better results, appropriate methodologies for ensuring the participation of people in the Gramasabhas for the effective implementation of the projects, enhancing the ability of planning, directing, organising, monitoring and reviewing, to implement various programmes /projects, lobbying with the resourceful and powerful group such as politicians, religious leaders, social activists and academicians for the required support and co-operation for the implementation of the various projects, and identifying and dealing with the problems of women, far better than that of her counterpart.

Summary and Conclusion

Gender equality is desirable and productive. Among the Indian states, Kerala benefited the most from the 73rd amendment because of factors like highest female literacy rate, their political consciousness, entrepreneurial skills and involvement in kudumbasree and SHGs. The choice of Chemancheri Gramapanchayat in the Panthalayani block, Koyilandi taluk of Kozhikode district in northern Kerala as a study area is justified as Kerala had the necessary development and women-empowering conditions that other states may choose to emulate. The objective of the paper was to describe how the entry of an empowered woman into the government structure reshaped governance at the grassroots in terms of:

Innovative programmes /best practices under three heads: 1) Production sector—renovation of traditional water resources, promotion of agriculture products; and, animal husbandry. 2) Service sector—provisions for education awareness campaign for Anganwadi teachers, holding of night classes for weak children, initiation of a computer centre for income generation for the women, establishment of an institution, Abhayam, for the mentally retarded and disabled and handing over of the same to an independent agency for better performance, publication of Kuruthola, a booklet of paintings and writings of primary school students and establishment of a reference library. Improvement of health and hygiene, introduction of Clean Chemancheri Project for solid waste management through the selfless co-operation of everyone irrespective of their political, religious and socio-economic differences. 3) Infrastructure sector—construction of houses, roads and pathways. 4) Other Sectors—100 per cent collection of taxes with the cooperation of all government departments, implementation of government schemes on a time bound manner, formation of kudumbasree units, and spending 100 per cent of the fund allocation.

Impact of programmes in people's lives: The innovative practices introduced in the production sector has resulted in increased water availability for drinking and agricultural purposes and enhancement of agricultural produce. Service sector—increase in the SSLC pass rate, enhancement of computer literacy and subsequent increase of income for women and improvement of the health and hygiene condition of the people. Infrastructure— provided safe shelter to the homeless, improved the transportation facilities of the Panchayat and enhanced the income of women through the kudumbasree entrepreneurial activities.

Challenges and lessons learnt: Challenges faced included lack of co-operation from the different committees of the Panchayat, constraints in prioritisation of projects, difficulties in co-ordinating the various activities of the various departments of the Panchayat, local issues, problems in implementation due to lack of information on the projects, and mobilisation of people's participation.

Prominent lessons learnt were developing the skill of team work, importance of drawing people's participation in decision making process, facing the challenges/ problems confidently, timely follow up of the activities, appropriate methodologies for ensuring the participation of people in the Gramasabhas, enhancing the ability of planning, directing, organising, monitoring and reviewing the projects, lobbying with the resourceful and powerful group and identifying and dealing with the problems of women better than her other counterparts.

Recommendations

The major recommendations are: Proper training on the PRI system, goals and processes of self-rule, more support structures and services needed by women, more capacity building programmes, more sensitised training of male members on women's rights, more support from NGO's, 50 per cent reservation to women in the local self- governance, political conscientisation of women, women's education, formation of self-help groups for women empowerment.

To conclude, the secret of success of this woman president has to be measured in terms of her use of tangible and intangible technologies (such as blueprints, models, consultancy and problems solving) in mobilising people's participation to the maximum possible extent, prioritising the needs of the community, availing and utilising the co-operation of the people and the officials concerned in implementing the projects and completing these projects/ programmes on time. Kerala is one of the few states in India to have shown progress in building a system of grassroot governance which is getting momentum among the masses. The state has recently implemented the policy of 50 per cent reservation to women in the local self- governance—another step towards the principle of equality.

If other Indian states can emulate the good practices in governance implemented by the able leadership of Valsala, a positive change in woman governance in their respective states would be seen. Further facilitating interactive sessions and sharing of experiences of this woman with the respective women leaders of other states could instill skills of confidence, would foster will power and leadership qualities among them that could contribute to their excellence in governance. A model

like Valsala could be created in other states by pursuing measures like: selecting only those women with at least basic education, right political attitude, and appropriate skills in governance and leadership qualities. Moreover, continuous support and encouragement from the male counterparts is all the more important in achieving this goal.

References

- Government of India (2013). *India Country Report*. New Delhi: Central Statistics Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.
- Chemancheri Gramapanchayat. (2002). *Integrated Development Document*. Kozhikkode: Chemancheri Gramapanchayath.
- Chemancheri Gramapanchayat. (2003). *Citizens Right Document*. Kozhikkode: Chemancheri Gramapanchayath.
- Chemancheri Gramapanchayat. (2004). *Plan Document*. Kozhikkode: Chemancheri Gramapanchayath.
- Chemancheri Gramapanchayat. (2005). *Commemorative Document*. Kozhikkode: Chemancheri Gramapanchayath.
- IIPS (International Institute for Population Sciences). (2010). *District Level Household and Facility Survey (DLHS-3), 2007-08*. Mumbai: IIPS.
- Jayaram, A. (2013). 'Proportion-of-women-in-workforce-declines.' *The Hindu, Business line*.
<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/industry-and-economy/proportion-of-women-in-workforce-declines/article5222042.ece>. Accessed 4 September 2014.
- Nair, P. V. (2012). 'Enrolment of women in higher education increases.' *The Times of India*.
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/Enrolment-of-women-in-higher-education-increases/articleshow/16244028.cms>. Accessed 4 September 2014.
- Ramachandran, T. (2013). 'India ranked 101 in global gender gap report.' *The Hindu*.
<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/blogs/blog-datadelve/article5275487.ece>. Accessed 4 September 2014.
- Service, E. N. (2014). 'Kerala registers lowest maternal mortality rate in country.' *The New Indian Express*.
<http://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/thiruvananthapuram/Kerala-Registers-Lowest-Maternal-Mortality-Rate-in-Country/2014/01/06/article1985321.ece>. Accessed 4 September 2014.
- Government of Kerala (2005). *Human Development Report*. Trivandrum: State Planning Board.
- Government of Kerala (2011). *Economic Review 2011: Human Development*. Trivandrum: State Planning Board.