

Voice of the Village: A Leader Forged in Determination

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Abstract

This case study explores the leadership journey of Smt. Baby Balakrishnan, Jilla Panchayat President of Kasaragod district, Kerala, whose leadership trajectory exemplifies resilience, social commitment, and gender-inclusive governance. Born into an economically marginalized family, she overcame structural and cultural barriers to emerge as a transformative leader in local self-governance. Her initiatives which range from decentralised planning, renewable energy projects, biodiversity conservation, and digital literacy programs, to the empowerment of women and marginalized communities illustrate the integration of administrative vision with empathy and social justice. Her recognition at national and international levels highlights the significance of grassroots women leaders in shaping participatory and sustainable governance models. This study situates her contributions within the broader context of women's political participation in India following the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, underscoring her role as both a practitioner and a catalyst for inclusive democratic development.

Keywords

Women's Leadership, Local Governance, Grassroots Empowerment, Gender and Politics, Decentralisation

Introduction

Historically, women in India have been systematically silenced and marginalized, often beginning within the confines of their own homes. Deep-rooted discrimination and subordination have long shaped their lived experiences. Patriarchal norms have long dictated that a woman's place is to obey, serve, and remain unheard, a reality that has over the years spilled over into every sphere of society, including politics. For generations, women were denied the right to express their opinions, even within their own homes and let alone participate in the political landscape of the nation.

Against this backdrop, the introduction of the Women's Reservation Bill and the landmark 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992 marked a significant moment in India's democratic journey. These amendments mandated the reservation of one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies, creating a structural shift in the political landscape. Their primary aim was also to enable women to step into spaces of power, articulate their needs, and become active participants in governance. It was a path by which they could recognise their own voices and of others who are struggling. Today, leaders such as K.K. Shailaja, Swati Maliwal, Mahua Moitra, Medha Patkar, Priyanka Gandhi and Brinda Karat, have emerged as powerful voices advocating for women's rights across the nation. They continue to challenge injustices, break patriarchal barriers, and lead movements that empower women at every level of society.

In addition to nationally recognized figures, there exists a cadre of remarkable women leaders emerging from the grassroots level, individuals who have fought long and hard to assert their voices and claim their rightful space in public life. These women have navigated formidable barriers rooted by the walls of patriarchy, tradition, and socio-economic constraints. Among such resilient and inspirational leaders is **Smt. Baby Balakrishnan**, the Jilla Panchayat President of Kasaragod district in Kerala. This case study seeks to examine her pathway into political leadership, with a particular focus on the personal, social, and structural challenges she has encountered and overcome. By exploring her lived experiences, this study aims to highlight the transformative potential of grassroots women's leadership in local governance.

Social Roots and Political Awakening.

Baby Balakrishnan was born and raised in an economically marginalised household, where both of her parents earned their livelihood as daily wage labourers in a stone-breaking unit. Her early life was marked by acute financial hardship and limited access to opportunities.

Despite these formidable socio-economic constraints, she emerged as an exemplar of perseverance and academic ambition. Among eight siblings, most of whom were only able to complete education up to the seventh grade, she was the only one who managed to complete her primary schooling and continue on to higher education. Her academic journey culminated at Nehru Arts and Science College in Kasargod, a feat she attributes to her strong sense of discipline, intrinsic motivation, and a consistent commitment to learning.



Her entry into political activism and leadership began during her student years, where she became actively involved in the Students' Federation. She displayed early signs of political consciousness and social commitment by engaging in protest demonstrations and publicly voicing her perspectives on pertinent issues, despite facing institutional constraints, especially from the science department, which traditionally discouraged political participation. These experiences were foundational in shaping her ideological orientation and leadership ethos. She vividly recalls the powerful sense of collective identity and purpose that accompanied the sloganeering and mobilizations during her student days, those activities that not only grounded her political identity but also equipped her with the tools of grassroots activism.

Upon completing her undergraduate studies, she broadened her leadership involvement by taking active roles in various SFI and local political units across Nileshwaram, Kanhangad, and Kasargod. Her transformative entry into formal political office occurred when she successfully contested the Panchayat elections in Madikkai and became **the Panchayath President in 1996**. This decision, however, was not without familial opposition. Her father, adhering to conventional aspirations, envisioned a more secure and socially acceptable career for her, specifically as a schoolteacher. Nevertheless, her unwavering commitment to both education and public service led her to pursue a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree while simultaneously serving as the elected President of the Madikkai Panchayat. Her election was facilitated in part by the active support of progressive political allies advocating for greater inclusion of women in local governance structures. Assuming dual roles as a student and public official, she mastered the complex task of balancing academic pursuits with the practical

demands of governance. Her tenure as one of the youngest Panchayat Presidents in the country was characterised by a deep sense of civic responsibility and an energetic, hands-on approach to leadership. She earned the admiration and trust of her community members, as well as former educators, one of whom recalls regularly recommending her for school-level programmes due to her evident leadership potential.

Under her leadership, the Madikkai Panchayat emerged as a benchmark of decentralised governance, especially during the period following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which sought to empower local self-governments in India. Her administrative capability was further sharpened when she was chosen as the **district representative** for a study on decentralisation and its implementation. These experiences not only elevated her understanding of policy frameworks but also enabled her Panchayat to be conferred with the prestigious award for **Best Panchayat in 1998** for its exemplary efforts in participatory planning and decentralised development. A defining aspect of her leadership was her conscious resistance to patriarchal norms and gender-based discrimination in public office. During an era when women leaders were often tokenised or dismissed, she actively asserted her authority, ensured her voice and that of other women were heard, and worked to democratise the decision-making process. She recounts incidents where she had to sign Panchayat documents while attending B.Ed. lectures, underscoring the continuous balancing act she was required to perform. These episodes reflect not only the structural challenges of being a woman in leadership but also her resilience in overcoming them.

In a candid reflection, she shares, *“I was so firm in my command as a leader that I carried it into my family life. When I got angry, I would become assertive and authoritative, which sometimes caused tension with my husband. Over time, I consciously worked to separate my professional demeanour from my domestic life.”* This statement illustrates the layered identity she inhabited, as a firm, capable public servant and a woman navigating personal roles within a traditional familial structure. Her story is a compelling testament to the interwoven nature of public service, gender negotiation, and self-evolution.

Impact of Leadership on Local Governance and Social Welfare.

A true leader is one who not only listens to the needs of the people but internalizes their struggles as their own, responding with empathy, vision, and action. Smt. Baby Balakrishnan stands as a remarkable embodiment of such leadership. Her deep-rooted connection with her

community and unwavering commitment to inclusive development have defined her decades-long public service.

Due to her exemplary dedication during her first term, she was **re-elected as Panchayat President in 2001**, a testament to the trust and confidence reposed in her by the people. During this second tenure, her focus expanded toward technological innovation and decentralized planning, for which she established various sub-committees aimed at strengthening local administrative capacity. A key initiative during this period was the Aero Water Project, implemented to ensure access to clean and sustainable drinking water, addressing a core issue of rural livelihood and health. Her leadership trajectory continued to ascend as she was elected to the Block Panchayat in 2005, where she maintained her commitment to community welfare. In 2007, she made history by becoming the first person of Malayali origin to be elected to the CPCRI Advisory Committee—an achievement that strengthened her rising influence and recognition at a broader policy level. While actively engaged in governance, Baby Balakrishnan continued to pursue her academic interests. In 2010, after completing her Master's in Sociology, she served as a guest faculty member in three schools simultaneously, demonstrating her passion for education. Despite her demanding schedule, she assisted a research project led by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), on recommendation by Dr. Thomas Isaac, reflecting her integration of policy, research, and pedagogy.

Another significant milestone in her career was the establishment of the Madikkai Community Bank, where she served as President. Under her leadership, the bank received the **Award for Best Community Bank**, not only for its operational excellence but also for its role in generating local employment and financial empowerment. In 2014, she also **led a World Bank-supported project** in the district, positioning herself as an influential figure. Her portfolio of leadership extended beyond institutional governance. She also served as the **District (Jilla) President of the Mahila Association**, an organization devoted to advancing women's rights and welfare. This role further amplified her voice as an advocate for gender justice at both policy and grassroots levels. During the COVID-19 crisis, Baby Balakrishnan displayed remarkable responsiveness and innovation. She spearheaded the launch of a community supermarket in the Madikkai Panchayat, where essential commodities were sold at subsidized rates, easing the burden on economically vulnerable households. This initiative not only addressed immediate community needs but also garnered widespread recognition.



Her Biggest Leap into Leadership.

Among her many significant achievements, Baby Balakrishnan regards her election as the **President of the Jilla Panchayat** as the most defining moment in her political and administrative career. She perceived this role not merely as a positional upgrade but as a vital platform to effect systemic, district-wide transformations. With expanded jurisdiction and influence, she undertook a series of developmental initiatives aimed at sustainable growth and inclusive governance.

One of her most noteworthy accomplishments during this tenure was the implementation of renewable energy infrastructure in public institutions. She spearheaded a landmark initiative to convert government schools into solar-powered campuses, a move that reflected her commitment to environmental sustainability and energy independence. In recognition of this pioneering effort, she was honoured with the prestigious **Akshaya Urja Award**, underscoring her role as a progressive and forward-thinking administrator. Equally important was her long-term vision to foster economic self-reliance within her Panchayat. Through strategic planning and decentralised resource management, she succeeded in guiding the Panchayat toward self-sufficiency. Her model emphasized sustainable livelihoods, participatory planning, and community empowerment. In addition to infrastructural and environmental reforms, Baby Balakrishnan remained deeply committed to social justice, particularly the protection and advancement of women and children. She played a key role in the institutionalization of gender-responsive governance mechanisms, including the formation and operational strengthening of sector-level vigilance committees and women's collectives. These grassroots bodies were instrumental in promoting community surveillance, addressing rights violations, and ensuring safe and accountable public spaces.

Recognizing the rapidly evolving global and technological landscape, Baby Balakrishnan placed strong emphasis on digital literacy and skill development, especially in underserved rural communities. She introduced targeted initiatives aimed at equipping women

and youth with essential digital competencies, thereby aligning local progress with broader national goals such as Digital India. These efforts not only empowered individuals with new opportunities but also contributed to bridging the rural-urban digital divide. In parallel, she adopted an unwavering stance against drug abuse, understanding its detrimental impact on youth and societal health. Through coordinated efforts with law enforcement agencies and educational institutions, she led sustained anti-narcotic awareness campaigns, further solidifying her role as a proactive and socially responsive leader.

Empowering Women and Youth.

From the very inception of her public service career, Smt. Baby Gopalakrishnan demonstrated a strategic and unwavering commitment to the empowerment and socio-economic upliftment of women and children within her constituency. Notably, even prior to the official implementation of the Kudumbashree Mission in 1998—Kerala's pioneering initiative for poverty alleviation and women's empowerment, she had proactively mobilized community-based **self-help groups (SHGs)** in her locality. Acknowledging the systemic marginalization of women, particularly those who had been excluded from formal education systems, she strategically allocated 30% of local developmental funds toward livelihood-oriented skill enhancement programs. These interventions included training in micro-enterprises such as soap-making, garment production, and food preservation, providing women with tangible income-generating capabilities and catalysing their entry into the informal economy. This grassroots initiative served as a transformative disruption of entrenched patriarchal structures, facilitating a paradigm shift in gender roles and economic participation. Through increased access to income and opportunities for self-sufficiency, local women began to achieve a sense of economic autonomy and social agency, aligning with Baby's core leadership vision of gender-responsive governance.

Further exemplifying her commitment to women's empowerment was the launch of **Project Darppanam**, implemented in collaboration with the Kudumbashree collective. This initiative aimed at enhancing educational access and skill acquisition for women across diverse socio-economic strata. Through this program, approximately 250 women received targeted instruction in both academic and vocational domains, reflecting her dedication to fostering inclusive capacity building. Drawing from her own experiences within a conservative, traditional family context, Baby demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the structural

barriers faced by women, which informed her empathetic and context-sensitive leadership style.

Her interpersonal engagement extended beyond formal policy interventions. Recounting an episode, she recalled, *“Once, after a meeting, a young girl approached me seeking shelter. With no family to support her, she asked if she could come with me. I took her in, educated her, and supported her journey—because I believe every woman has potential. I saw her as my own younger sister.”* Such instances reflect the embedded ethic of care that characterized her leadership, blending policy-level vision with deeply personal, community-rooted action. In another case, she facilitated the rehabilitation and reintegration of a woman trapped in an abusive marriage by ensuring both safety and employment, further underscoring her commitment to holistic gender justice.

A local resident of Madikkai village attested to her deep relational ties within the community: *“Baby echi (elder sister) is like a family member. She visits our homes, helps with everything. Because of her leadership, our village is now well known and respected.”* This testimonial underscores the relational legitimacy and participatory trust that she cultivated over time.

In parallel with her gender-based initiatives, Baby Gopalakrishnan also recognized the pivotal role of educational capital, particularly English language proficiency, in facilitating intergenerational mobility among youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. In response to regional educational disparities, she **spearheaded a community-based English language learning program**, strategically tailored to address the needs of underprivileged youth. This initiative not only democratized access to language education but also served as a vehicle for enhanced employability and social mobility. Her work in this domain was honoured with a Government Excellence Award, signifying recognition of her innovative, inclusive, and future-oriented leadership in rural education.

Personal Achievements and Interests.

Smt. Baby Balakrishnan’s academic inclination and research orientation deeply informed her leadership style. She regularly engaged in independent studies, most notably a comparative research project titled **“Before and After Decentralisation”**, which analysed the impact of policy reforms on local governance. Her commitment to knowledge-driven governance led to her selection for an international study tour to countries like London and Switzerland, where she examined global governance models to extract practical insights.

Her contributions have been widely recognized through numerous prestigious honours. Among them is the **Best Women Leadership in Panchayat Award by the Institute of Social Sciences**, celebrating her exemplary administrative capabilities and serving as inspiration for women leaders nationwide. Demonstrating a strong ecological vision, she spearheaded a **Biodiversity-Related Project (2021–2022)** focused on the preservation of native flora and fauna, earning the **State Biodiversity Award (2025)**. In 2024, she received the **Excellence Award for Women from the Universal Record Forum in Qatar**, acknowledging her international impact in social development. A consistent thread in her public service has been her unwavering focus on the upliftment of marginalized and minority communities. She has actively pursued the modernization of socio-economically vulnerable groups through targeted skill development programs, vocational training, and employment facilitation. These efforts reflect her integrative vision of equity, empowerment, and long-term capacity building.

Reflecting on her decades-long public service, she remarks, *“I have never sat idle. Always busy and engaged with work and my people. And they mean everything to me... this was never a tiresome work for me. I have always enjoyed helping my people and working for them...”* Her words encapsulate a work ethic grounded in compassion and purpose.

The leadership trajectory of Smt. Baby Balakrishnan represents a paradigmatic example of gender-inclusive, community-rooted, and ecologically sensitive governance. Her model of leadership, marked by administrative acumen, grassroots engagement, and a sustained commitment to social equity—offers a compelling framework for reimagining local self-governance in India.



Conclusion.

As a native of a village in the Kasaragod district of Kerala, where women's participation in political activities and leadership roles has not traditionally been encouraged or supported, leaders like Smt. Baby Balakrishnan stand out as powerful figures of inspiration. Her journey through the deeply entrenched gender norms that equate womanhood with domesticity, caregiving, and silence, reflects a profound resilience and determination. By challenging these societal expectations, she has redefined the role of women in public life. Her political convictions, clarity of purpose, and commitment to community welfare have significantly influenced my own perspectives on leadership.



Through conversations with her, I am reminded that leadership, especially in local governance, is deeply rooted in lived realities rather than inherited positions. Through the life of Baby Balakrishnan, I have come to understand that the journey from marginalisation to leadership is neither linear nor easy, it is one of resistance, negotiation, and unwavering resolve. Her ability to integrate education, activism, and administration into a coherent life path not only challenges existing gender hierarchies but also offers a critical model for participatory democracy. Her story reaffirms my belief that inclusive governance begins when voices like hers are not just heard, but trusted and followed.

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