

UNHEARD NO MORE: THE JOURNEY OF SMT. A.V. LEJU

Anand Santhosh
Zakir Husain Delhi College

In many villages in India , big to small , leadership has long been shaped by the traditional patriarchal norms where women are expected to be on the sidelines of the public sphere. But changes arise in the most unexpected scenarios. Rajiv Gandhi was not just a former Prime Minister, he was someone who staunchly believed in the power of the people to shape their own future. He believed in giving power back to the people. His vision for an inclusive India was shaped through the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendments. This redefined how villages and cities were governed. By guaranteeing one-third of the seats for women, Rajiv Gandhi opened the doors that had been long closed by the traditional norms. Suddenly all women, all mothers, all daughters and all sisters were given seats in the decision making process, they were given the power to make decisions, shape their own lives which was forever denied to them and thereby breaking new grounds for the generation to come.

I am Anand Santhosh, a third-year student of Political Science Honours at Zakir Husain Delhi College. Smt. A.V. Leju, the Panchayat President of my native village where I have spent most of my life, has been a powerful source of inspiration for many young girls and women in Karivellur, and continues to be so even today. Her journey toward becoming a strong political figure, along with her lived experiences, has been documented in this case study. To ensure that the study presents a rich and reliable account, various methods such as individual interviews and structured observations were employed to gather information about this woman leader from the Karivellur-Peralam Grama Panchayat in the Kannur district of Kerala.

Introduction

This case study examines the leadership journey and accomplishments of Smt. A.V. Leju, who is currently serving her first term as the president of Karivellur Peralam Grama Panchayat. This Panchayat is located in the Kannur district of Kerala. It is a rural local body within the Payyannur Panchayat Samiti. It comprises two villages and is divided into 14 wards. This case study shares the story of a determined woman who has stepped into leadership in the Panchayati Raj Institution highlighting how she finds ways to succeed and make a difference in her community even though she was challenged by the strong traditional as well as patriarchal norms.

Formative Years and Pathway to Political Engagement

Smt A.V. Leju's story as a political representative began after she was married. She was born in a nuclear family, where her father worked as a jailer, being born in a family that valued discipline, her world was limited to her home and school. There was only limited space or opportunities for social interactions. Everything changed when she joined a joint family after marriage. She was surrounded by more people, she found herself in a livelier and more socially connected environment. New relationships and responsibilities gradually helped her get out of her shell. Over time her confidence grew more and she desired to contribute beyond the walls of her home inspiring her to take on public roles and make a difference beyond her home.

She started her political career through active involvement in school level governance, she was the PTA (Parents Teachers Association) President for a period of 12 years. Her service as PTA president was widely recognised which led to her earning several awards. Alongside this she has also contributed to several women associations, finding ways to support others. Eventually she decided to step into local governance by contesting elections at the ward level. She contested ward elections from the 10th ward, which she won with a remarkable margin which can be seen as a sign that the people trusted her and her leadership qualities. After her remarkable success in the ward elections, she was approached by the party for her to contest for the post of the Panchayat President. Initially she hesitated, doubted herself, she believed there were others who were more experienced and qualified for such a big responsibility. However, the party expressed strong confidence in her leadership qualities and gradually persuaded her to take up the responsibility of leading the Panchayat as its President. She took up the role of the Panchayat President in 2021.

Milestones and Hurdles in Her Political Career

Upon assuming the role of President without any formal prior training, she faced a certain amount of challenges during her initial year of tenure. She often doubted herself, questioning if she was ready to handle such a huge responsibility. Was she good enough? Was she capable of leading? These questions weighed heavily upon her. Furthermore her opinions were highly undervalued. Many of the other members were older, experienced and some of them also held higher positions in the past. Being a woman, her opinions especially on matters of economic planning and resource allocation were ignored. The traditional narrow mindset persisted, that because she was a woman she had little knowledge and experience in money or governance. But this was not enough to stop her, instead she made sure to prepare thoroughly. Before

speaking her due she studied the issues inherently and made sure that she understood the subjects well. And when she spoke with confidence, everyone started listening. Her voice started being heard, not just in the Panchayat but also in the community. She stated, “If we have enough knowledge of what we are talking about, we don't have to be afraid of anyone”. Even though she faced many gender based biases and discrimination initially, her resilience and determination earned her respect. She made it to the point where - her words today are not just heard but are seen as the final word in the Panchayat.

Her Role in Strengthening Women’s Agency in Karivellur

Throughout her tenure as the Panchayat President, Smt. Leju gave considerable attention to women's empowerment. Women participation in the Gram Sabha grew noticeably. The women who did participate in the Grama Sabha often raised their voices and their needs thoroughly, and their voices and needs were heard and taken seriously. She proudly shared that 10% of the government funds are specially allocated for women empowerment. And under her administration these funds were allocated according to the needs and demands expressed by women in the Gram Sabha. Much of her work for women empowerment was carried through “*Kudumbashree*”. Kudumbashree is a poverty eradication and women empowerment program implemented by the government of Kerala. It is also known as State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM). The main objective of Kudumbashree is to alleviate poverty and empower women through various initiatives. It utilizes a three tiered community network of women, fostering collective action and decision making. It also supports micro finance activities, the formation of many micro enterprises and the marketing of products created by its members. The programme also engages in social development activities, including those related to gender, agriculture and animal husbandry. Leju described Kudumbashree as not just a government scheme, but as a network for helping women. Through Kudumbashree Smt. Leju tries to empower women in the Panchayat economically and socially. Many initiatives were taken up through this Kudumbashree. More than 25 enterprises were started across different wards. These include bakeries, tailoring units, rice mills, gymnasiums and many more. What made these initiatives special was that these were the results of the voices of women in the Gram Sabha. The women themselves have identified what they needed and with a little help from the government they were able to bring their ideas and wants to life. Her efforts to women empowerment was noticed by all, Women especially older women often appreciated her works and also expressed their admiration for her leadership.

During her tenure, a book was published titled “*Jwalitha*” in which there are many articles on different issues and other matters affecting the Panchayat. Out of which the article titled “*Sthree Padhavi Padanam*” focused specifically on the problems faced by women in their daily life within the Panchayat. Small teams were made of retired teachers and other volunteers were constituted. They visited women working in many places, including those in beedi companies and studied about their needs and problems. For Leju this isn't just a book, it's a record of lived experience. She stated that this particular book can be used for future leaders to understand the problems and challenges within the Panchayat, especially the problems faced by women, and to make necessary policies that truly address their needs.

From Vision to Reality: Transformative Work on the Ground

During her tenure as a President, Leju was successful in implementing many policies and activities and helped make Karivellur Peralam Gram Panchayat one of the most admired Panchayats of the district. Among all her achievements, the one she is most proud of is the successful organization of a Karivellur fest- a significant event which she conceptualized and led despite the resistance from others.

The idea of a fest exclusively for Karivellur came up in one of the Grama Sabha meetings, Leju supported this idea, but the idea was initially opposed by several senior members from the Panchayat. They raised her concerns of the fest being a failure and the Panchayat may fall into a serious debt. Moreover, Karivellur lacked the space to host such a big event. Every time she put forward the idea of the fest in meetings, she was heavily discouraged and eventually, it seemed the plan would be dropped off. This wasn't enough for Leju to give up. She believed in herself and took it upon herself to make it happen. She told everyone that she would handle all the planning and financial responsibilities. Even though the idea was nearly abandoned, she along with the support of some members who believed in her leadership, gave it a one last try. Through thorough negotiation and planning, she was able to convince the Panchayat that the fest could be successful. And it was. The Karivellur fest was a huge success, which attracted a huge population from different parts of the district. The fest even generated a profit of 6 Lakhs which was far beyond anyone's expectations. Furthermore, this profit was used for building and improving local playgrounds and Anganwadis. To her this fest was more than just an event- it is the symbol of what determination, faith in oneself and support from the community can overcome the strongest resistance. This still remains her proudest accomplishments.

Other Contributions

She also made numerous contributions to the community during her years of leadership. One of them is ensuring safe housing for the poor and backward communities. She was really passionate about helping the poor. During her tenure, a total of 161 houses were built for those who have lived in hardship. She was aware of the importance of a stable home to a struggling family. She also had a special place for elderly in her heart. She organized a club exclusively for the elderly, where health officials were placed to regularly check their blood pressure and sugar levels. “This is not just a gathering place for elderly people, it is a place that they could be cared for and looked after”, she stated. She also envisioned a women and child friendly Panchayat. She formed a committee named, “Jagrata Samiti” which gave opportunities to discuss and act upon issues of any kind of violence or abuse against women and children be it domestic, sexual or emotional. This became a place where women no longer had to suffer in silence- they were heard and supported. Leju also believed deeply in the power of knowledge. Two new libraries were opened adding to the existing 33 active libraries in the Panchayat during her tenure. She also initiated the “Samagra Vayana Yagnam” which tries to transform libraries in more than just reading spaces. Experiments to check the quality of soil and of water were conducted based at the libraries. She gave due importance to cleanliness also. Around 30 mini MCF bottle booths were installed across the Panchayat for proper waste collection and segregation. She also introduced the water budget promoting water conservation. Karivellur Peralam Gram Panchayat, under her leadership progressed significantly, it was often recognised as the best Panchayat in the Kannur district. Furthermore, it was considered as a “Learning Panchayat”, an honour given to a few Panchayats that others look to for inspiration. People across the district often visited the Panchayat to learn from its model of functioning. She considers this as one of her great achievements. The book titled “Jwalitha” was also published during her period. This book captured the issues of the Panchayat. This book was also successful in understanding the lived realities of women in their daily life. An article titled, “Sthree Padhavi Padanam” was compiled and it focused entirely on women's struggles in their day to day lives. To Leju, this book was a legacy, which could be referred to by the future leaders to truly understand the needs of the people they are going to serve.

Awards and Recognitions

Smt. Leju’s year as the Panchayat President of Karivellur Peralam Gram Panchayat was marked with notable recognitions. Her sheer determination and dedication for the betterment

of the Panchayat was duly noticed both at the state and national levels. Under her leadership, the Panchayat achieved numerous remarkable recognitions, two of them being prestigious National Awards.

The Karivellur Peralam Gram Panchayat was awarded the Child Friendly Grama Panchayat Award (CFGPA) for 2 consecutive years. The CFGPA recognizes the efforts of the Panchayat for the betterment of children, to promote children's rights, education, safety and overall well being. It acknowledges the Panchayat that creates a safe, supportive and healthy environment for the children. The award is part of the larger National Awards given to the Panchayats for their remarkable works across various focus areas. The Panchayat was also honoured with the Nanaji Deshmukh Rashtriya Gourav Grama Sabha Award (NDRGGSP), the award given to Gram Panchayats for their outstanding contributions to socio-economic development of the Panchayat by actively involving Gram Sabhas. These were featured in national media outlet, the Hindu. She also stated that the Panchayat won the Gourav Grama Sabha Award thrice. Her own leadership was widely appreciated. She received 6 to 7 awards for her work as a women leader. She was invited to participate in a program on women's empowerment in Delhi. It was extended to only a few women across the country and for her it was more than just a moment of pride. She stated, "It was a reminder that change begins at the grassroots, and can reach all the way to the national stage and more".

In conclusion, Smt. Leju's story is not just a story of leadership, it shows how real changes start at the grassroots. From being a woman confined largely to her home to being the President of a Panchayat respected and admired by everyone across the district, her journey shows what happens when women are given not just a seat at the table but also a space to lead, a space to speak. Her rise from a homemaker to the President captures how deeply meaningful is the participation of women in local self governance. Her story is not just of leadership, but of deep listening, shared strength and the belief that real change begins when everyone's voice is heard. Her initiatives from empowering women through Kudumbashree, starting successful enterprises, giving more importance to education and health to making her Panchayat known to National level, showcases her individual resolve and the collective strength of the community when led with clear vision and empathy.

This transformation was possible only because of the larger vision of Shri. Rajiv Gandhi in transforming Indian democracy at the grassroot level. Through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, new doors were opened to women and the citizens. These amendments were successful in bringing democracy to every doorstep of citizens. These

amendments gave women, who had long been silenced by the traditional patriarchal structures, the legal power to participate in governance. It gave them something that they always deserved but never received, a voice in the decision making. Today Smt. Leju's story journey continues to inspire those around her, showing how powerful it can be when women are given the chance to lead. Her journey isn't just not about her achievements, it is about how her courage and commitment have helped lift up the entire community around her, bringing people together and bringing real, meaningful change for everyone.