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Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations - A case study of India

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Introduction

With more than 900 million voters, India is a very large federal and competitive multiparty electoral democracy with an independent judiciary, a relatively free press and a vibrant civil society. Except for a brief period (1975-77) in which democracy was suspended, India has held free and fair elections for over 75 years. In terms of the overall health of India's democracy, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's (IDEA) Global State of Democracy (GSoD) report from 2021 classed India as a "backsliding democracy." [1]

While the report credits India for having free and fair elections, the country ranks poorly on safeguarding civil liberties, as well as checks against executive overreach. Similarly, Freedom House downgraded India from "free" to "partly free" in 2021 in its Freedom in the World 2021 report, a status which remained the same in the newer 2022 version of the report.[2] In other words, democracy in India is passing through a great period of stress and turbulence due to growing polarisation, authoritarian tendencies, the rapid erosion of individual freedoms and the ongoing decline of key democratic institutions.[3]

Despite these issues, there are numerous positive examples of democratic resilience and innovation found in India that offer hope for its democratic revival. One of the most inspiring examples of democratic resilience is India's capacity to hold free and fair elections with over 900 million voters, mostly using electronic voting machines. It has also done well in terms of rolling out comprehensive affirmative action policies (mandatory quotas or reservation policies), the success in affirmative action policies has been seen as a beacon of hope for the representation of historically marginalised communities. Affirmative action, in many instances, has opened up political spaces for Dalits and Adivasis in the democratic process, thus increasing inclusivity in India's deeply hierarchical society.[4]

Although India's impressive democratic journey has seen the country overcome many important milestones in the face of grinding poverty, mass illiteracy and other similar nation-building challenges, the crucial deliberative aspects of democracy have not yet taken deep roots. Like many democracies in the Global South, democratic practice in India is mostly limited to periodic elections at the federal, state and local levels. Aside from a few notable exceptions, there are barely any deliberative forums or tools for citizens to use to regularly interface with their elected representatives and state officials, consequently limiting citizens' capacity to demand accountability and responsiveness.[5] Accountability is something that only comes once every five years or so when political parties are compelled to approach voters. The power elites in India have systematically reduced politics to administration and it rarely answers the voters be it in parliament, assemblies or on the streets.[6] Often, individuals with the least socio-political and economic capital, such as the Dalits and tribal people end up, excluded from politics as they have no agency or ability to collectivise or push for their demands. Thus, there is widespread disillusionment within large sections of India's population about the efficacy of the democratic process, these frustrations are often expressed in street protests and acts of mobilisation on issues the general public deems important.

Since the early 1990s, India has been trying to address its democratic deficit in deliberative activity through a series of decentralisation programmes, which aim to provide ordinary citizens with a voice in day-to-day democratic governance. This was a response to years of failed top-down centralised forms of governance. The legal

1 IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Report, 2021, 6-14, https://www.idea.int/gsod/
2 Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2021, 26, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege; Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2022, 16, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule.
3 Niranjan Sahoo, "Mounting Majoritarianism and Political Polarization in India," in Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia: Old Divisions, New Dangers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020. https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/18/mounting-majoritarianism-and-political-polarization-in-india-pub-82434.
4 Niraja Gopal Jayal, "Engendering Local Democracy: the impact of quotas for women in India's Panchayats," Democratization 13, August 9, 2006, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13510340500378225.
5 Arun Maira, "The next step in democratic evolution is overdue," The Hindu, updated December 4, 2021, https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-next-step-in-democratic-evolution-is-overdue/article62105553.ece.
6 Neera Chandhoke, "We need to build a deliberative democracy," The Tribune, February 21, 2022, https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/we-need-to-build-a-deliberative-democracy-371079.

and constitutional foundation for these decentralised governance programmes was created when the Parliament of India passed the 73rd Amendment in 1992.[7] At the time, it was considered the largest experiment ever held on democratic decentralisation in the world. The new legislation rolled out a three-tier governance structure aimed at the country's vast rural population, who until that point had possessed little or no agency to represent their concerns and grievances.[8] The 73rd Amendment is intricately linked to both democratic innovations discussed within this report, since they are both tools for achieving decentralisation and self-governance.

Case Study 1: Gram Sabhas (the Little Parliaments)

The first democratic innovation discussed in this report is the introduction of Gram Sabhas (village parliaments). The Gram Sabha was designed to be the legislative body for village councils, they are often called village parliaments and are one of the pioneering initiatives taken by India to make democratic governance deliberative and participatory. Breaking away from hierarchical, top-down forms of governance which rarely entrust citizens with important decision-making processes, Gram Sabhas are vested with the power to approve village plans and programmes for social and economic development, audit panchayat accounts (village council accounts) and select beneficiaries for all kinds of government programmes.[9] In line with the 73rd Amendment Act, all rural Indian villages are now governed by a Gram Sabha. The composition of every Gram Sabha includes the entire adult population of a village on the electoral roll.[10]

Gram Sabhas play a pivotal role in India's efforts towards deliberative democracy as they have been made the base unit in India's new system for the local self-governance of villages.[11] Gram Sabhas are intended to be the main forums for village communities to debate and discuss their problems in a face-to-face setting with their elected representatives.[12] In every Gram Sabha, villagers' demands are conveyed to an executive body called a Gram Panchayat. Furthermore, decisions taken by a Gram Sabha cannot be annulled by any other body except itself. Therefore, in every sense, a Gram Sabha is analogous to a village parliament. A Gram Panchayat, the executive body of a Gram Sabha, consists of 10-15 members directly elected by a Gram Sabha's members. Gram Sabah is responsible for approving all plans and programmes for social and economic development within a village, the auditing of panchayat accounts (village council accounts) and selecting a range of beneficiaries for government programmes. In short, Gram Sabhas are the nuclei of India's new local governance structure. This affects more than 840 million people living in approximately one million villages in rural India.[13] According to the most recent figures, there are more than 3.1 million elected representatives at the rural level, out of which 1.3 million are women.

Among the Indian states, Kerala has the best record in realising the vision of Gram Sabhas enshrined in the 73rd Amendment. In Kerela, Gram Sabhas have been functioning as local governance structures since the late 1990s.[14] Understanding why Kerela has become a pioneer in effectively implementing Gram Sabhas requires a brief overview of the state's history and demographic features. With the highest literacy rate in India (96.2%) and the best development indicators among all the Indian states, Kerala is notable for having a long history of progressive politics.[15] It initiated India's most radical programme of participatory decentralisation in the 1990s (popularly named the People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning); within this programme, the Gram Sabha became the underlying structure for rural self-governance.[16] It is the only state in India that has devolved several public services, such as health, education and sanitation to Gram Sabhas, going as far as to allocate 40% of the state's development budget to panchayats.[17] Another contributing factor in Kerala's successful push for decentralisation was the state-wide

7   L.C. Jain, "Cry the Beloved Self-Government," Occasional Paper, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), April 2001,
    https://www.pria.org/knowledge_resource/1548311062_Occasional%20paper-%20Cry%20the%20Beloved%20Self%20%E2%80%93Government.pdf.
8   Niranjan Sahoo, "Decentralisation @25: Glass Half Full Yet," ORF Brief, May 5, 2018,
    https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/decentralisation25-glass-half-full-yet/.
9   Kuldeep Mathur, Panchayati Raj, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 32.
10 Ramya Parthasarathy and Vijayendra Rao, "Deliberative Democracy in India," Policy Research Working Paper, No. 7995. The World Bank Group, March, 2017,
    https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/26245.
11 Mathur, Panchayati Raj, 44.
12 Mathur, Panchayati Raj, 44.
13 Parthasarathy and Rao, "Deliberative Democracy,"
14 Mathur, Panchayati Raj, 46.
15 "At 96.2%, Kerala tops literacy rate chart, Andhra Pradesh worst performer with 66.4%," The Times of India, September 08, 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/
    home/education/news/at-96-2-kerala-tops-literacy-rate-chart-andhra-pradesh-worst-performer-at-66-4/articleshow/77990417.cms; "As Kerala turns 60, here are five
    indicators that set the state apart," The Indian Express, November 01, 2016, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/as-kerala-turns-60-here-are-
    five-indicators-that-set-the-state-apart-3732000/.
16 Thomas Issac and Richard Franke, Local Democracy and Development: People's Campaign for Decentralised Panning in Kerala (Delhi: Left-Word Book, 2020).
17 Ministry of Panchayati Raj, the Government of India and Tata Institute of Social Science, Mumbai, "Devolution Report 2015-16: Where Local Democracy and
    Devolution in India is heading towards?," 22, https://www.panchayat.gov.in/documents/448457/0/Devolution+Report+2015-16.pdf/338f86ed-a6da-13ca-719b-
    2d41b467da93?t=1633331634500.

People's Campaign, led by a left-wing government in 1996.[18] This administration successfully raised public awareness about the (then) new Panchayati Raj system, and it sensitised citizens to their rights and entitlements under it.[19] Additionally, Gram Sabhas were made central to the state's village planning processes, especially when it came to preparing development plans for villages. The state formed working committees and organised development seminars around Gram Sabha meetings to make them effective deliberative forums for decision-making and planning.

The organised and concerted effort of Kerala's state leadership to make Gram Sabhas more inclusive has yielded positive results for these self-governing institutions. According to a major study of 72 Gram Sabhas, the People's Campaign had positive bearing on social inclusion of marginalised groups and women in decision-making.[20] Another study by Gibson, in 2012, found the effectiveness of the state's Gram Sabhas can be attributed to the high level of women's participation.[21] Although in most states Gram Sabhas are failing to become proper deliberative bodies, with many of them acting as a "talking shop", in Kerala they have mostly succeeded in this goal and the have taken deeper roots. A similar study, using survey data from 537 villages in the south-Indian states of Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, found that with the exception of Kerala, Gram Sabha meetings were not being held regularly.[22] The study reveals that Kerala's Gram Sabhas have "become sites for the joint production of an understanding of what it means to be officially classified as poor" and that "these exchanges foster the future capability of the poor to engage in a critical dialogue with the state on definitional matters".[23]

Kerala's success is a result of impressive progress being made on ensuring Gram Sabhas have regular proceedings, high levels of attendance and the active participation of women and people from lower caste backgrounds, improving distributive politics and accountability.[24] This participation from groups that are usually excluded has not only forced public discussion on sensitive social issues but has also made Gram Sabhas into key forums for social inclusion and dialogue.[25] However, it is important to note that Kerala's high literacy rate and the state's commitment to devolving power were necessary conditions for making these self-governing bodies tools for democratic transformation. The lack of these features in many Indian states are obstacles that need to be considered when trying to replicate Kerela's success.

Despite the Panchayati Raj System (rural, local self-government) and Gram Sabhas delivering important gains in vital spheres of democratic governance, many hurdles still restrain India's road to deliberative democracy.[26] These grassroots institutions have a long way to go before they can be considered truly 'self-governing' local level institutions. In most of India's states, participation in Gram Sabhas remains low, and meetings and agendas are often hijacked by powerful interest groups, such as landed castes, local mafias or strongmen, the moneyed class and state level leaders.[27]

In this regard, Kerala has remained an outlier among Indian states. Yet, even in Kerala, Gram Sabhas are arguably used too often simply to discuss and select beneficiaries for different government welfare schemes rather than playing a significant role in village planning processes.[28] Despite their impressive record in Kerela for creating visible improvements in democratic participation and the deliberative capacities of villages, the state has also had instances of forums being hijacked by powerful local interest groups. Nonetheless, given the great political capital that the state leadership invested (irrespective of which political parties were in power), Kerala has managed to provide an impressive model, remaining, by far, the largest laboratory test for implementing deliberative democracy in India. Inspired by Kerela's success, many other Indian states are increasingly emulating its model of democratic decentralisation.

18 Anil.S, "People's Planning turns 25: The Way Forward," The New Indian Express, August 17, 2021. https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2021/aug/17/peoples-planning-turns-25-the-way-forward-2345656.html.
19 Issac and Franke, Local Democracy.
20 Partick Heller, K.N. Harilal, and Shubham Chaudhuri, "Building Local Democracy: Evaluating the Impact of Decentralization in Kerala, India," World Development 35, no. 4, (2007): 626-648, https://econpapers.repec.org/article/eeewdevel/v_3a35_3ay_3a2007_3ai_3a4_3ap_3a626-648.htm;
21 Christopher Gibson, "Making Redistributive Direct Democracy Matter: Development and Women's Participation in the Gram Sabhas of Kerala, India," American Sociological Review, April 19, 2012, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0003122412442883.
22 Timothy Besley, Rohini Pande, and Vijayendra Rao, "Political Economy of Panchayats in South India," Economic and Political Weekly 42, no.8 (February 24, 2007), 661-666, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4419281.
23 Vijayendra Rao and Paromita Sanyal, "Dignity through Discourse: Poverty and the Culture of Deliberation in Indian Village Democracies," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 629 (2010): 164-172, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0002716209357402.
24 Issac and Franke, Local Democracy.
25 Paromita Sanyal, Vijayendra Rao and Umang Prabhakar, "Oral Democracy and Women's Oratory Competency in Indian Village Assemblies," World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 7416, September 21, 2015, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2663798.
26 Sahoo, "Decentralisation @25,"
27 Mathur, Panchayati Raj.
28 Raghabendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo, "Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomised Policy Experiment in India," Econometrica, 72, no.5 (2004): 1409-1443, https://economics.mit.edu/files/792.

Case Study 2: The Social Audit as a tool for improving citizens-state interface

In order to move beyond the electoral form of democratic accountability, which only occurs once every five years, and deepen the stake citizens have in the processes of democratic governance, a group of civil society actors in India have produced an innovative concept called the Social Audit. The Social Audit is a type of audit where citizens organise and mobilise themselves to evaluate and audit the government's performance on a particular infrastructure project or welfare scheme. This is undertaken through a Jan Sunwai (a public hearing) in order to generate high levels of pressure on public officials to respond to the needs and demands of citizens. The innovative element of the social audit is that it reduces the ability of officials to conceal their inefficiencies behind bureaucratic red tape.[29] Analysis has already shown that social auditing has created an enabling environment for citizens to question the government on their management of resources and their efficiency. In addition, the social audit ensures that citizens are more likely to participate in decision-making because they feel it creates a space where their voices are heard and their demands are not dismissed, which is typically the case in India's normal electoral politics as the power dynamics involved minimise the voices of ordinary citizens.

The concept of Social Audit was first pioneered in India by a civil society forum called Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) based in the northern state of Rajasthan.[30] In the early 1990s, many civil society groups led by MKSS worked hard to ensure that citizens got paid the minimum wage as there were numerous cases of embezzlement within the local contractors-politicians-officials nexus.[31] At the time, MKSS along with other CSOs from Rajasthan campaigned for more transparency in the financing and accounting of government projects, as well as the introduction of a general auditing process and compensation scheme for returning embezzled public funds. All these demands were put forth in the first public Jan Sunwai in 1994. Jan Sunwais had an unprecedented impact: they produced a space which citizens used to force government officials to return embezzled funds, as well as creating a model for how the public could hold officials accountable.[32]

Recognising its usefulness in enhancing participation and accountability, the MKSS model of social auditing was institutionalised into local bodies, the panchayats, by the federal government in 2006. The government did this by incorporating social audits into new legislation, which aimed to guarantee the right to work; this legislation was known as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), later renamed as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).[33] In line with the (then) new legislation, all Gram Panchayats (elected village councils) were expected to conduct social audits of all projects within their jurisdictions at least twice a year.[34]

Over the past two decades, the social audit processes have evolved, and several Indian states have experimented with it in a variety of ways, which is one reason why it has emerged as an empowering tool for rural citizens. For instance, an offshoot of the social audit process called Jan Soochna (Public Information Portal) was launched by the Government of Rajasthan in 2019. This online portal allows citizens to access information, such as publicly available government documents. Since its creation, the government has been expanding the services the portal offers by including things such as information on pensions, government welfare schemes and utilities, like electricity and water.[35] Since its launch, Jan Soochna has had an average of 300,000 users every month.[36] It has enabled citizens to access information that educates them on the mechanisms and practices institutions use that are detrimental to the public good, such as creating unnecessarily complex bureaucratic processes and employing inefficient and corrupt intermediaries. This claim is supported by the results of an impact study on Jan Soochna conducted by The Hindu newspaper, which shows citizens in Rajasthan have been positively impacted by their use of the portal.[37]

29 Yamini Aiyar and Micheal Walton, "Rights, Accountability and Citizenship: Examining India's Emerging Welfare State," CPR Working Paper, October 22, 2014, https://cprindia.org/workingpapers/rights-accountability-and-citizenship-examining-indias-emerging-welfare-state/.

30 Jeannette Weller, "Social Audits: When People Verify State Actions," Civil Society Academy, accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.civilsocietyacademy.org/post/social-audits; More information on Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan can be found from their website: http://mkssindia.org/.

31 Suchi Pande, "Social Audits in India, Institutionalizing Citizen Oversight," Accountability Research Centre, June 29, 2021, https://accountabilityresearch.org/social-audits-in-india-institutionalizing-citizen-oversight/.

32 Santosh Kumar Biswal and Uttam Chakraborty, "Keep a Close Eye, Social Audits in India," The Telegraph, published November 6, 2020, https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/keep-a-close-eye-social-audits-in-india/cid/1796676.

33 Pande, "Social Audits,"

34 Aiyar and Walton, "Rights, Accountability and Citizenship,"

35 "Home page," the Government of Rajasthan, https://jansoochna.rajasthan.gov.in/Home/HomePage.

36 "jansoochna.rajasthan.gov.in," Similar Web, accessed August 17, 2022, https://www.similarweb.com/website/jansoochna.rajasthan.gov.in/#overview.

37 Priscilla Jebaraj, "A lifeline called Jan Soochna: How Rajasthan's public information portal is empowering people," The Hindu, October 26, 2019, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/a-lifeline-called-jan-soochna/article61970427.ece.

Although Rajasthan was the first state in India to implement social audits, the southern state of Andhra Pradesh (AP) is the one that has become India's major innovator in social auditing. Between 2006, when the MGNREGA was rolled out nationally, and 2012, AP conducted a dozen rounds of social auditing across every one of its gram panchayats. Following this, social auditing was institutionalised through the creation of a state-sponsored body called the Society for Social Audit, Accountability and Transparency (SSAAT).[38]

A closer examination of AP shows why it has invested heavily in social auditing while other Indian states have overlooked the option. Analysts have found the key factor for the institutionalisation of AP's model for social auditing was strong political support.[39] This support began with the unexpected electoral victory of the Congress Party in the 2004 Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly elections. Led by Y.S. Rajashekhar Reddy (YSR), the Congress Party's victory came against the backdrop of a severe agrarian crisis in the state. The party's electoral strategy linked the resolution of the agrarian crisis to the provision of expanded social welfare schemes which addressed the specific concerns of distressed farmers and other affected households. The (then) newly elected Chief Minister, YSR, was keen to quickly consolidate the political gains made in the 2004 elections.[40] In social auditing, he saw a rare opportunity to break the local governance stranglehold created by contractors, politicians and bureaucrats, who were siphoning off a significant portion of the capital allocated for development schemes. Since the social audit scheme enjoyed political support at the highest level, key state officials and local political elites were also invested in its success.

Regarding its value to MGNREGA's jobs creation objective, studies have shown that the social audit process has positively benefitted it by improving the government's capacity for public communication, curtailing poor practices and improving government responsiveness. The social audit has considerably improved the level of public awareness about the job creation scheme among the rural population, and it has helped to reduce forms of malpractice, such as contractors manipulating the muster rolls for workers.[41] Most notably, surveys show that 85% of village respondents felt social auditing had given them the confidence to demand answers from government officials on key welfare schemes, increasing government responsiveness.[42]

Andhra Pradesh's success story has encouraged many other Indian states to embrace social auditing. Telangana (a new state branched out of Andhra Pradesh in 2014), Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand and most recently Meghalaya have also taken steps to initiate social auditing.[43] However, the implementation of the social audit has not been uniformly applied at the national level, nor has it been institutionalised in participative democratic processes over the last 10 years. Unfortunately, in Rajasthan, the state where the social audit was first used, it continues to face resistance from vested political interest groups and officials who perceive it to be a major threat to their monopoly on power.[44]

While civil society groups and gram panchayats have not given up and are continuing the fight, the political class of Rajasthan is now much less interested in social auditing. In 2015, the Controller and Auditor General (CAG) observed that several state governments were diluting and violating the provisions that upheld the spirit of the social audit.[45] Following the CAG's findings, the Union Ministry of Rural Development set up a task force to tackle these failings. Based on the task force's recommendations, the ministry adopted a social audit action plan, and it instructed state governments to begin monthly social audits on MGNREGA. The social auditing process has now been expanded in its scope and covers multiple other central acts, particularly the National Food Security Act.[46] Despite enhancing participation and accountability in democratic governance, the number of social audits has decreased significantly in the last few years. Nevertheless, Andhra Pradesh has demonstrated that social audits have a future in India's expanding deliberative democratic space.

38 Based on the author's interviews with Yamini Aiyar and her colleagues at the Centre for Policy Research, Delhi.
39 Aiyar and Walton, "Rights, Accountability and Citizenship,"
40 Aiyar and Walton, "Rights, Accountability and Citizenship,"
41 Shylashiri Shankar, "Can Social Audits Count?," Working Paper, ASARC, 2010.
42 Yamini Aiyar, Salimah Samji, and Soumya Kapoor-Mehta, "Strengthening Public Accountability: Lessons from Implementing Social Audits in Andhra Pradesh," CPR Working Paper, November 29, 2009, https://cprindia.org/workingpapers/strengthening-public-accountability-lessons-from-implementing-social-audits-in-andhra-pradesh/.
43 Suchi Pande, "Social Audits,"; Divya Singh Kohli, "Manual on Social Accountability: Concepts and Tools," CBGA, 2015, https://www.cbgaindia.org/primers-manual/manual-on-social-accountability-concepts-tools/.
44 Pande, "Social Audits,"
45 Pande, "Social Audits,"
46 Suchi Pande and Rakesh R. Dubbudu, "Improving Social Audits," The Hindu, May 10, 2018, https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/improving-social-audits/article23828790.ece.

Conclusion

A quick review of these two case studies strongly indicates the deepening of deliberative and participative democracy at the grassroots level. While there is a sharp erosion of democracy at the macro-scale, due to growing government authoritarianism and increased political polarisation, democracy at the local level remains somewhat insulated from these phenomena.[47]

For instance, despite some strong expressions of opposition from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), for example, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi called MGNREGA a "living monument of failure" to attack the Congress Party. Yet, the government still reinvested in MGNREGA and social audits.[48] Therefore, in practice, the Social Audit has a degree of bipartisan support, which might explain its inclusion in the BJP's 2014 election manifesto.

Similarly, the Panchayati Raj System, particularly the Gram Sabhas, have bipartisan support since they have worked successfully in Kerala. While there are many pitfalls and challenges for both of these institutional innovations, they have become popular with citizens, particularly among the poor and marginalised communities of India. Considering their wide applicability, as nearly 65% of India remains rural, and their electoral benefits, there is a great interest in and many incentives for state governments to implement radical decentralised policies. For instance, encouraged by the performance record of women representatives at the panchayat level, in a radical move, the Odisha government reserved 70% of the positions for heads of Zilla Parishads (District Councils) for women.[49]

Measures like this are crucial for improving women's participation in key rural self-governance bodies, offering these enhanced leadership roles may act as incentives for other states to embrace such measures in the near future. In short, while the situation with India's democracy at a macro-level is concerning, at the grassroots level there is great potential for Indian democracy as these democratic experiments in decentralisation have produced deliberative and empowering forms of governance.

47 Sahoo, "Mounting Majoritarianism" and Political Polarisation in India," in Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia: Old Divisions, New Dangers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020. https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/18/mounting-majoritarianism-and-political-polarization-in-india-pub-82434.

48 Liz Mathew, "Why the BJP embraced MGNREGA, the living monument of UPA's failures," The Indian Express, February 06, 2016, https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/why-the-bjp-embraced-mgnrega-the-living-monument-of-the-upas-failures/.

49 "In a first, women to head 70 percent of Zilla Parishads in Odisha", Hindustan Times, March 14, 2022. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-a-first-women-to-head-70-per-cent-of-zilla-parishads-in-odisha-101647281439558.html.

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About the project:

'Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations' is a research project supported by Robert Bosch Stiftung, which explores emerging innovations in democratic participation around the world and offering an overview of the lessons learned throughout the application of these innovations.The project highlights policy implications and gives a set of recommendations for European policymakers and practitioners working on the EU's internal democratic renewal. The project brings together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to exchange best practices in democratic political innovations.