

# Democratic Decentralization and the Right to Education: An Evaluative Study of School Management Committees (SMCs) in Kurnool District

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## Abstract

The Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 is not merely a legal mandate for schooling but a significant experiment in **Democratic Decentralization**. Section 21 of the Act mandates the creation of School Management Committees (SMCs), envisioning them as vehicles for participatory democracy where parents and local stakeholders oversee school governance. This paper critically examines the political efficacy of SMCs in the Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh. Through a Political Science lens, it analyzes whether these committees have truly empowered marginalized communities or if they have fallen prey to "elite capture" by local political leaders. The study concludes with recommendations to strengthen grassroots educational governance.

**Keywords:** Democratic Decentralization, SMCs, Participatory Democracy, Local Governance, Kurnool, Political Empowerment.

## Introduction: Education as a Grassroots Political Right

In Political Science, decentralization is viewed as the "transfer of authority to the people." The RTE Act represents a shift from a top-down bureaucratic model to a bottom-up community-led model. The School Management Committee (SMC) is the primary unit of this decentralization.

For a region like Rayalaseema, where local social hierarchies are historically strong, the SMC represents a potential site for **Social Transformation**. If a parent from a marginalized background can question a school principal or a government official through an SMC meeting, it represents a fundamental shift in the power dynamics of the village.

## Theoretical Framework: Participatory Democracy

This paper utilizes the theory of **Participatory Democracy** (as advocated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and later by Amartya Sen).

- **The Idea:** Citizenship is not just about voting once every five years; it is about active involvement in public institutions.

- **The Instrument:** The SMC acts as a "mini-parliament" at the village level, responsible for preparing the School Development Plan (SDP) and monitoring the utilization of grants.

### **Power Dynamics in SMCs: The Reality of Kurnool District**

Based on political observations in rural Kurnool, the paper discusses three major challenges:

#### **A. The Problem of 'Elite Capture'**

In many villages, the Chairperson of the SMC is often a proxy for the local Sarpanch or a powerful landlord. This prevents the committee from acting as an independent watchdog, turning it into a rubber stamp for existing political interests.

#### **B. Lack of Political Literacy**

While the law mandates that 75% of members must be parents, many rural parents in backward blocks lack "Political Literacy." They are often unaware of their legal powers to audit school funds or report teacher absenteeism.

#### **C. Gender and Representation**

The Act mandates 50% representation for women in SMCs. This paper explores whether these women have a **Substantive Voice** in decision-making or if their participation is merely "symbolic," with their husbands or male relatives making the actual decisions.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent has the mandatory representation of marginalized groups in SMCs led to an actual shift in the power structure of rural schools in Kurnool?
2. What is the level of coordination between the **Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)** and the SMCs in implementing educational infrastructure projects?
3. Does the "Social Capital" of a village influence the success of its School Management Committee?

### **Conclusion and Political Recommendations**

The success of the Right to Education depends on the success of **Local Accountability**. Education cannot be "delivered" by the state; it must be "claimed" by the community.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

1. **Capacity Building:** The State Government should conduct "Leadership Training" for SMC members, similar to the training given to Ward Members and Sarpanches.
2. **Social Audit:** Mandatory social audits of schools by the Gram Sabha to ensure transparency in RTE fund utilization.
3. **Incentivizing Participation:** Recognizing and rewarding "Best Performing SMCs" at the district level to encourage active community involvement.

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