TWO TRANSGENDER WOMEN CREATE HISTORY BY WINNING LOCAL ELECTIONS IN INDIA

Two transgender women have won 2020 local village elections, also known as gram panchayat elections, in India.

On December 30, Devika Akka, one of the transgender women, was elected to represent Ward 7 of Salimgrama town council in the southern state of Karnataka. Devika secured 115 votes in the election, winning by a margin of five votes. Sudha M. was also elected to local office in the nearby village of Kallahalli, securing 622 votes.

These wins are historic in a country with severe prejudices against the transgender community. The latest census data from India declared the total transgender population of the country to be 480,000. However, it is estimated that there are between five and six million transgender people in India who hide their identities to avoid discrimination. According to a 2018 study by National Human Rights Commission, around 92% of transgender people, including qualified individuals, are deprived of the right to participate in any form of economic activity. One of the most marginalised communities, transgender people are denied proper education, health, and employment opportunities. Many are disowned by their families and are forced to beg and engage as sex workers to earn their livelihood. Devika’s life was no different.

Devika, in her interview with the Times Of India, recounted her childhood. She used to take part in plays to narrate mythological tales. That was when she started to identify as transgender. Like other transgender people, she left home at the age of 16 to settle down in a suburb of Mumbai.

“I survived by begging. I used to live with my friends,” she said. However, she often used to visit her home in Salingrama.

Devika Akka returned to Salingrama in her later years. “When I visited people’s homes seeking votes, they had kind words for me,” Devika said. “Now, that they have placed their confidence in me, I will strive to live up to their expectations… I aim to be available to my residents for even the smallest of needs.”

Villagers also expressed their happiness about her victory.

“The people here, especially from her colony, helped elect her,” said one of the residents.

Gram panchayat elections in villages are held every five years. All people over the age of 21 who are residents of the territory of that village’s gram panchayat can vote.