Chapter VI

Panchayat System
CHAPTER-VI

PANCHAYAT SYSTEM

Panchayat System-A Historical Backdrop

The Panchayat Raj system as an institution has a long history in India. Although not known as Panchayat Raj system, the elements of this system did exist in the ancient assemblies in the period of Pandyas and Pallavas from eighth to twelfth centuries and they were known by different names in different parts of the country. In many villages, there was a Sabha or Council, supervised by a headman, which discussed the problems and welfare of the village.

The modern history of local self government began with the Local Fund Act of 1871 issued during the days of Lord Mayo. Lord Ripon, the Apostle of Local Self Government, introduced the system with the object of promoting the community interest of the people. The Local Boards Act, passed in 1884, laid the basis for the growth of democracy at district, taluk, and union levels. The British Government, in order to preserve and stabilize its political control, took various measures and controlled Village Panchayats1. A special commission was appointed in 1909 on Local Self-Government which recommended the need for setting up Village Panchayats to handle the local affairs. Subsequently, Madras, Bombay and United Provinces passed Village Panchayats Act of 1920 to look after the

village affairs and matters of development. They were empowered to try minor cases but the powers given were meager and financial resources were limited. The Government of India Act of 1935 introduced provincial autonomy which in turn gave impetus to the development of local body institutions. The Madras Village Panchayat Act of 1941 curtailed the powers of the village panchayat and further inroads were made into the functioning of the panchayats by the Village Panchayat Act of 1946. After independence, the Government of India took a number of steps to make Panchayats truly a people's institution. Every village should be a Gram Swaraj with a Panchayat having full powers. In the post-independence period, the introduction of Article 40 in the Constitution of India was the first major step towards the revival of panchayats.

In October 1952, the Community Development Programme was launched with a view to facilitating the participation of people so as to bring about all round change. The Programme was aimed at improving the social and economic life of the village community. In order to assess the situation, a study team on Community Development Projects and National Extension Service, headed by Balwant Rai Mehta, was constituted in 1957. The team asserted that people's participation was the key to success. They believed that powers should be transferred to the lower levels through the Panchayat Raj in order to realise community development projects.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee recommended a three tier system of Panchayat Raj-District Level (Zila Parishad),

Intermediate Level (Block Samiti) and Lower Level (Village Panchayat). The function of the three-tier government crucially depends on the devolution of resources and transfer of subjects. After the constitutional amendments, states too have met their legal obligations by passing conformity legislations. But the transformation of panchayat from mere state agencies into local governments has varied across states depending on the willingness of the existing state structures to give up powers.

The death of Nehru brought about decline in the spirit of Panchayat Raj and democratic decentralization received a set back. The Ashok Mehta Committee of 1977 marked a turning point. But due to the apathy of political parties, local body elections were not conducted for about fifteen years in Tamil Nadu.

Tamil Nadu stands characterized by tight bureaucratic control over the panchayats. In Tamil Nadu, the government is reluctant to give powers to local bodies and no wonder it prefers to issue executive orders instead of notification on the 29 subjects mentioned in the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act. As executive orders do not have legal validity which the notification enjoys, the bureaucracy ignores them and the panchayats remain mere agents of the government.

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The Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992

The general function and working of the Panchayat Raj in Tamil Nadu in the context of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments underwent a change. The passing of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution is considered the culmination of various attempts towards decentralization of the highly centralized system of parliamentary democracy in India. With these amendments, the structure of governance has changed permanently from a two-tier to a three-tier system of governance with union, state, and panchayat as the three-tiers of federal governance. However, it is one thing to pass a law but quite another to make it work.

It was on December 22, 1992 that the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was passed as a result of the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s effort to strengthen the Panchayat Raj institutions. When he came to know that only 1/6 of the total money allocated for development work reached the people, he was determined to introduce Panchayat Raj. Close on the heels of the 73rd amendment, the present Panchayat Raj Act as enshrined in the 74th Amendment of the Constitution, was passed on December 22, 1992 and the President gave his assent on April 20, 1993. The 74th Constitution Amendment Act, 1992, which came into force with effect from 24 April 1993 lays the foundation of a strong and vibrant Panchayat institutions in the country. The 73rd and 74th (Municipalities) Amendments in

1993, initiated a new era of decentralization and self governance in the country. The present Act is an improvement on the Panchayat Raj Act of 1947 and 1961 with some modifications and changes to suit the present requirements. Its objectives are

1. to place more and more powers in the hands of the rural people to enable them to determine their own destiny.
2. to enhance the capabilities of the rural people to involve themselves in the process of grass-root level planning.
3. to decentralize execution of all kinds of development activities with effective participation of people and,
4. to orient development administration based on the philosophy of popular participation

The salient features of the constitutional amendments are

1. To provide three tier system of Panchayat Raj for all states having population of over 20 lakhs.
2. To hold Panchayat elections regularly every five years.
3. To provide reservation of seats for Scheduled Caste /Tribes and Women (not less than 1/3 of the total seats)
4. To appoint State Finance Commission to make recommendation regarding financial powers of the panchayats and
5. To constitute District Planning Committee to prepare draft development plan for the district as whole.

With the 73rd and 74th amendments, local governments have acquired constitutional sanction. Reservation for SC/ST and women has brought many women and disadvantaged groups into the political process. This is an opportunity for all to try and evolve new structures of governance. Some sections of the earlier political system may become disempowered, including politicians and officials in the bureaucracy in the process. Their opposition to change has to be handled by those elected to the local governments. But the making of new structures depends to a great extent on who get elected as members of the local governments and how they understand their powers, responsibilities and limitations and function to build new systems.

**Tamil Nadu Experience**

Except Bihar, all states have passed laws to give effect to the provisions contained in the constitutional amendments. Accordingly Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act of 1994 was passed to give effect to the 73rd Amendment. The Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act of 1994 (Tamil Nadu Act 21 of 1994) was passed in line with the constitutional amendments. Elections to the Local Bodies were conducted in October 1996 for the first time under the new dispensation.

**1. President of Gram Panchayat: Responsibilities without Powers**

The Tamil Nadu experience demonstrates that there is ample evidence of ‘elite capture’. The members, who have been elected,

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hail from the economically well-off sections. The educational levels of ward members are above that of the general population. They also come from sections of the population holding larger extent of land and live in better houses. Extremely poor, landless and living in thatched houses have not become members to the extent of their share in the total population. As regards membership of Self Help Groups and political parties, a fairly high proportion of ward members are drawn from political parties in Tamil Nadu. A high percentage of women are members of SHGs but the percentage of men who are members of political parties is comparable to that in the general population. The perception of powers and responsibilities of the ward members shows poor awareness. In toto, the panchayats in Tamil Nadu are looked down merely as conduit pipes for channelising the development funds rather than perceived as the decision-making authority.

The general responsibilities of the panchayat presidents, in their view, are to address the problems of the people in the panchayat, take care of their needs, accept complaints and solve problems and prepare and execute plans for the development of the panchayat. They prepare a separate budget for the panchayat and they develop plans for the development of the panchayat. Further, they said that they do not have to depend entirely on the block and district panchayats for funds.

However, reality belies the expectations. The role of the panchayat presidents is confined to recommending the deserving or needy to the next level of authority. Their involvement in schemes/programmes during the last twelve months was confined to Annapoorna Rice Scheme, AMT, PMSY—all central and state government sponsored schemes. They were involved in works relating to drainage, water supply, public toilets and street lighting. Surprisingly, there was no mention of any scheme as part of a plan for the panchayat developed by the panchayats themselves, indicating there is hardly any planning at the grassroots level. The money allocation to each particular programme is decided by the panchayat union councillors, or officials and engineers.\(^{15}\)

All the panchayat presidents maintained that they consulted villagers in developing projects in the village. The Gram Sabha is the forum used for such consultations. The Gram Sabha also becomes a forum for the poor who feel that they deserve to get certain benefits of schemes. As elected representatives, they think that they have a right to select projects and beneficiaries. The panchayat presidents seem to think that they have been given too many responsibilities with hardly any powers. The elected representatives get the necessary co-operation from the panchayat president in carrying out these tasks but not from the higher level officials. All of them attend gram sabha meetings, panchayat sabha meetings and contact district panchayat frequently—every month. In the panchayat union meetings, all of them have been able to raise

issues concerning their villages and get satisfactory action from them. The visits to the district panchayat are to inform the needs of the villages and the response is helpful only to some extent.

The panchayat presidents take interest in the proper running of day care centres, schools, primary health centres, and housing programmes. Panchayat Presidents mentioned that houses were built for the poor. Some of the examples given by the presidents are running of an eye camp; sunshade for the health centre; kitchen at the school; and public toilets. Some presidents said that it is a full-time occupation and few of them spent two weeks in a month and others said that they spent about 20 days a month. There is no salary for the work and they get a paltry sum of rupees 330 per month as travelling allowance. In addition, many people come to visit them. 15 to 20 visitors visit them per week. It varies according to the seasons. During periods when a large number of schemes are about to be implemented, the number of visitors increases. They mostly come seeking favours, or to get some work done. Some of them come to get some work done in government offices.

2. Ward Members

In Tamil Nadu, ward members of the panchayats hail from three distinct age groups- 25 to 34 years, 35 to 44 years, and 45 years and above. 90 percent had over five years of schooling. The educational attainment of male and female members is equal. There is a higher proportion of better educated women members. The land


17. Ibid., pp.2829-2830
holding by the ward members shows significant variation between women and men. In Tamil Nadu, 75 percent of men are landless and over 60 percent of women come from households owning over 100 cents of land. Between 60 and 80 percent of the OBC and SC/ST own over 100 cents land and there is no significant difference between them. Almost all the ward members believe that solving the problems of the ward and demanding amenities for the ward and taking care of their maintenance is their responsibility. Maintenance of public amenities such as water supply, roads, sanitation and giving suggestions to the clinic nurse about health conditions are the other responsibilities. A few mentioned the following as their responsibilities: “to cooperate with president”, “help the president’s plan”, “negotiate a better share for the ward” and “demand amenities”. The enabling structure of decentralisation created by the state governments governs the decision-making powers of the ward members. Where powers and resources are devolved - as in Kerala - the decision-making vests with the gram panchayat and where these are not devolved as in Tamil Nadu, officials still exercise powers.18

Other Difficulties

The 73rd Amendment envisages women’s role on a larger scale. There is a general criticism that women elected representatives are always playing a ‘second fiddle’ to their men folk who assist them as backseat drivers. Shortage of staff in village panchayat is another problem that threatens to stall the growth of the panchayat institutions. In some cases the problem of leadership arises. There is absence of qualified leadership. It can be considered as a crisis of

18. Ibid., pp.2825-1826.
leadership. Caste factor is another problem posing threat to the smooth functioning of the Panchayat Raj system. The caste ridden society is reluctant to accept communal reservations in some areas. For example, in Madurai district four panchayats (Pappapatti, Keeripatti, Nattamangalam and Kottakachiyanandai) did not go to election. Further, the worst ever financial crisis is threatening to cripple the panchayats. Several panchayats are unable to pay the monthly salary of the staff. Another serious difficulty facing the effective functioning of Panchayat Raj system is the dominance of the state government which is more powerful and can erode the very working of the grass root organizations by passing vexatious rules and regulations.\(^{19}\)

The commitment towards popular participation in the governance at the local level has been reinforced through recent policies of reservation, which have given an opportunity to hitherto marginalized and disadvantaged groups to express their voice and have a say in the making of policies that affect them. Measures of reservation following the enactment of 73\(^{rd}\) Constitutional Amendment opened a new chapter in the history of democratic decentralization in India by devolving powers to the people and giving constitutional status to Panchayat Raj institutions.\(^{20}\) The increased importance of participation in the panchayats through policies of reservation has necessarily increased the number of SCs, STs and women in the rural political institutions. However, such numerical representation itself does not ensure empowerment of weaker sections unless and until it is transformed into effective participation.

\(^{19}\) Nagarajan, T.G., and Kandaswamy, P., loc.cit., pp.18-20.

The New Panchayat Raj System has started penetrating into the socio-political institutions at the micro level at Periyakkottai Panchayat. It moves deeper into the society with an objective of deepening democracy by accommodating all sections of the society in the institutions of governance. Before the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, there were about 4,700 representatives to represent the people and to articulate the grievances of the 100 million population in the State Legislative assemblies and the Parliament. Long years of democratic governance could not ensure that the state in India provided basic entitlements to all citizens of the country and satisfied the political aspirations of the masses because Indian polity has its own limitations in terms of structure and functions. The Indian political system has neither the structure to accommodate the aspiring social segments nor has the capacity to address the issues and redress the grievances of the people. To overcome the inherent weaknesses in the political system, a new institutional mechanism had to be devised in tune with the reform process initiated in the domain of world economy.

Under the new dispensation in India, about 32 million representatives are positioned constitutionally through election to different offices from gram panchayats to district panchayats with pre-determined roles and responsibilities. While expanding the


political space, scope for accommodating the hitherto marginalised and depressed social groups has been increased. Care has been taken to see that the people hailing from the last rung of the social ladder were accommodated in the power structure at the grassroot level institutions through reservation of seats proportionate to their population. As a result, all sections of the society are finding enough opportunity to express themselves politically.

Now the representatives hailing from the marginalised communities have to manage the institutions to administer economic development and social justice. The basic question is, to what extent the representatives from the marginalised sections are empowered to discharge their functions effectively in a caste-ridden and caste conscious society with the domination of the higher caste groups through their traditional caste panchayats? It is also true that the marginalised caste groups at present are vociferous in voicing their grievances and aggressive in asserting their claims and positions through their caste organisations. They are allowed to function independently as leaders of the institutions without barriers and hurdles. Even after many years of state intervention in social reconstruction, micro social structures could not be altered because institutional roots are very deep in terms of the values and symbols in


25. 73rd Constitutional Amendment makes it mandatory as per the governing clause of the Amendment 243 (G) that panchayats have to administer economic development and social justice through the planning exercise done at the bottom with the participation of the people. Government of India, *73rd Constitutional Amendment Act*, New Delhi, Government of India, 1993.

Indian society.\textsuperscript{27} The social institutions are so powerful at the micro level at Periyakottai Panchayat that they could resist the intervention of the state. That is why power has been accorded to the institutions constitutionally and reservation of seats have been made mandatory for the deprived and marginalized sections. The intensity and power of social institutions vary from village to village depending on the process of deconstruction of the society by the involvement of social reconstructionists and their movements. Thus variation is common in the operation of political institutions.

In the village panchayats of Periyakkottai Panchayat, nearly 24 percent of the seats in all positions have been reserved for SC and ST. They are in a legitimate position to discharge their role and responsibility thanks to the powers assigned to them legally through laws and notifications of the respective governments. It is obvious that Tamil Nadu is known for its social reformation and women emancipation through the concerted efforts of the social movements broadly under the label of Non-Brahmin Movement and Dravidian Movement.\textsuperscript{28} At the same time, it is obvious that Tamil Nadu, at present, is also known for caste conflict and formation of caste identity and caste mobilisation. This trend is drawing the attention of all as a paradox being exhibited in both polity and society at village panchayat level. Against this background, the newly elected leaders hailing from SC and ST community have to convene the Gram Sabha meeting and manage the panchayat council and perform the assigned functions. Discharging the responsibilities in the grassroots level institutions by leaders hailing from SC and ST community is not easy because caste groups are powerful in the rural

\textsuperscript{27} Fuller, C.J., \textit{Caste To-day}, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997.
areas. It is a general assumption that these conflicts cannot be as intense as obtained in North India thanks to the influence of the Dravidian Movement.

It is true that except in a few places, elections had been conducted and 28,149 representatives hailing from SC and ST communities occupy positions in panchayat institutions in Tamil Nadu. As on date, they are in power and position. However, the representatives belonging to SC and ST community could not enjoy equality and freedom in the rural society to perform their duties.

Available records\(^{29}\) amply portray evidences to construct a proposition that when powers are being decentralised through a constitutionally organised way, attempts are also made simultaneously by the social segments to capture power in an organised way. In the process, conflict becomes inevitable as the communities are sensitised and concretised by the reconstructionist movement through the media over a period of time in Tamil Nadu. The concretisation process further deepened the cleavages to sharpen the caste identity and to mobilise the people with an objective of claiming stakes in the benefits of services and power. Hence the conflict is intense enough to maximise the benefits flowing out of the authoritative allocation of values by keeping the power structure under the fold of the dominant caste either explicitly or implicitly.

\(^{29}\) Legal Resources for Social Action (LRSA), a Voluntary Organisation working for development of the Dalits, has initiated steps to federate the small organisations of the Dalit panchayat leaders to represent their grievances in an organised way to the government. A.Ganesan, the President, G. Sikamani, the Secretary and M. V.Sikamani, Treasurer of the Federation of Dalit panchayat leaders held several sittings in different parts of Tamil Nadu and prepared a document of the problems faced by the Dalit panchayat presidents. For more details refer to the documents prepared by them.

The Problem

The political relationship among the caste groups evolves as they seek to manage the grassroot level institutions. The issues are being visualised from the perspectives of the SC and ST leaders as they champion the interests of SC/ST through a constitutional provision. The relationship between the marginalised and the dominant groups in handling power at the grassroot level is being evaluated. This analysis does not confine the relationship between the legally created institutions under the marginalised leaders and the dominant communities holding the control of the people through traditional panchayats. The analysis moves beyond the political institutions to touch on some of the key issues which are being confronted by the leaders belonging to SC and ST communities. This analysis does not end with either confirming or testing the theoretical propositions of interrelationship among the social groups at the grassroot level institutions for sharing and shaping of power. The study proposes to evolve new positions to construct theories in political sociology. It suggests measures to reconstruct the rural society and polity to maintain equity and justice in administering development.

Backdrop of the Statements

The concept of decentralisation of power from the federal government to the unit of village continues to be a subject of debate ever since India won independence. There are three statements which generated a great deal of debate among the intellectuals and politicians of this country. They are the statements of Gandhi, Ambedkar and Rajiv Gandhi on decentralisation of power.
When the Constituent Assembly was in session, Gandhi made an observation that "I must confess that I have not been able to follow the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly.... (The correspondent) says that there is no mention or direction about village panchayats and decentralization in the draft constitution. It is certainly an omission calling for immediate attention if our independence is to reflect the people's voice. Greater the power of the panchayats, the better for the people..." While expressing his opinion to shape the Indian Polity, Gandhi made a statement that "the Centre of Power is in New Delhi or in Calcutta or Bombay or in the big cities. I would have it distributed among the seven hundred thousand villages of India...".

But Dr. Ambedkar expressed another point of view which was quiet opposite to the opinion expressed by Gandhi. Ambedkar started his argument by picking up a statement from Metcalfe. Ambedkar observed that "what is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism? I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit".

These two observations expressed by Gandhi and Ambedkar generated a volume of debate in the Constituent Assembly and speaker after speaker referred to the statements made by the two

31. Jawaharlal Nehru quoted the speech of M.K. Gandhi in the Constituent Assembly, AVARD, Panchayat Raj as the Basis of Indian Polity: An Exploration into the Proceedings of the Constituent Assembly, New Delhi, AVARD, 1962.
leaders of this country. No one was in a position to disprove the realities projected by Ambedkar and the members had to come to a conclusion. Ultimately they decided to accommodate the Gandhian principles in article 40 of the Constitution of India. After forty years, the same exercise was repeated by Rajiv Gandhi with the assumption that society has changed drastically but caution was essential. As a result, care was taken to empower the marginalised without being subjugated by the dominant castes. Rajiv Gandhi observed that “We trust the people; we have faith in the people. It is the people who must determine their own destinies and the destiny of the nation. To the people of India, let us ensure maximum democracy and maximum devolution. Let the people be empowered”.

Rajiv Gandhi took the individual as unit as adopted by Ambedkar. But individuals cannot use power unless they are organised. Power can be utilised only through institutions and institutions can be handled only by organisations. The question is, to what extent the social situation has changed between the era of Mahatma Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. Against this historical background, the interface between communities can be analysed in terms of decentralisation of powers. To look at the issues posited above, an appropriate theory has to be drawn and this problem could be clearly visualised in the backdrop of the theoretical background.

**Theoretical Considerations**

33. Rajiv Gandhi had given a detailed account of why power should be decentralised in India, while presenting the 74th Constitutional Amendment Bill in the Parliament. Bases of Decentralisation of Power had been explained in *A Charter for the Panchayats*, Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi, Task Force on Panchayat Raj, 1996.
For a meaningful discourse on caste, interpretations and theoretical works of anthropologists and sociologists have to be utilized. Caste is an Indian phenomenon which had been extensively studied and researched by the western anthropologists and sociologists who developed a variety of theories. Of course, Indian scholars have also contributed but substantial amount of literature has been developed by the western scholars. Till date, the hard core academicians had difficulties in understanding the role of caste in the society in the backdrop of change because there is much difference between the book-view and the field-view. Book-view is based on the scriptures and the field view is based on the implications and impact of the social reconstruction movement. A variety of theories have been developed over this issue by the scholars. Of course, a number of schools have been developed based on their contributors. Initially, Dumont conceptualised his idea holistically and presented the admirable characteristics of the caste system in India, which has been disputed by Andre Beteille. Following the criticisms levelled against Dumont, an array of documents have been prepared and published by a host of scholars. Studies have been carried out in tiny villages long back and they are being compared with recent studies undertaken in the same villages after forty years. Significant changes have not been recorded in this regard.

34. Fuller, C.J., op.cit, pp.4-5.
Scores of theories have been developed and theoretical approaches have been evolved by ethnographers, anthropologists, sociologists, socio biologists and historians on the subject of caste. In all these studies, characteristics of the caste system, implications of the caste system in the broader functioning of the social system, major differentiation of the sub-caste systems, attempts to construct new system and deconstruct and reconstruct the existing system had been extensively studied and propositions are made by classifying the scholars as constructionist, deconstructionist, reconstructionist, reformist, classicalist, neo classicalist and so on. But all these studies extensively analysed the linkages between the collectivities and the resources. The linkages between the collectivities and the resources are determined by the established hierarchy in the social system. But the whole relationship started losing its grip over the system during the period of colonial administration. Subsequently, the concept of state system gained currency and it tried to alter the position for the advantage of the colonial administration. From the colonial period to the present, the concept of power or authority had been playing an important role in deciding the interrelationship among the communities.

To trace the linkages between the social structures and the political system, it is necessary to consider the approaches of modern political sociologists. Of course, a well known political scientist Rajni Kothari has also done a commendable work in this area.\(^{37}\) He has analysed the transformative process of the caste structure and politics in India over a period of time. As per the propositions of the sociologists on modernisation, the social

Structures are moving from one stage of activities to another, with distinctive changes characteristics in the social system and equally the political institutions. The question is, to what extent the changes have taken place and to what extent it created impact in the society? Against this background, Rajni Kothari looked at the Indian social system. But every province and every region of the province is distinct in terms of keeping the characteristics of the local social sub-system. Considering the wide variations among the regions it has been decided that for this work, Andre Beteille's analytical framework would be taken for examination. The reason for selecting Andre Beteille's framework is his contributions are mostly drawn from Tamil Nadu experience.

Andre Beteille's argument stems from the basic premise that power started moving from one dominant community to another at the micro level and for which macro level politics is responsible in many ways. It starts from panchayats and the change is being exhibited through elections periodically. The flow of events and activities creates changes in the structure of social system. The caste enters into politics in a number of ways. It enters through appeals for mobilisation, creating network of interpersonal relationship during election time and at other times, for mobilising the people on caste lines through articulating the interests of the caste.

The whole process could be seen in the backdrop of the nature of the caste system prevailing in Tamil Nadu. The caste system in Tamil Nadu is both elaborate and deeply segmented. The caste system is characterised by several levels of differentiations. There are several larger units and the same are divided into smaller
ones and these are subdivided on the basis of fairly enduring cleavages. These segments are differentiated by themselves or by others. The caste groups are characterized, on the one hand, by certain diacritical differentiations and on the other by a set of syncretic values. Diacritical values are the process of maintaining unity in the segment by differentiating itself from others. Syncretic value is defined as the unity move of the groups or segments in terms of internal solidarity. The diacritical differences are elaborate in Tamil Nadu.

The caste structure in Tamil Nadu is different from other states. Hence, it becomes necessary to know the caste structure in Tamil Nadu. Tamil population can be broadly divided into three major groups viz., Brahmins, non-Brahmins, and Harijans (Adi-Dravidas). All three groups are having distinct dwelling units. Of the three major groups, non-Brahmins represent a broader spectrum of cultural variations and appear to be, on the whole, less cohesive than the other two segments. Each segment has its own subdivisions for their social and cultural relationships.

When caste enters into village politics, it works in a different pattern. There are two propositions about the way caste works in politics. Castes can successfully enter politics only when they combine into fairly large aggregates. The second proposition is that too much segmentation tends to work in grassroots politics. Groups tend to align with other groups to oppose any targeted group on specific issues. Hence there is constant movement from one alignment to another and this practice is normal in Periyakottai

Panchayat. Fissions and fusions in caste groups are common features of caste politics in Periyakottai Panchayat. For the purpose of sociological analysis, it is necessary that a distinction has to be made between caste at the political level and the cultural level.

Thus it can be deduced that caste is significant to the political process at every level. Organisations are rigid at the lowest level and they tend to develop flexibility when they move towards higher level. Three-fold division of society into Brahmin, Non-Brahmin and Harijan provides the broad basis for communal politics in Periyakottai Panchayat. This division provides the basic framework for the analysis of functioning of the village panchayats in Periyakkottai Panchayat Union.

**Panchayats in Periyakottai - Historical Context**

It is obvious from history that Tamil Brahmins enjoyed a favourable position in the traditional economic system. A considerable section of Brahmins owned land. Subsequently, during the period of British, the distance between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins increased structurally because of the westernisation of Brahmin community. In the first quarter of the century, they had utilised all the opportunities to place themselves in enviable positions and distanced themselves from the non-Brahmins. Everywhere, they formed a 'clique' and left no space for non-Brahmins.

To counter the expansion of Brahmins' hold over the political structures and economic institutions, non-Brahmin movement was formed. Yet, they could not succeed initially. Even in the panchayat institutions at the micro level like Periyakkottai
Panchayat, Brahmins began to dominate during the British Raj. In the past, Brahmins enjoyed the highest positions in the hierarchies of status, class and power. Even today, they enjoy the ritual and economic dominance but political power has shifted to the non-Brahmins. The shift in political power has been hastened by the introduction of panchayat system.

At the dawn of independence and a little earlier, the non-Brahmins with the help of the Anti-Brahmin Movement began to capture panchayats like Periyakkottai Panchayat and transferred the power centre from the *agraharam* to the streets of non-Brahmin settlements. Panchayat halls were the centres of political gatherings of the villages and automatically the Brahmins had been excluded. Simultaneously, the Brahmins had moved over to towns and cities to take up positions\(^{39}\) of importance and left the political space for the non-brahmins.

Though it was asserted that the Non-Brahmin Movement included all castes other than Brahmins, including Muslims and Harijans who speak South Indian languages, the lingual groups and the social groups never perceived themselves as Non-Brahmins. The dominant caste group dominated at the micro level and a few dominant caste groups jointly dominated the power structure at the macro level. The non-Brahmin ascendancy reached its peak in the mid-fifties. In the event of consolidation of the Non-Brahmins’ power, internal cleavages developed within it. With the introduction

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mandatory provision and the quantum of seats has been fixed in proportion to their population. This kind of reservation created a critical mass for the process of empowerment of the marginalised and underprivileged.

This new dispensation comes into operation at a time when the Dalit collectivities took an aggressive form to negotiate with the power structure at the state and central level to get their legitimate socio-economic demands settled. When this provision is being put into practice, naturally the Dalits have an opportunity to move over to the power centre in large numbers and carry out programmes and schemes for the development of Dalits. But the process is not smooth. However, the social change witnessed in the Indian society is rather a slow process when compared to the political transformation. Social structures remain unchanged. To capture power, competition is between dominant castes and not among all the caste groups. When the competition was between two or three social segments of the non-Brahmins excluding the Dalits, it never took an aggressive form. Even during the period of power shift from the Brahmins to non-Brahmins, it was not so aggressive as witnessed when power shifts take place from non-Brahmin dominant castes to Dalits consequent upon the reservation of seats in the panchayat system at Periyakottai Panchayat.

To start with, the power shift took place between the cohesive Brahmin community and non-cohesive non-Brahmin dominant caste groups. Later the power shift took place between the non-cohesive non-Brahmin caste groups and cohesive Dalit group. The two power shifts have brought about several propositions for further validation. The first power shift occurred between the
westernized, socially, economically, and culturally highly placed cohesive community to non-cohesive, socially and economically disadvantaged dominant caste groups. The first category lost power at the grassroots and retained their economic power and social power through several institutional structures. Further, they were westernised enough to understand the transformation process. Hence it was not an aggressive struggle.

The second power shift is an aggressive one as the incohesive social groups were not in an advantageous position socially or economically or politically. The existing social structure had not much changed and hence there was no orientation to the dominant non-Brahmin caste groups to digest the power shift from them to the Dalits as they still treated them as untouchables. The incohesive non-Brahmin dominant communities have developed an antipathy towards the Dalits because the Dalits were enjoying more benefits from the government, even though the economic conditions of certain sections of the non-Brahmin communities and the Dalits were the same. Even though the non-Brahmin communities were politically incohesive, they were functionally cohesive as they had distinct functional responsibilities. Their organisations have the resource base. The groups in the non-Brahmin category, who have developed themselves in the process of transformation that took place in Tamil Nadu for the past thirty years because of the policy interventions of the non-Brahmin movement, have started migrating from the rural areas to urban centres to enhance their economic and political status.

As a consequence of the reservation of seats for the Dalits, the transformation process is passing through the stage of a
conflict. Wherever the population of Dalits outnumber the non-Brahmin communities, they take aggressive postures and in other places too, they enter into conflict with other caste groups. These attempts often met with resistance from the dominant castes. These conflicts have been particularly a significant feature of the relations between non-Brahmins and Dalits in the Periyakottai Panchayat.

At present, Dalits enjoy power legitimately in the hierarchy of power structure at the grassroot level. Nearly 24 per cent of the positions have been occupied by the Dalit representatives. At present, they have formed the critical mass for socio-political and economic transformation. But this power is not being actualized. Many factors stand in their way. There is yet another interesting development that wherever the Dalits are a minority, their leaders are brought under the control of dominant caste groups. The dominant caste group leaders ensured that their nominee from the Dalit community is elected for panchayats and thereby they re-establish their sway over the society.

The Dalits have to carry on their struggle with their in-built weaknesses. While the elders of the Dalit community are not able to assert themselves and assume their rights due to a long tradition of servility, younger elements of the Dalit community are developing a spirit of challenge and conflict with other communities in order to establish their position of equality with other communities. Even for the younger elements, lack of education and contact with the outside

40. For more details, refer to the documents prepared by Human Rights Research Foundation, Chennai and Legal Resources for Social Action at Chenglepet. Detailed narratives are in Special Number on Local Bodies by *Theekathir*, 1999.
world and poor economic conditions block their way to enhance the skill necessary to cope up with the challenges of organised politics. The problems are multidimensional in nature. The Dalits are being oriented by certain organisations of the civil society to develop perspectives on their own to look at issues dear to Dalits. They are being concretised as to how their issues are to be sorted out. In other words, the Dalit leaders who have come to power have the advantage of looking at basic issues concretised by the outside agencies in the civil society.

For the poor and landless non-Brahmins, the concessions extended to the Dalits by law are a constant source of irritation. In the case of the land owners from the dominant caste, they were disturbed over the demand of the Dalits for land and other resources and they feel that Dalits are the real threat to their social and economic development. Therefore, they are also very aggressive. The non-Brahmins have their own traditional panchayats looking after the community affairs and they are dominant in the rural areas. These traditional organisations have established control over the resource bases. When the Dalits took over the reins of political power, the traditional panchayats with their powerful resource base challenge the formal panchayats occupied by the Dalits. Hence the social conflict is intensive in many parts of the state and it took violent forms at Periyakottai Panchayat. Dalits versus Mukulathors conflicts have been erupting frequently. Victims are recorded in both camps.

In the past six to seven decades, steps had been taken to bring unity among the non-Brahmins of South India under the concept of Dravidian Nationalism and later, under the Indian Tamil
Nationalism. Yet, it could not be demonstrated that they have achieved the desired identity. For the past 30 years, the Tamil ethnic political parties are in power and both in urban and rural areas like Periyakottai Panchayat, people are generally oriented to Dravidian ideology. But in reality the non-Brahmin dominant caste groups have not reconciled themselves to the concept of social equity and justice as enunciated by the state authorities. The struggle is on.

Problems Confronted by Dalit Leaders

The nature and intensity of the problems of Dalits vary from village to village in the Periyakkottai Panchayat. Dalit leaders, who live in a village where Dalits are a minority, have to succumb to the pressure of the traditional panchayats. Activities are designed in accordance with the direction of the traditional panchayat leaders. Even in such areas, there are Dalit leaders who disobey the direction and they are determined to carry out the panchayat activities without the back up of the traditional panchayats. Such presidents and leaders are facing plethora of problems in their administration. Some of the presidents of panchayats have touched upon the encroachment of lands by the influential individuals who belong to Caste-Hindu Non-Brahmins. This pro-active intervention can succeed only with the support of the state government. It is unfortunate that the state government does not come to the rescue of the Dalit leaders in panchayats. Dalit leaders are leading a struggle for social justice. When they organise Gram Sabha meetings, they are being boycotted by the Caste Hindus. Gram Sabha members create chaos and confusion with the purpose of creating an impression that Dalits do not have
the capacity to manage the panchayats. Moreover, pressure has been built around the Dalit leaders from all quarters like officials, police and party leaders. Even their own caste leaders do not extend their support to these fearless presidents who take up the cudgels against the dominant caste leaders who injure the interests and welfare of the village.

Dalit leaders are being exploited by the others because skill, capacity and education of the Dalits are poor. Of course, a large number of Dalit leaders are waging a relentless fight to secure or carve out a niche for them legitimately. Dalit women leaders are being ill-treated by all sections of the society. Wherever the dominant caste groups are powerful, Dalit women leaders are brought under the control of the traditional panchayat leaders. Their monetary conditions propelled them to hand over their responsibility to the Caste Hindu leaders. Thus the micro institutions under the leadership of the Dalit leaders are virtually on a war path or in a state of submission to traditional leadership.

**Analysis and Observation**

It is obvious that the social structure has not changed fast enough despite the efforts of various social reform movements. The large scale exodus of members from the Dravidian Movement to form casteist organizations, proves that the Dravidian Movement has failed to deliver the goods to the deprived masses. Forming caste based associations and organisations are an indicator of the failure of the Dravidian Movement. Secondly, the caste based associations, which comprise of people belonging to the poor segment, indicate that the policies pursued by the ethnic political
parties have not been helpful to the poorest section. As a consequence, they move out from the ethnic political parties and form different organisations by accusing the Dravidian political parties. Primarily they could not find equity at the political level. At the social level, dominant caste groups are powerful and hence their control and sway over the society could not be subdued even with the intervention of the state.

But the moment the panchayat institutions became constitutional entities, they have been captured in an organised way by the caste groups. The reservation of seats for Dalits has been given in proportion to their population. Hence, 24 percent of the seats have been allotted to the SC and ST in all positions. However the newly enthroned Dalit representatives could not do anything in favour of Dalits against the wishes of the dominant community. In a few places, dominant caste groups have not allowed people to contest in the elections despite the deliberate attempts of the state government. Even those who have contested and won the election, have to rely on the support of the caste panchayat leaders. Dalit women, who have come to power, have to adjust with the community panchayat. They seek the help of the traditional leaders even to run the administration. When this is the situation, the Dalit leaders face a lot of problems. Many of the Dalit leaders, who have established contact with state level Dalit leaders, have taken a confrontationist posture and started resisting oppression. Thus, panchayat institutions in the Periyakottai Panchayat are going through a conflict phase in their evolution towards social justice.

Caste associations have been formed and activated vigorously for establishing their rights and gaining rightful position
in the socio-political system. The marginalised communities have started moving away from the Dravidian Movement and started asserting their position in polity and society. At the same time, the dominant caste groups also tread the same path and hence the struggle between Dalits and dominant caste panchayats has been activated. Of course, in certain places there is perfect understanding between Dalit leaders and dominant caste group leaders. But in many of the villages in the Periyakottai Panchayat, conflict is being witnessed. Hence the role of government in empowering Dalits is a matter of great necessity. In the light of the large scale exodus from the Dravidian movement towards separate caste outfits, the existing theories and approaches on formation of caste identity and mobilisation have to be re-evaluated. Further, the currents and under currents of the influx and exodus of members from organisation to organisation have to be examined. The available data in the Periyakottai Panchayat indicate the emergence of new propositions in the social transformation process of the Tamil society. Thus the working pattern of the panchayat is highly influenced by the caste factor. Kallars are the dominant community in the Periyakottai Panchayat. They dominate the formal panchayat bodies and traditional caste panchayats. The reservation of seats for Dalits recently paved the way for communal clashes and the rise of young leaders in the local Dalit organisations.