The status of women in India has been subject to great many changes over the past few millennia. Historically women have been treated as ‘Home- Makers’ are good in household chores. Though a few exception ruled kingdoms and recently become Prime Minister and Chief Minister. Generally the developing countries like India are far from in giving equal status to women in society, offices, governance etc\textsuperscript{1}. The root cause for all this is backwardness and consciously keeping women with lesser education, illiteracy or poor education, poverty and social-cultural values have traditionally treated women as followers of men in the house and in society.

In countries like Norway, Australia, Canada, USA, UK, Sweden, Japan, Denmark and Italy, women enjoy equal status to men in all spheres of activities. But in developing countries like India the status of women is very low in all spheres of activities\textsuperscript{2}. The strengthening of women’s participation in all spheres of life has become a major issue in the discourse of economic and social development in the last decades. Virtually every international and bilateral development agency has proclaimed policies to integrate women better into economic and social process. The promotion of women in politics, however, is their agenda in spite of the fact that women, who form around fifty percent of the world population, share a considerably lower presence in elected
political bodies. Women made up only 11.6 percent of MP’s in 176 parliaments in 1995.\(^3\) Universal adult suffrage is not adequate to overcome the structural barriers which prevent the presence of women in political offices. Even though women constitute half of the world population, but with regard to political power and positions, they are very less in number.

Women have been considered as sex object and inferior to the men in different spheres of knowledge. Traditions as Sati, Purdah, Jauhar, Child marriage and Devadasis have been banned and are largely defunct. However some cases of these practices are still found in the underdeveloped parts of India. The purdah system is still in practice by many Indian women especially the Muslims. Sati is an old largely defunct custom, in which the widow was immolated alive on her husband’s funeral pyre. It was abolished by the British in 1829. Jauhar refers to the practice of the voluntary immolation of all the wives and daughters of defeated warriors in order to avoid capture and consequent molestation by the enemy. Earlier child marriages were highly prevalent in India. The young girls would live with their parents till they reached puberty. It is still a common practice in some remote areas of the country. Purdah is the practice of requiring women to cover their skin and conceal their form. Now it is a declining tradition in India, practiced mostly by Muslims. Devadasis is a religious practice in some parts of South India, in which women are married to a deity or temple. The ritual was well established by the 10\(^{th}\) century A. D. In the latter period, the sexual exploitation of the Devadasis became a norm in some parts of India\(^4\).
Women played an important role in India’s independence struggle. Some of the famous freedom fighters include Bhikaji Cama, Dr. Annie Besant, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Anjali Ammal, Aruna Asaf Ali, Suchetha Kriplani, Muthu Lakshmi Reddi etc. Women in India now participate in all activities such as education, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the state (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows provisions to be made by the state in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the state for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 42).

The feminist activism in India picked up momentum during later 1970’s. One of the first national level issues that brought the women’s groups together was the Mathura rape case. The acquittal of policemen accused of raping a young girl Mathura in a police station led to a wide scale protests in 1979-80. The protests were widely covered in the national media, and forced the government to amend the Evidence Act, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Indian Penal Code and introduce the category of custodial rape. Female activists united over issues such as female infanticide, gender bias, women health and female literacy. In 1990’s grants from foreign donor agencies enabled the formation of a new woman- Oriented NGO’s. Self help groups and NGOs such as Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) have played a major role in women’s rights in India. The Government of India declared the year 60
2001 as the year of Women’s Empowerment. The National policy for the Empowerment of Women was passed in 2001.

India is after China the World’s most populated nation with over one billion people. India has a strong majority of male citizens opposite from most countries in the world that have a majority of females. As per 2001 Census, the over all female sex ratio at 933 for 1000 male in population. India covers an area of 3,287,263 sq km and there are 29 states. 18 languages are recognized by the Constitution, the most spoken is Hindi. In Indian women and men are getting the same ontology status, but in traditional practice and thoughts the status is very different. Women’s role is in the household whereas men are expected to fulfill the role as provider. Many women today have limited options for employment. Gender discrimination in wages is a regular feature for women workers. Since it is traditionally a women’s job to take care of the household, it is hard for girls to get the education that would lead to a better job. Those who get an education often work with health care, education or administration. For the women in the rural areas that work bear the double burden of a job and responsibility for children and home. The agriculture sector in India employs 65 percent of the labour market.

**Status of Women in Tamil Nadu**

The status of women is examined in the absolute sense by looking at where women stand *vis-a-vis* health, education, income and social indicators. The status of women in India is examined through the following broader areas by the researcher.
Control over Resources

No State (or national) level statistics are available on the ownership of land. A study of land ownership amongst 161 households in Dindigul district carried out by MSSRF revealed that in 94 per cent of the households, men owned the land. Women who owned land were predominantly those heading households or the only child of their parents. The patrilineal customary system of inheritance, patrilocal system of marriage, the lack of knowledge of women of their legal rights and dependence of women on their male siblings for support in the event of marital conflict all comes in the way of women claiming their rights.

Credit and Markets

The fact that women engage less in paid work and have less access to formal education than men further constrains their ability to access credit. They also do not have valuable independent assets to make them credit worthy. Other constraining factors are distance from banks, gender bias of bankers, working time of banks and the lack of resources to meet formalities. In the past, household-focused poverty alleviation programmes such as Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) sought to reserve 50 per cent of credit for women. Against this target, 38.46 per cent of IRDP loans were channeled to women in 1998-99. However, women’s access to credit did not always imply that they exercised control. In extreme cases, women had to struggle to repay the loan on their name, which had been used or misused by their husband. Learning lessons from the past, the Tamil Nadu Government has evolved the Tamil Nadu Women’s Development
Project *(Mahalir Thittam)* which is an SHG based scheme with a focus on the economic empowerment of women. As regards access to markets, it is most often the husband who is involved in the marketing of products/goods in the case of agriculture, family business or service, and as a result women lack knowledge of markets which includes information and dynamics of pricing, quality, marketing channels, etc\textsuperscript{10}.

**Income**

A micro-level study of 34 households carried out in three districts by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) mission of the TAWDP in 1999 reveals that women’s control over the income they earn varies with their age, household headship, and nature of activity (IFAD, 2000). Women’s control over their income is higher when they are engaged in wage labour or where marketing is controlled by them (for example milk vending, flower vending, fish vending), and less so when marketing is controlled by the men. However, where the women have some control over the money they earn, they usually spend the bulk of it on the family’s basic needs, especially food, health care and education, unlike their husbands. Moreover, the issue of control over household income is a crucial factor affecting nutritional levels of women (in particular pregnant women), infants and children, and the well-being of the family\textsuperscript{11}.

**Common Property Resources (CPR)**

Poor women in Tamil Nadu, like all over the developing world, have a gender-specific form of interaction with the environment. As per social norms, women are concerned with the provisioning and care of the household. Scarcity and pollution of water and lack of fuel wood
affect poor people more than the better-off, and amongst them poor women more than poor men. Micro-studies in Masinagudi block of the Nilgiris reveal that the erosion of traditional rights of STs to forest produce in the colonial period led to a decline in food security for ST families, particularly of women and girl children. While many of these common property rights have been denied even in the post-independence period, a single Act in the 1990s, of issuing permits to STs to collect forest produce, has expanded the incomes and food security of women.\textsuperscript{12}

Participation \textbf{in Decision making}

One of the basic objectives of human development is expanding choices, and doing so for all sections of people. An important aspect of this is enabling all sections of the population to take part in administrative and economic decision making. Experiences from most countries in the world have shown that a more broad based participation in decision making influences decisions in a positive way. Gender differences, however, continue to exist across the globe. In some ways, in fact, India has taken the lead as far as constitutional and statutory initiatives are concerned. For example, the recent sharp increase in the participation of women in grassroots democracy has paved the way for women’s increased mobility outside their homes, creating a space to voice their concerns. While there is still a long way to go for full participation, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, reserving one-third seats in local bodies for women, have facilitated women’s participation in the political process\textsuperscript{13}. 

64
Decision Making in Parliament

Table 2.1
Women Representation in Indian Parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lok Sabha</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Rajya Sabha</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Seats</td>
<td>Women Members</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Total Seats</td>
<td>Women Members</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>257^</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: National Informatics Centre, 2004*

Table 2.1 presents the details about women’s representation in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha from the year 1952 to 2004. Table 2.1 captures the trend over time with regard to female members in both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. As seen from the Table, the percentage of female Members of Parliament (MPs) has been consistently below eight percent. No improvement is seen over time. The gender gap is erratic for All India with female percentages ranging between a low of 2.5 percent (1996) to a high of just 9.09 percent (1984), with no discernible trend. There has only been one woman minister at the Centre from Tamil Nadu in 1984.
With respect to political participation in local bodies, the situation is more favourable in terms of women’s participation. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992, which went a long way in re-activating decentralized democracy in India, also made it mandatory to reserve one-third of seats in local bodies for women. This set the stage for serious participation by women in the political process in India, not as passive voters or party workers alone, but also as candidates. The following table gives the details about the reservation of seats in the Rural Local Governance in Tamil Nadu.

| Table- 2.2 |

| Reservation of Seats for Women in Rural Local Governance in Tamil Nadu |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>si. No.</th>
<th>No. of Seats by Reservation</th>
<th>District Panchayat</th>
<th>Panchayat Unions</th>
<th>Village Panchayats</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chair person</td>
<td>Ward members</td>
<td>Chair person</td>
<td>Ward members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Total Offices</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>6,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>ST General</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>ST Women</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SC General</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>SC Women</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>1,643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>3,150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tamil Nadu State Election Commission Report, 2001

The Seventy third and Seventy fourth Constitutional Amendment Acts Provide 33.33 percent reservation to women in all three tiers of the Rural Local Governance. So far three Local body elections have been
held in the years 1996, 2001 and 2006 in Tamil Nadu. According to the 1996 Panchayat election results, Women crossed 33-33 percent. In the 1996 Panchayat elections to the total number of candidates to rural local bodies was 19,448. Of these 7040 were women, constituting 63.20 percent of the total.

**Table - 2.3**

**Women Representatives Elected in Tamil Nadu**

*(In 1996 Local Body Election)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>2038</td>
<td>60232</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>3362</td>
<td>6385</td>
<td>50540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>978</td>
<td>2409</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>1736</td>
<td>3147</td>
<td>25208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>SC General</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>879</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>1862</td>
<td>12794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>SC Women</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>1073</td>
<td>5989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>ST General</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>ST Women</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>474</td>
<td>3392</td>
<td>10173</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>6496</td>
<td>12555</td>
<td>95181</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Tamil Nadu State Election Commission Report, 1996*
### Table - 2.4

**Women Representatives Elected in Tamil Nadu**

**(In 2001 Local Body Election)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>2038</td>
<td>6023</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>3150</td>
<td>6405</td>
<td>51106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>978</td>
<td>2409</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>1643</td>
<td>3154</td>
<td>26264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>1876</td>
<td>13046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>1078</td>
<td>6302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>ST</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>ST</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>470</td>
<td>3392</td>
<td>10173</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>6120</td>
<td>12619</td>
<td>97512</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source**: Tamil Nadu State Election Commission Report, 2001

### Table - 2.5

**Women Representatives Elected in Tamil Nadu**

**(In 2006 Local Body Election)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>5482</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>2956</td>
<td>5318</td>
<td>43848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>1048</td>
<td>2378</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>3228</td>
<td>24785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>804</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>844</td>
<td>2152</td>
<td>15495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>794</td>
<td>1658</td>
<td>11969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>ST</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>ST</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>473</td>
<td>3391</td>
<td>8780</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>6569</td>
<td>12593</td>
<td>97146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source**: Tamil Nadu State Election Commission Report, 2006
Manu, the sagacious law-giver of ancient India distinguishes three types of settlements village (gram), town (pura) and city (nagara). According to him, village was the fundamental unit of administration. The village headman who used to be the village leader, was generally nominated by the king or in other case hereditary or elected.\textsuperscript{14}

In olden days each village was a republic which was governed by the Panchayat or the village council. Three or five persons were appointed to look after the welfare of the village and this association was referred to as Panchayat.\textsuperscript{15} As described by the Greek Ambassador Magasthenes, who visited the court of Chandragupta Maurya in 303 BC, village communities are rural units and little independent republics aptly said to be self contained and self governed.\textsuperscript{16}

In Tamil Nadu, during the Tamil Sangam period (3\textsuperscript{rd} Century BC - 4\textsuperscript{th} Century AD), the residents of a village (oor) met and transacted local government affairs through the village assembly called mantram or avai. The sangam system survived the Kalabhra Interregnum (3\textsuperscript{rd} — 6\textsuperscript{th} Century AD) and was revived during the Pallava - Pandya period (6\textsuperscript{th} to 9\textsuperscript{th} Century AD). The local government developed into an integrated system during the golden age of the Cholas (9\textsuperscript{th} - 13\textsuperscript{th} Century AD). Such a vibrant local government declined under the Muslim and the Vijayanagar rule (14\textsuperscript{th} - 17\textsuperscript{th} Century AD).\textsuperscript{17}

During the Chola Period, the Central feature of rural organisation was the formation of government by means of primary assemblies comprising the adult males of each village.\textsuperscript{18} A number of self governing
villages constituted a Kurram or Nadu or Kottam as it was known in different parts of the country. A big village which is large enough to form a Kurram by itself have been often described as a taniyur (A town apart). A number of Kurrams formed a Valanadu, which was often known as nadu in the areas where the smaller division was called Kottam. Above Valanadu, there was the mandalam which was the largest division of administration. There were about eight or nine of these mandalams or provinces including in Chola kingdom.¹⁹

For selecting persons for several committees which governed the village alongside the Mahasabha and the general body of the adult males belonging to the Brahmin community, the regulations were laid down by the Uttiramerur inscriptions (AD 919). The selection was done in rotation so that the same persons or their relatives will not be the committee members continuously.²⁰ There were thirty Kudumbus (wards) and in each of these wards, the people concerned came together and wrote more than one forth nilam of taxable land, resided in houses on their own land, were below seventy and above thirty five years old, know the mantra brahmana and experienced, were competent in one veda and possessed experience and had material and spiritual purity.²¹ A person who had done the variyam before and failed to show accounts and his relatives should not have their names written on the tickets. Those names can be included only after they perform the expiation.²²

Excluding all the above specified persons, names should be written on tickets in all the thirty wards and in these twelve series, attaching separate covering tickets (Vayalai) for each ward, and the tickets of the thirty wards should be separately bundled and put into the
pot. When these tickets were drawn, all the members of the Mahasabha, whether young or old should be assembled there and the temple priest (Nambimar), who happened to be in town on that day should be seated in the inner Mandapa (Pavillion) with the Mahasabha. The elderly priest among them should stand up holding the pot and looking upwards so that all the people could see that.

A small boy who could not even understand what is happening there should be asked to take the bundle of one ward and mix it with another pot and take out one ticket and place it in the hands of the madhyastha. He should read it aloud and it should be read aloud by the temple priests in the inner pavilion, and that name should be written down. Likewise, one name should be selected from each of the thirty wards. Among the Madhyasthas, only a person having material purity should write the accounts and he should not maintain any other accounts. He should submit the maintained accounts to the Accounts Committee of the Sabha and then he was declared pure.23

The duties of the revenue officers included many other responsibilities besides their designation. They were often found regulating the receipts and expenditure of temples and helping the local authorities to do the audit and accounts of temples. Theft, adultery and forgery were considered serious offence and people who committed any crimes were excluded from the village committees of Uttiramerur. People who had ridden upon donkeys were also excluded because this form of punishment for other offences were only fines, and that even murder had the punishment of maintaining a perpetual lamp burning in the nearest temple.24
**British Rule and Decline of Rural Self Governance**

Up to the establishment of the rule of East India company, the rural self governing village systems were permitted to function independently by rulers. Even the Moghal kings did not disturb the village structures. The Village Panchayats managed the affairs of the village. They collected land revenue and paid it to the state. Most of the disputes within the villagers were settled by the Village Panchayats. The common property resources of the village like irrigation systems, grazing lands, fisheries and forests were managed by the Panchayat. People did not have any direct interaction with the state.

Establishment of British rule in India was a great set back to the self governing village Panchayats. Particularly the land revenue policies of the East India company contributed to the decline of Village Panchayats. In 1793 Lord Camwalis, then Governor General of India introduced permanent land revenue settlement. This policy bring an end to the traditional village management system. It introduced a system of direct collection of land revenue by the government. All the common property resources were taken over by the state. State established courts to settle disputes. Revenue department was established and district collectors became the rulers. The role of village Panchayats was greatly undermined by this process.\(^{25}\)

**Local Government in British India**

The British government wanted to establish a municipal administration in places like Madras, Bombay and Calcutta to provides good civic facilities to the European Community. In 1688, the first municipal corporation was established with a Mayor and 12 aldermen.
Most of them were Europeans. The municipal corporation attended works related to construction of town halls, schools and maintenance of streets and drainages.\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{Lord Mayo's Resolution of 1870}

A resolution was passed by Lord Mayo's government local self government as a conscious process of administrative devolution and political education may be said to be initiated by the scheme of financial decentralization. This seems to be the first attempt to develop local self government in rural areas. The management of funds devoted to education, sanitation, medical relief and local public works. The operation of this resolution in its full meaning and integrity will afford opportunities for the development of self government for decentralization of powers to bring about administrative efficiency in meeting the demands of the people and the fiscal compulsion also.\textsuperscript{27}

The Local Bodies Act of 1885 reflects the validity of Ripon’s policy which actually paved the way for decentralized local self governing institutions down to the village level.

\textbf{Lord Ripon’s Resolution (1882)}

Lord Ripon’s resolution with the recommendation that the sub-division taluka or the tehsil which is the smallest administrative unit to be placed under a local board with two thirds of its membership composed of the elected representatives. The provincial governments could create the district boards above the local boards, with powers of coordination or control. It was a rotation system for a term of two years and compulsory retirement. The local bodies act of 1885 reflects the
validity of Ripon’s policy which actually paved the way for decentralized local self-governing institutions down to the village level.28

Royals Commission Report (1909)

In 1909, the Royal Commission on Decentralization analysed the working of the local and the district boards in various provinces of the country and came to a conclusion that, mainly due to their unrepresentative character and inadequate powers, these bodies had not succeeded in creating an electorate consisting of the members of the village Panchayats, the provision for an elected majority on all boards and due representation to minorities on all boards through nomination. It was also recommended to form Village Panchayats and reconstitute the local boards where they had been abolished so that the local government could be built up from the base.

Montague Chelmsford Report (1918)

The Montague Chelmsford Report (1918) placed the local self government under the domain of Indian ministers in the provinces. The report came with the suggestion that there should be complete popular control in local bodies so that the local self government will be fully representative and responsible.

In 1918 the Government of India passed a resolution accepting the principle of substantial elected majorities on all the boards. By the demonstration of the local electorate, the elective principle was to be reinforced and by retaining nomination rather than by introducing some system of communal or proportional representation, the representation of minorities was to be secured.29
Development of Panchayati Raj System After 1947

As India was a predominantly rural country, Mahatma Gandhi viewed Panchayats as a Swadeshi institution and he was of the opinion that village organisation meant the organisation of the whole of India. After the independence, the main question that was discussed in the constituent assembly was whether this institution should have a place in the new constitution or not.

The Constituent Assembly debates present the dual picture of the importance of the Panchayat in the Constitution. Panchayats were regarded as schools of democracy and as an instrument for village upliftment by those who favoured Panchayats and those who opposed them displayed contempt for villages and village democracy. The overall feeling of the members were to include village Panchayats in Article 40 under the Directive principles of the Constitution. The Directive Principles were only persuasive and did not compel the state to take steps to promote Panchayats. The Article reads, “The state shall take steps to organise Village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of local self government”.

A comprehensive programme for rural development namely community development programme was launched by the Government of India in 1952, which encompassed almost all activities of rural developments. This programme could not fulfill the dreams of the rural masses. The Government of India constituted a high power committee headed by Balwantrai Mehta, a Member of Parliament to examine the causes for the failure of community development programme. This
committee found that the failure of the programme was due to the absence of people’s participation and suggested that a set of institutional arrangements would have to be created to make people’s participation meaningful and effective.

The Committee recommended the establishment of a three tier Panchayati Raj System with Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and the Zilla Parishad at the district level. There should be a genuine transfer of power and responsibility to these bodies and they should be given powers for planning and development activities.\textsuperscript{31}

The second tier, the Panchayat Samiti should be the executive body while the Zilla Parishad with the District Collector as Chairperson should be the advisory, coordinating and supervisory body. A system should be evolved with adequate resources to enable them to discharge their functions and effect furthered evolution of authority in future. A few states in the country passed Panchayat Acts in 1959 and in 1960s Panchayats were established in all states of India, with states like Rajasthan having a three-tier system, whereas Tamil Nadu adopted a two-tier system. Some states even had Nyaya Panchayats or judicial Panchayats with powers to deal with petty, civil and criminal cases.\textsuperscript{32}

Jawaharlal Nehru, then Prime Minister of India, supported the Panchayati Raj Movement in India. He could influence state governments in different states of India to pass legislations for the establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions. He created a separate Ministry of Panchayati Raj in the Government of India and appointed S.K.Dey, a wellknown expert in rural development, as the Minister for Panchayati Raj. In most of the states powers were devolved to
Panchayats and Panchayats could emerge as instruments of development at the grassroots. After the death of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964, Panchayats could not get political support and after 1964 Panchayats started declining.

64th Amendment Bill

After Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India in 1984, he could revive interest in Panchayati Raj, he wanted to regenerate Panchayats as instruments of development at the grassroots. He introduced a Constitutional Amendment Act in the Indian Parliament to give constitutional status to Panchayats and devolve powers to Panchayats.

The Rajiv Gandhi government introduced the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill in the Parliament in July 1989 to constitutionalise the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Although the Lok Sabha passed the Bill, the Rajya Sabha did not approve it. Regional parties vehemently opposed the Bill on the ground that it sought to strengthen centralization and reduce the power of the state governments.\footnote{33}

Narasimha Rao Government

The government under the Prime Ministership of P.V.Narasimha Rao once again considered the constitutionalization of Panchayati Raj Institutions. It modified the proposals to delete the controversial aspects of 64th amendment bill. It introduced the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha in September 1991. The Lok Sabha passed in on December 22, 1992 and by the Rajya Sabha passed it on December 23, 1992. It was approved by the 17 state assemblies and received the assent
of the President of India on 20th April 1993- Thus it 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 came into force on 24th April 1993-

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992

73rd Constitutional Amendment Act added Part - XI of the Constitution of India. It is entitled ‘The Panchayats’ and consists of provisions from articles 243 to 243-0. The Act has added the Eleventh Schedule to the constitution. It contains 29 functions to the Panchayats and deals with Article 243G. The Act has given effect to Article 40 of the Constitution, which says that, “The State shall take steps to organise Village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government”. This article is a part of the Directive Principles of State Policy. 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act gives Constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. It has brought them under the justifiable part of the constitution. The state governments are under a constitutional obligation to create the Panchayati Raj System. Neither the establishment of Panchayats nor the holding of elections at regular intervals depends on the will of the state government any more.

In our country the Act is a significant landmark in the evolution of grassroots democratic institutions. It transforms representative democracy into participatory democracy. It is revolutionary concept to build democracy at the grassroots level in the country. The Salient Features of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act explained hereunder.
Three Tier System

The Act provides a three tier structure for Panchayati Raj in all states. Village Panchayats, Intermediate Panchayats and District Panchayats have been created. The Act has brought about uniformity in the structure of Panchayati Raj throughout the country. However, a state having a population not exceeding 20 lakhs may not constitute Panchayats at the intermediate level.

Gram Sabha

The Act provides for a Gram Sabha as the foundation of Panchayati Raj System. It is a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls of a village within the area of a Panchayat. It is a village assembly consisting of all the registered voters in the area of a Village Panchayat. It shall exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the legislature of a state determines.

Election Procedure

The members of Panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels shall be elected directly by the people. The Chairpersons of Panchayats at the intermediate and district levels shall be elected indirectly by and from amongst the elected members. The Chairperson of a Panchayat at the village level shall be elected in such manner as the state legislature determines.

Reservation, of Seats

The Act provides for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes in every Panchayat (i.e., at all the three levels) according to their population in proportion to the total population in the
Panchayat areas. Further, the state legislature shall provide for the reservation of offices of chairpersons in the Panchayat at the village or any other level for the SCs and STs.

The Act provides for the reservation of not less than one third of the total number of seats for women (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the SCs and the STs). Further, not less than one third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women.

State Election Commission

The Act provides for an independent state election commission. It consists of a State Election Commissioner to be appointed by the Governor. His conditions of service and tenure of office shall also be determined by the Governor. He shall not be removed from the office except in the manner and on the grounds prescribed for the removal of a judge of the state high court, and his conditions of service shall not be varied to his disadvantage after his appointment.

Duration of Panchayats

The Act provides for a five year term of office to the Panchayat at every level. However, a Panchayat can be dissolved before the completion of its term. Fresh election to constitute a Panchayat shall be completed before the expiry of its duration of five years, or in case of dissolution, before the expiry of a period of six months from the date of its dissolution.
Powers and Functions

The State Legislature may give the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of Self-Government. Such a scheme may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and functions upon Panchayats at the appropriate level with respect to the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice. The implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice, as may be entrusted to them, including those in relation to the 29 matters listed in the eleventh schedule.

Finances

The State Legislature may

i) Authorize a Panchayat to levy, collect and appropriate taxes duties, tolls and fees;

ii) Assign to a Panchayat taxes, duties, tolls and fees levied and collected by State Government;

iii) Provide for making grants-in-aid to the Panchayats from the consolidated fund of the State; and

iv) Provide for constitution of funds for crediting all moneys of the Panchayats.

Finance Commission

The Governor of a state shall, after every five years, constitute a Finance Commission to review the financial position of the Panchayats. The commission shall make the following recommendations to the
Governor: The principles, which should govern: (a) The distribution between the state and the Panchayats of the net proceeds of the taxes, duties, tolls and fees levied by the State, (b) The determination of the taxes, duties, tolls and fees, which may be assigned to the Panchayats. (c) The grants-in-aid to the Panchayats from the Consolidated Fund of the State.

1) The measures needed to improve the financial position of the Panchayats.

2) Any other matter referred to the Finance Commission by the Governor in the interests of sound finance of Panchayats.

The state legislature may provide for the composition of the commission, the required qualifications of its members and the manner of their selection. The Governor shall place the recommendations of the Commission along with the action taken report before the State Legislature. The Central Finance Commissioner shall also suggest the measures needed to augment the Consolidated Fund of a State to supplement the resources of the Panchayats in the States (on the basis of the recommendations made by the finance commission of the state).

**Audit of Accounts**

The State Legislature may make provisions with respect to the maintenance of accounts by Municipalities and the auditing of such accounts.
Continuance of Existing Laws and Panchayats

All the state laws relating to Panchayats shall continue to be inforce until the expiry of one year from the commencement of this Act. In other words, the states have to adopt the New Panchayati Raj System based on this act within the maximum period of one year from 24th April 1993, which is the date of the commencement of this Act. However, all the Panchayats existing immediately before the commencement of this Act shall continue till the expiry of their term, unless dissolved by the state legislature sooner. Consequently, the majority of states passed the Panchayati Raj Acts in 1993 and 1994 to adopt the new system in accordance with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992.

Eleventh Schedule

The Eleventh Schedule, added to the constitution by the Act, contains the following 29 functional items placed within the purview of Panchayats:

1. Agriculture, including agricultural extension.
2. Land improvement, implementation of land reforms, land consolidation and soil conservation.
3. Minor irrigation, water management and watershed development.
4. Animal husbandry, dairying and poultry.
5. Fisheries
6. Social forestry and farm forestry
7. Minor forest produce
8. Small scale industries, including food processing industries.

9. Khadi, village and cottage industries

10. Rural housing

11. Drinking water

12. Fuel and fodder

13. Roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, waterways and other means of communication.

14. Rural electrification, including distribution of electricity.

15. Non-conventional energy sources.


17. Education, including primary and secondary schools.

18. Technical training and vocational education.

19. Adult and non formal education.

20. Libraries

21. Cultural activities

22. Markets and fairs.

23. Health and sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries.

24. Family welfare

25. Women and child development.
26. Social welfare, including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded.

27. Welfare of the weaker sections, and in particular, of the Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribes.

28. Public distribution system.

29. Maintenance of community assets.

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India not only confers a constitutional status to the Panchayats, it also provides uniformity and formal structure to these institutions of self governance for the sake of their effective functioning.

**Tamil Nadu New Panchayati Raj Act 1994**

The New Panchayati Raj System came into being in Tamil Nadu after enacting a new law for local body institutions in the year 1994. The 1994 Act has brought a number of changes in Tamil Nadu Panchayati Raj structure. The main purpose of this act is to bring about all round development in the rural areas. The salient features of the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act 1994 are as follows:

i. A three-tier system viz., Village Panchayat, Panchayat Union (Block Panchayat) and District Panchayat came into existence.

ii. Panchayats as a generic term used for all the three tiers. Town Panchayats were excluded from the purview of the Act and brought under Nagarpalika Act.

iii. Members of the three local tier bodies and Presidents of the Village Panchayats are directly elected by voters. Chairpersons of
Panchayat Union Councils and District Panchayats are elected indirectly from among its elected members.

iv. All the three tiers of Panchayats are made independent of each other. There is no linkage of representation of President of Village Panchayat in panchayat Union Council and Chairman of Panchayat union in District Panchayat.

v. Reservation of seats and offices for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes is made in proportion to their population in every local body. One third of total number of seat and offices are reserved for women. Rotation of offices in all these categories in all three tiers shall be once in 5 years.

vi. Uniform term of 5 years is fixed for members and Chairperson of all three tier local bodies. Power of supercession of Panchayats by Government is taken away. Ordinarily election shall be conducted within six months from the date of occurrence of vacancy.

vii. Tamil Nadu State Election Commission was constituted as an independent body under section 239 of the Act to conduct election to the local bodies regularly. Electoral roll of the Legislative Assembly is adopted for Panchayat election.

viii. State Finance Commission, Under the mandatory provision of the 73rd Constitutional amendment can be constituted as per section 198 of the Act 1994.

ix. District Planning committee shall be constituted under Section 241(1) of the Act 1994 to consolidate the plans prepared by the Panchayats and Municipalities in the district to prepare a development plan for the district as a whole.
x. The concept ‘Gram Sabha’ consisting of all persons registered in the electoral roll relating to a Village Panchayat is revived and State provided for specific powers and functions to be performed by such Gram Sabha.

**Gram Sabha**

The Gram Sabha is the nucleus of the New Panchayati Raj System. All the registered voters of the Village Panchayat are members of the Gram Sabha. The President of the Village Panchayat is the Presiding Officer of the meetings of the Gram Sabha. The quorum for transacting business in the Gram Sabha is one third of the total membership. It has to meet at least four times a year, the government has now made it mandatory for Gram Sabha to be conducted in every Village Panchayat on fixed days like Republic Day, May 1st, Independency Day and Gandhi Jayanthi. The functions of the Gram Sabha, it would meet to approve the village plan, the annual village budget and also to review the progress of the implementation of schemes entrusted to the Village Panchayat (Sec.3 sub section 3(a)). An amendment to this subsection has been made that it is the Gram Sabha’s responsibility to approve the audit report of the Village Panchayat’s previous years’ accounts. Gram Sabha approves the list of beneficiaries selected and the location of community facilities identified by the Village Panchayat, review the works executed by the Village Panchayat in the previous year, scrutinize the list of works to be undertaken in the current year, and mobilize voluntary labour and cash and other contributions for the welfare of the Panchayat. The above said functions, the Gram Sabha under the New Panchayati Raj System in Tamil Nadu is intended to be an important instrument of participatory decision making.
Village Panchayat

Village Panchayat is constituted for a minimum population of five hundred. The membership of the Village Panchayat Council ranges from a minimum of five to a maximum of fifteen. The President and the Ward Members of the Village Panchayat Council are elected directly by the voters. The Vice-President is elected indirectly from among the elected Ward Members. The Village Panchayat has to look after the following subjects:

(a) Construction, repair and maintenance of Village Panchayat roads;

(b) Lighting of public roads and public places;

(c) Providing drainage facilities;

(d) Cleaning of streets;

(e) Providing public latrines;

(f) Providing burial and burning grounds;

(g) Providing water for washing and bathing purposes and

(h) Such other duties notified by the Government then and there.

In order to enable the Village- Panchayat to perform its functions, the following decisions have been taken and notified through government orders:
(a) All Village Panchayats will get financial resources from the Government directly without any intermediary. Panchayati Union or Block Panchayat will not interfere in the process;

(b) Gram Panchayat Presidents have been designated as Executive Heads and they have been entrusted with powers and responsibilities;

(c) Village Panchayat roads can be taken up for works with the resolution of the Panchayats;

(d) Facilities like street light, water supply can be maintained and attended to if there is any disrepair;

(e) Part time clerks can be appointed by the Panchayat president;

(f) House construction plan approval has to be given by the Village Panchayats;

(g) Beneficiaries for the government schemes and programmes have to be selected by the Gram Panchayat in the Gram Sabha;

(h) Library and information centre in the villages has to be established by the Village Panchayat.

**Panchayati Union**

Panchayat Union is formed for every block. Each Panchayat Union has a Chairperson and a Vice-Chairperson elected indirectly by the members of the Panchayat Union Councils. The Panchayat Union Council members are elected directly by the people, at the rate of one member for every 5000 population. Members of Parliament and of the
Legislative Assembly elected from that area are ex-officio members of the Panchayat Union Council.

The Panchayat Union has the following duties and responsibilities:

(a) Construction, repair and maintenance of Public roads;
(b) Establishment and maintenance of dispensaries;
(c) Construction and maintenance of elementary schools;
(d) Preventive and remedial measures connected with any epidemic;
(e) Conduct of fairs and festivals;
(f) Veterinary relief;
(g) Opening and maintenance of Panchayat Union markets;
(h) Extension of village sites and regulation of buildings;
(i) Maintenance of statistics related to births and deaths;
(j) Improvement of agriculture and agriculture stock;
(k) Promotion and encouragement of cottage industries;
(l) Other duties and responsibilities entrusted to Panchayati Union by the Government through Government notification.

In order to enable the Panchayat Union to perform its duties, the Government of Tamil Nadu has, by notification, identified the following activities:
(a) Construction and maintaining Panchayat Union roads, irrigation tanks, and lakes, initiating family welfare activities, executing noon meal schemes and implementing schemes for Adi Dravidas;

(b) works have to be identified from Employment Assurance schemes and they are to be executed;

(c) Draught relief works have to be identified and executed;

(d) M.P. and M.L.A area development schemes akin to union have to be executed;

(e) Panchayat union buildings have to be maintained by the union itself;

(f) Panchayat union can supervise the activities in the domain of public health, primary education, drinking water supply, roads, small culverts, khadi and village industries works, technical training education, libraries, rural electricity and non conventional energy.

**District Panchayat**

The District Panchayat is constituted with directly elected members. For a population of 50,000 one member is elected. A Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson are elected from among the members of the district Panchayats. Members of Parliament and the Legislative Assembly of that area are the Ex-officio Members of the District Panchayat Council. The District Panchayat Council has to perform the following functions;
(a) advise the government in all matters concerning Panchayati Raj institutions particularly on services and development programmes;

(b) Watching the progress of the measures undertaken by the government, Village Panchayats and Panchayat Union councils in the districts as under the administrative control of the districts;

(c) Classification of markets, fairs and public roads in Panchayati Raj institutions, and

(d) Collection of data, publication of statistics, demanding any information from Village Panchayats and Panchayati Union Councils.

**Reservations**

In 1994 Act has provided the reservation of seats in Panchayats for women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in accordance with the provisions prescribed in the 73rd Amendment Act. While the reservation for women was one third of seats, for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the reservation is in proportion to their population.

**Election and Finance Commission**

An Election Commission headed by the State Election Commissioner appointed by the Governor to conduct the local body elections is mandatory. The Election Commissioner enjoys powers and privileges and status of a judge of the High Court. The tenure of office of the election commissioner is two years. However, the Commissioner can be given extension for four more years. In Tamil Nadu elections are
conducted on party lines for District Panchayats and Panchayat Union. Elections for Village Panchayats are not on party lines.

There will be a Finance Commission Constituted for every five year to review financial positions of the Panchayats and to make recommendations to the Governor as to fix the principles to govern the distribution between the state and Panchayats of the net proceeds of the taxes, duties, tolls and fees leviable by the Government. Further to identify the logistics for making grants in aid to the Panchayats from the consolidated fund of the state and the measures needed to improve the financial position of the Panchayats. The Finance Commission shall consist of a chairman and four other members.

**District Planning Committee**

Government of Tamil Nadu shall constitute in every district a District Planning Committee to consolidate the plans prepared by the District Panchayat, Panchayat Union Councils, Village Panchayats, Municipal Councils, and Municipal Corporations in the district and to prepare a draft development plan for the district as a whole. The Committee shall consist of the Collector of the District, members of the House of people who represent whole or part of the district, members of the council of states, Members of Legislative Assembly whose constituencies lie within the district, Mayor of the city Municipal Corporation and all Chairpersons of the Municipalities of the District, Chairperson of the District Panchayat, one fifth of the total number of Chairpersons of Town Panchayats and Panchayat Union notified by the government every year by rotation, and such number of persons not less than four fifth of the total number of the committee as specified by the
government elected from among the Members of District Panchayat, Town Panchayats, Municipal Councils and Corporations in the District in proportion to the ratio between the population of the rural areas and of the urban areas. The District Panchayat President is the Chairperson.

**Problems Faced by Elected Women Village Panchayat Presidents in Rural Local Governance in Tamil Nadu**

To empower the women, the women Village Panchayat Presidents have to be first empowered through the available means. In this process, it is essential to understand the problems faced by the women representatives while performing their role and functions and to solve the problems as much as possible. The problems of the women representatives of local bodies are classified under two categories, based on their perception as a women and as a women Panchayat representative respectively. The problems faced by the women leaders were documented during the meeting conducted for them by the Rajiv Gandhi Chair for Panchayati Raj studies of Gandhigram Rural University.36

**Increasing Work Load**

The moment they filed their nomination, their workload increased doubly and constraints also increased. No women representative from the rural areas reported that their workload in the home front has reduced due to their work in public space. In a joint family system, attention on the routine work cannot be reduced. At every state, the elected women representative has to tackle the problems carefully in the family; otherwise, she will be put into trouble. The family burden coupled with the workload in panchayat made the elected women representatives tired of the activities in publish space. Their efficiency could be exhibited and could not be improved as they had no time. On
most of the occasions, the elected women representatives preferred a joint workshop with the male members of their family.

**Implications of Micro Politics**

Politics has its own ramifications and dimensions - whether it is state politics or national politics. Till they enter into grass roots institutions, women had confined only to voting. After reserving seats for them in the grass roots institutions, they have also been made as players in the political game. So far, they had not been dragged in this game and hence they are a novice in this art. In order to acquaint them with politics, they need the support of men. But while drawing the support of men for their work, the men try their level best to coopt the women representatives in their work. Now they are learning the art of politics.

**Illiteracy**

Illiteracy serves as a basic problem to the newly elected women representatives. They are not able to write and read, but yet they are allowed to file nominations. After they are elected to positions, they feel very much annoyed about their inability to read and write. They have aspiration to read and write and are prepared to undergo training but their husbands disallow them as they are operating the Panchayat at present. Wherever the elected women representatives are establishing contact with NGOs, they are properly oriented and trained to manage the institutions on their own by the interventions of the NGOs.

**Usual Shyness**

Having secluded themselves from the society, especially the menfolk, they face difficulties interacting with the men in office and in public life, after being elected to panchayti institutions. Further, they had no experience of sharing their views on issues and matters with men. But when they become the leaders they have to interact with
community—both men and women. Such kind of inhibitions prevented them from interacting with men in public places without any reservations.

**Domination of Male Members**

It is clear from experience of the elected women representatives that their capacity had not been recognized by the male members of their families. After their election, they have been attending meetings and training programmes. They learn so many things in the training. Initially the men in the family, under the guise of helping them accompanied the elected women representatives to offices and public places. Over a period of time, they have learnt the art of administration through interacting and training. But the male family members would not accept that their family women, who have been elected to Panchayats have equipped themselves to manage the institution. It is an irony that the elected women representatives felt that they could manage the affairs on their own without the help of any male member from their families. Yet this could not be communicated to the male members of their families. Further, the elected women representatives are facing problems in Panchayats when the male members of their family interfere in administration. In the absence of interference in administration by the male members of the elected women representatives, trouble from other male members would be very minimal and negligible.

**Movements are Restricted**

The women representatives indicated yet another problem; village people used to bring problems to the representative at any time. Though the women representatives indicated their willingness to attend such work any time, they were not permitted by their husbands/other family members. Similarly, the need the permission of their husbands or
in-laws, if they wanted to go to police station or hospital during night time. On such critical occasions, people wanted the support of the leaders. If the leaders are not coming out to help the people, public use to criticize the panchayat leader. The social mobility of these women representatives is thus restricted.

**Made not to raise the issues of women**

Although women in the rural areas are facing a multitude of problems, men ensure that such problems are never raised openly in public fora. The women representatives felt suppressed by this very much. Alternatively, the women representatives feel that those problems could be raised by the affected women in the fora. However, the affected women feel that those problems could be raised by the women representatives. The family members of the elected women representatives are therefore silencing the elected women members from articulating people’s problems (esp.women’s problems) in public.

**Negative attitude of the officials**

Elected women representatives find it very difficult to convince the officials in the government offices as they have a poor opinion about the women representatives. The officials felt that the elected women representatives are in position simply because of reservation policy and that they do not have an opinion or vision of their own. Officials assume that the women representatives would accept whatever the officials advise. Contrary to expectation, women representatives who go to offices with aspiration, and lot of expectations from the officials feel frustrated.

**Illtreatment**

It is a sorry state of affairs in government offices that the elected women representatives with high social and economic background get
respect while the poor elected women representatives, especially the Dalits face only illtreatment. To illustrate the tragedy of Dalit leadership, a case is narrated here. A poor Dalit women who served as a construction worker assisting; the manson got elected as Gram Panchayat President. She went to the Panchayati Union office to clear a file for her panchayat. The moment she went to a room and met the concerned clerk, she was asked to bring a cup of tea from the nearby tea stall by the clerk without minding it. Later she was asked to meet him at his residence. She went to his residence and she was asked to do some work in his garden. She also did that work. Later, she got the cheque from him and went home happily. When she narrated the incident in a training programme she was asked as to why she has not resisted? She said previously, it was her routine to bring tea to mason in the construction site. Now she was asked by an official. This was her reply. Illtreatments are not new despite the presence of Dalit movement.

**Information Blockade**

There are several blocks and barriers to the process of women empowerment. Information blockade is the most powerful weapon used by the officials to disempowered the women. Generally women do not have access towards newspapers. Moreover, all government information are transmitted from one department to another, only among officials. The officials circulated the information booklets and details only among the men representatives are not willing to share their knowledge with the women representatives

**Domination of Caste Panchayats**

Traditional caste panchayat leaders are yet another barrier to the elected women representatives as they impose conditions and restrictions on the women leaders. If the elected women representatives belongs to the caste of the traditional panchayat leader, he would
extend all support to her to be in power but not in attending to the works in her agendas. The traditional panchayat leader expects that elected women representative should adhere to the advise of the traditional panchayat. She is expected to carry out the works from the agenda of the traditional panchayat. If the elected women representative belongs to other caste, particularly Dalit, she cannot do any work literally. Invariably, she has to be under the control of the traditional panchayat leader. Otherwise, she has to spend sleep less nights.

**Lack of Communication Skill**

Communication skill is most important for the success of any leader in the modern era. The elected women representatives never had a public space experience and hence they lack communication skill. The elected women representatives have to manage the councils and the public. Since they feel that they lack badly, they could not achieve what they wanted to achieve. The men councilors or ward members use to threaten the women leaders. This is common in many places.

**Poverty Prevents**

There are elected women representatives from the working class who ought to rely on their daily wage. Since, the elected women representatives have been entrusted with so much of responsibilities and duties there is no way out to reimburse their loss of wage. This pulls them out of their livelihood and hence some are forced to use their office as proxy.

**Oriented to lose their self**

Commonly, we could expect that women would be so sensitive towards women’s issues. However, it is not true in the case of the elected women representatives as they have been continuously oriented formally and informally not to be sensitive towards the women issues. In
the same way, Dalit women representatives too are unmindful of Dalit issues. One argument put forwarded was that they are the representatives of not only to women of Dalits but the whole village community. Therefore, they neither address all the women’s issues nor the issues of Dalit women effectively.

**Lack of Managerial Skills**

In order to achieve success, one should essentially have managerial skill. Managerial and administrative skills are an imperative for any successful administrator. The elected women representatives are lacking in accounting and managerial skills. Since they have this deficiency they are misguided by the officials and male members of their families. Sometimes women are trapped on this count and thereby they are coopted in all dealings of the officials. They expressed that they need the managerial and accounting skills to over come the problems which they have been facing at present.

**Women Leaders Coopted**

When the women village panchayat presidents meet the officials with their male members of their family, the officials used to talk to the male members and not to the representatives. Even while giving seats, seats are being offered to their husbands and male members of their family and not to them. Initially, they felt very much and later they had developed a practice of ignoring such things.

**Lack of Motivation**

To perform any job motivation is a key. The elated women representatives are new to this job. All of them have not taken up this assignment willingly or voluntarily. Further, they have been facing problems without any pep up. There is no motivation for them. As a result, many elected women representatives are in the state of mental
depression. The problem has reached such a stage that they are searching for a counseling centre for the mentally depressed elected women leaders.

**Caste Discrimination**

Untouchability is in practice in the rural areas. For the Dalit leaders, it becomes a problem. Whenever a Dalit heads the panchayati council and Gram Sabha, we may witness pandemonium. Dalit leaders are not respected and in many villages, the traditional leaders conduct the proceedings. In the meeting the elected women representatives merely serve as spectators. Further, the two tumbler system prevails in the rural areas where the Dalit leaders are the presidents. They are not able to speak on those issues as they developed mortal fear. It is the duty of the panchayat to administer social justice but in reality, they are not able to do so. Only a few political parties highlight the issues and plight of the Dalit and submit critical reports to the government periodically.

**Dalit Women Leaders Marginalised**

Dalit women representatives, unless oriented by the party are powerless and voiceless. Dalit leaders are not allowed to speak and that too about the problems of Dalits. Even if decisions are taken in the panchayat, they are not allowed to execute the decisions. Genuine and basic facilities to Dalits are not allowed to be provided. In certain areas, the traditional panchayat leaders asked the Dalit women representatives to hand over the office to them. In many places, the Gram Sabha was being organized and conducted by the traditional panchayat leader and the elected women representative remains as one among the participants. She has no voice and she has to sit along with other Dalit women in the audience side.
**Husbands Coopted**

When the husbands of the Dalit women representatives are working in the forms of the traditional or caste Hindu leaders, it is all the more easier to take over the panchayat office. Her husband insists that she has to obey the dictum of the caste leaders in order to avoid conflict and to lead a peaceful life. Officials on their part, terrorise the Dalit women leaders to execute whatever programme the officials want to execute in the rural areas, irrespective of the needs of the panchayts. Dalit women representatives are easily coopted in the corrupt administrative system without any resistance. Whenever the misdeeds are found out, the poor dalit women would be caught and not the officer.

**Non Cooperation of Police**

It is a well known fact that police officials are always in the hands of the upper class or upper caste people. Despite the repeated steps taken by the Dalit women representatives, nothing is favourable to the Dalit from the police. Police officials are not taking cognizance of the genuine grievances of the Dalit representatives. Dalit representatives are giving complaints to the police about the encroachment of the common properties by the caste Hindu influential party men in the rural areas. As per the government order, police has to take action and eviction has to be carried out. But contrary to expectation, no action is taken against the encroachers despite the repeated pleas.

**Design of the Caste Hindus**

It is a general argument that since the Dalit women are poor, they hand over the panchayat responsibility to some one—mostly caste Hindu traditional leaders with a view to earn their livelihood. No one can deny this problem. But one has to look at the reality. It is the design of the
caste Hindus to elect a poor Dalit women so that the women could be easily coopted in their design, whereas the other economically sound Dalit women could not be easily coopted in their design, as she has got needed economic background to manage her livelihood.

The caste Hindus are not allowing the elected women Dalit presidents to carry out programmes earmarked for Dalit as they also need such programme, for which there is no sanction from the government. Even the allotted works for Dalits could not be carried out in the rural areas, hence, the Dalit presidents have got poor name among the people of their own caste. They neither get the support of Dalits nor the support of non Dalits.

**Non Cooperation of Caste Hindus**

Another silent attempt is made by the caste Hindu leaders in their panchayats through non cooperation, which makes the elected women Dalit leaders non-functional and unsuccessful. Thereby, they declare that Dalits especially women of that caste are totally incompetent to manage the public institutions. In many places they have successfully done this strategies. Wherever thy elected women Dalit representatives agreed to coopt with the caste Hindus, they are allowed to carry out certain works which are not favourable to the marginalized.

The elected women representatives face yet another problem in panchayats viz., the caste Hindus have cleverly created a design of usurping the power of Dalits. Even during the tie of election, in many gram panchayats, the caste Hindus made a ploy by which they got assurance from the candidate that the Vice-President would be elected from the caste Hindus, especially male. By another design, after the election the president was asked to agree to the proposal that the Vice-President could be elected from the caste Hindus, particularly a male so that they can get cooperation from the caste Hindus. In both the designs,
they are victimized as the panchayat administration is virtually under the control of the Vice-President, the elected women Dalit president has to accede to the proposals of the Vice-President. In many places, Vice-Presidents are making the presidents to commit mistakes and by committing the mistakes, they subject themselves as victims of the clause 205 of the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act. Further, in those panchayats the infrastructure facilities are created in the settlement. This was raised many times in the Gram Sabha by the Dalit youth for which Vice-President gave reply and thereby the present incumbent is made to face the problem in the Dalit community.

**No Support Base**

Another pertinent questions discussed by the women is the support base of the women leaders. Discussion were held on all the aspects based on which the women leaders took initiative to carry out certain schemes and programmes. They have faced a variety of problems in the field. To overcome these problems they were in need of some supportive organization. But in reality, there is no support base for women leaders. In the absence of such support mechanism, one cannot expect exemplary achievements from the women leaders at the grass roots level.

**Encroachment Encounters**

Common properties are the lifeline of the poor. Most of the common property resources are encroached by influential individuals with the support of political parties. As per the New Panchayat Act, the president of Gram panchayat can take action against encroachments. To evict an encroachment, panchayat presidents have to get the village map from the village administrative offices. Many of the villagers, the administrative officers are not giving the village map to the presidents of the Gram Panchayats. With great difficulty the Gram Panchayat
Presidents took initiative to retrieve the common property from the encroachers. This act has propelled the encroachers to fight against the women leaders. This is yet another challenge to the elected women representatives.

**Crowd Management**

Another problem they face is the problem of crowd management. Gram Panchayat presidents have to convene Gram Sabha meeting four times every year. Our rural masses have not been oriented in the orderly presentation of issues in public fora. In a crowd they normally tend to shout. Even the speaker of Lock Sabha is not able to manage enlightened representatives in Lock Sabha and the Legislative Assemblies not any better. But in a Gram Panchayat, even if it is four hundred in an open place, it is always a free for all. When women representatives are presiding over, anti-social elements deliberately use unparliamentarily words in order to drive away the women folk. Nobody regulates the meeting except the family members of the elected women representatives. When family members are coming to the rescue to the elected women representatives other members of Gram Sabha oppose it. But the same Gram Sabha members are not helping the elected women representatives while they are facing problem in the Gram Sabha due to anti social elements. People under the influence of alcohol participate and disturb the proceedings. But no one is ready to manage them.

**Procedure of Accounting**

Another hardship they undergo is the accounting procedure. In the computer era, Gram Panchayat Presidents have to maintain a total of 31 records. All the 31 records are to be regularly maintained. Even the post graduate students with commerce background found it difficult to manage the thirty one records. How can a poor uneducated Dalit
women representative maintain so many records? They are not properly oriented in account keeping but they are taken to task when they commit mistake in accounting. Most of the elected women representatives are the victims of this procedure. Either the procedures have to be simplified or their capacity has to be enhanced.

Representatives’ Perception of Women Issues

The above posited issues are the problems faced by the women leaders in the panchayat administration. They have perceived the problems faced by the women in the rural areas. The issues are classified and presented. They are:

Primarily, the aspirations and feelings of the women are not respected and are not taken into consideration for decision making. It is common at the family level and at the community level. There is not much difference between the rich and the poor.

Gender discrimination prevails in the family, community, office, parties, cultural organizations, and religious organizations. Women are discriminated in providing facility, service and benefits. From the family level to the central government one would find the discrimination on the basis of gender. Girl children are poorly fed and malnourished. They are not given fair treatment on par with the male child. Girls are generally not permitted to go for higher studies beyond primary school.

Women are discharging dual responsibilities with great difficulties; yet, their burden is not understood properly. When women move beyond the routine, their workload would be increased with nobody to share the workload. For the poor women, there are no proper amenities in the work place. Health facilities are not provided to the women as we extend to the men. Women are also not sensitive towards their health problems. Female infanticide and foeticide are the
problems the women face in many villages. Due to non-availability of water, fuel wood, medical facilities, proper public distribution system, women are the worst victims. Women are harassed in the family and sexually exploited in the work place.

Alcohol has been spoiling the life of the poor women in the rural areas. Women are denied their property rights even though the Equal Property Rights Act was passed in Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly. Women workers are paid poor wage compared to men. Women are made to be dependent. Assertive women are subjected to character assassination. Panchayats have no perspective plan on gender development.

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