CHAPTER - II
SETTINGS

WOMEN AND NEW PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM IN TAMIL NADU

SECTION -1

2.1. Historical Perspectives on Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs)

Pre—Colonial Period

Decentralization or local self-governance has been in vogue as an organizational concept in India since time immemorial. There are evidences of the existence of self-governing village communities in the Rigveda, approximately around 1200 BC\(^1\) and the Sangam era. There is also evidence of the existence of village sabhas (councils or assemblies) and gramins (senior persons of the village) who would contact higher authorities on matters affecting the villages until about 600 BC.\(^2\) In course of time, these village bodies became panchayats, an assembly of five members, with both police and judicial powers. The village panchayat and the caste panchayat continued to exist in various forms till the time of the British colonial regime.

Colonial period

During the colonial period, decentralization through village self-governance started with the Ripon Resolution in 1882 by involving the ‘intelligent class of public spirited men’ in the management of rural areas under British rule.\(^3\) In the years following the Ripon Resolution,
District Boards and Taluk Boards were set up with nominated members to look after health, roads and education. Decentralization in India preceded the establishment of the County Councils in England, though the new bodies were mainly seen as appendages of the central administration. The British administration had taken the initiative to establish the village as the basic unit of local self-government. However, Ripon’s District Boards succeeded in making the villages the basic unit of local self-government.

In 1906, the Congress Party accepted ‘self-government’ as a political goal for the country. Similar to the Lord Mayo Resolution of 1870, the Royal Commission on Decentralization, in its report released in 1909, recommended that, in order to associate people with the local tasks of administration, an attempt should be made to constitute and develop village panchayats for the administration of local village affairs. Unfortunately, like the Ripon Resolution, the Royal Commission on Decentralization also remained only on paper. Dr. Annie Besant, in her presidential address to the Congress Session in Calcutta in 1917, blamed the ‘inefficient bureaucracy’ for the sorry state of affairs in the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Decentralization.

As a result, the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 transferred the subject of local government to the domain of the provinces. They also recommended that, as far as possible, there should be complete popular control in local bodies and the largest possible independence for them of outside control. By 1925, eight provinces had passed village panchayat Acts. However, these statutory panchayats covered
only a limited number of villages and had a limited number of functions.

As a result, the District Board Act of 1922 was enacted, giving the Boards the responsibility for road maintenance, tree planting, hospitals, schools, drainage and health.

The Government of India Act 1935 and the following provincial autonomy enabled elected governments in the provinces to enact legislation for further democratization of local self-government institutions. This process continued until August 1947.

Post-Colonial or Independent India

In 1947, Gandhiji observed in the Harijan. “The correspondent says that there is no mention or direction about the Village panchayats and decentralization in the foreshadowed constitution. It is certainly an omission calling for immediate attention if our independence is to reflect the people’s voice. The greater the power of the panchayat, the better for the people....”

With the dawn of independence, in line with Gandhiji’s conviction, the All India Congress Committee (AICC), in its 14th November 1947 meeting, resolved that the panchayat has to be the basic brick of our polity. Thus, village centered approaches for development and village-based democracy were underscored to facilitate self-governing and self-sufficient little republics. Particularly through the Sarvodaya Movement of Jaya Prakash Narayan and
Vinobha Bhave, the movement for panchayat raj received both intellectual respectability and a sentimental attachment.

Ambedkar, in a discussion on the draft constitution regarding the government of the villages in 1948, observed that, “the love of the intellectual Indian for the village community is infinite if not pathetic”. This was largely due to the fulsome praise’ bestowed upon them by Metcalfe who described them as little republics having relatively everything that they wanted within themselves and almost independent of any foreign relations. He also added that “that they have survived through all vicissitudes may be a fact, but mere survival has no value. The question is on what plane they have survived. Surely on a low, on a selfish level...

In line with the arguments of Ambedkar, Manmohan Das proposed that, “Unless and until our village people are educated, unless and until they become politically conscious, unless they become conscious of their rights and privileges, the village panchayat systems will do more harm than good.... These systems will enable the village zamindars, the village talukdars, the mahajans and the money lending classes to rob, to exploit the less cultured, the less educated, poorer classes of the villages”.  

Similarly Muniswamy Pillai also advocated that, ‘Due to the hereditary system of appointment of village officers, Manigars and Karnams, they are the people who rule the villages. Having made a constitution for the upper strata for management of provinces of India, if we leave alone the village reconstruction, I feel that we are
doing a wrong thing... whether in the district board or municipalities, there are no real representatives of the people of the village or the taluk ... This is not a popular institution, as it is now constituted. I feel that the village unit must be taken into account.10

Though Ambedkar was initially against the formation of the panchayat system since the village in reality was a sink of localism, den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism, he later modified his view after listening to a large number of members of the Constituent Assembly. He supported the proposal to incorporate Article 40 as a Directive Principle of State Policy for the formation of village panchayats as units of self-government. Thus, Article 40 became an agreed Act of the Constituent Assembly.

Before the panchayat structure was put into practice, the philosophy of community development was practiced with financial assistance from the USA. The programme made provision for appointing Block Development Officers (BDOs) and Village Level Workers (VLWs) to awaken village India. Since the programme failed to take off along the expected lines, the Balvantrai Mehta Committee was constituted to find an institutional framework for the states to impose their development vision on Indian villages rather than to treat the villages as the fountain head of harmonious economic development.11 The Mehta Committee observed that “development cannot progress without responsibility and power. Community development can be real only when the community understands its problems, realizes its responsibilities, exercises necessary powers
through its chosen representatives and maintains a constant and intelligent vigilance on local administration”.

The Mehta Committee (1957) recommended the introduction of a three-tier structure (village - block - district), the transfer of powers and responsibilities supported by resources and the channelization of all development programmes through the three-tier bodies. It also recommended promoting an intermediate institution, the panchayat samiti, to command resources for development work. The organic link between the panchayat samiti and the village panchayat was suggested through Gram Sewaks (or village level workers).

Ram Reddy observed in his comprehensive study on patterns in panchayats across states that panchayats have been charged with too many functions and their resources are not adequate to perform the mandatory functions effectively. The Santhanam Committee also pointed out that the actual resources often vary inversely with the number and extent of obligatory functions. Thus, in the course of time, the apprehensions of Ambedkar and others were proved true and village panchayats were captured by the rural male elites and it intensified factions and feuds on caste lines. The community development programmes increased the production by better off segments and the subordination of social justice. Maheswari described it as the God that Failed.

Brass (1922) observed that the political fear of panchayats becoming more powerful prompted alternative sources of political influence to ensure their failure. The Sarvodya leaders’ opinion was
strongly against introducing party politics into the already fragmented village societies. The other opinion was in favour of permitting political parties to get involved in the functioning of local bodies.

The Santhanam Committee, on the other hand, strongly recommended that parties should not be recognized for purposes of panchayat elections. A host of studies presented by Ram Reddy established the negative impact of party politics in many states. These studies also brought to light the role of political parties in the affairs of rural local bodies and how these institutions become victims of party politics.

Nevertheless, one of the major objectives of the panchayat raj was to involve the people in development programmes. L.C. Jain suggests that the institution of elected panchayats offers the best hope for development with equity, economy and integrity in the absence of any other options in sight. While opinions differ on the level of participation of the people in development programmes, it is generally accepted by all that the Panchayati Raj has strengthened a participatory democratic culture. However, successive governments have stripped off the panchayats’ powers and resources systematically one by one on flimsy grounds.

Land reform is one among the various village development roles taken away from the panchayats. Thus decentralization took the form of strong rural administration but not rural government. Without power and resources, the panchayat system became less attractive and dissolved in most states in the pre-emergency era. When the Janata Government came to power after the emergency, it appointed the
Ashok Mehta Committee to assess the functioning of the panchayat system and to suggest new measures.

It observed that the panchayat system had failed due to various reasons such as shifting of development programmes, inelastic finances and changes in the development context, particularly the Green Revolution. It also noted that the dominance of socially privileged sections in local institutions facilitated the emergence of oligarchic forces, which yield no benefits to weaker sections.

Mehta observed on the panchayat system thus: “Politically speaking, it became a process of democratic seed drilling in the Indian soil, making the average citizen more conscious of her/his rights than before. Administratively speaking, it bridged the gulf between the bureaucratic elite and the people. Socio-culturally speaking, it generated a new leadership, which was not merely relatively young in age but also modernistic and pro-social change in outlook. Finally, looked at from the developmental angle, it helped rural people cultivate a developmental psyche”. He recommended the adoption of a two-tier system i.e. Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat. In line with the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Mehta also recommended women’s active participation and involvement through the reservation of two seats for women in panchayat bodies.

Decentralization within a government refers to transfer of power away from the central authority to lower levels in a territorial hierarchy. Democratic political leaders in less developed countries regard it as a
way to make the government more responsive to local needs and preferences. Decentralization, coupled with democratization, provides greater transparency, accountability, responsiveness and opportunities for mass participation. Evidently, after the collapse of communism due to its inherent philosophy of central authority, the relevance of decentralization to the enhancement of participation, good governance and democratization has been underscored by multilateral agencies, bilateral agencies, governments, academics and the voluntary sector.

Decentralization is facilitated through two processes, viz., de-concentration and devolution. While de-concentration extends the reach of central or state governments by relocating their executive agencies to lower levels in the political system, devolution is a form of power sharing between central government and sub national governments. In India, the de-concentration process became operational from the early fifties through the community development approach adopted by the Central government. Under this approach, village level workers (Gram Sevaks and Block Development Officers) were appointed at the territorial level. Though the Mehta Committee recommendations aimed at initiating the process of devolution, pragmatically it was confined to financial devolution through statutory bodies like the Finance Commission.

Though formulation of local self-governments was included as a Directive Principle of State Policy under Article 40 of the Indian Constitution, it was not in practice in all the states till the 1990s. Due to changes in the political context and the compulsions of a liberal
democratic regime, it became a mandatory principle only through the 73rd Amendment Act implemented from 1992.

2.2. Milestones in Indian decentralization

1. 1882 The Resolution on Local Self-Government.

2. 1907 The Royal Commission on Decentralization.


4. 1957 Balwantrai Mehta Commission - an early attempt to implement the panchayat structure at district and block (Samithi) levels.

5. 1963 K. Santhanam Committee - recommended limited revenue raising powers for panchayats and the establishment of State Panchayati Raj Finance Corporations.

6. 1978 Asoka Mehta Committee - appointed to address the weaknesses of PRIs, concluded that a resistant bureaucracy, lack of political will, ambiguity about the role of PRIs, and dite capture had undermined previous attempts at decentralization, recommending that the District serve as the administrative unit in the PRI structure. Based on these recommendations, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal passed new legislation to strengthen PRIs.
7. 1985 G.V.K. Rao Committee - appointed to address weaknesses of PRIs, recommended that the block development office (BDO) should assume broad powers for planning, implementing and monitoring rural development programmes. 1986 L.M. Singvhi Committee - recommended that local self-government should be constitutionally enshrined, and that the Gram Sabha (the village assembly) should be the base of decentralized democracy in India.

8. 1993 The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution - PRIs at district, block and village levels are granted Constitutional status. The Gram Sabha is recognized as a formal democratic body at the village level. The 74th Amendment, granting Constitutional status to municipal bodies, is passed soon after.


Finally, after a long wait, based on the experience of the 25 per cent reservation for women in Karnataka and the 30 per cent reservation in Maharashtra, the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi introduced the 64th Amendment Bill, recommending one-third reservation for women. But the Bill was not passed in Parliament during his tenure. Later it was enacted through the 73rd Amendment Act.
1922, It made provision for reservation for members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population and one third of the seats and posts of chairpersons for women.

2.3. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment

The 73rd Amendment gives village, block and district level bodies a constitutional status under Indian law. The more important features of the Amendment are summarized hereunder

The 73rd Amendment: Major Provisions

1. The establishment of a three-tier PRI structure, with elected bodies at village, block and district levels (States with populations less than 2 million are not required to introduce block-level panchayats);

2. The recognition that the Gram Sabha constitutes a deliberative body at the village level;

3. Direct elections to five year terms for all members at all levels;

4. One-third of all seats are reserved for women; reservations for SCs and STs proportional to their populations;

5. Reservations for chairpersons of the panchayats - Sarpanches - following the same guidelines;
6. State legislatures may provide reservations for other backward groups;

7. A State Election Commission (SEC) will be created to supervise, organise and oversee panchayat elections at all levels;

8. A State Finance Commission (SFC) will be established to review and revise the financial position of the panchayats on five-year intervals, and to make recommendations to the State government about the distribution of panchayat funds.

At the village level, the most important provisions relating to participation and accountability are those governing reservations and the Gram Sabha. Under the 73rd Amendment one-third of all seats must be reserved for women. Likewise, reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are made in proportion to their population. At the village level, the Gram Sabha, which comprises all the eligible voters within a gram panchayat area, is meant to serve as the principal mechanism for transparency and accountability. Among its principal functions are:

- to review the annual statement of accounts;
- to review reports of the preceding financial year;
- to review and submit views on development programmes for the following year;
- to participate in the identification of beneficiaries for some government schemes.
This last provision is particularly important because it confers substantive authority over an area that is particularly prone to misallocation and corruption (Sections 3 and 4). As Jha (2000: 103) has argued, the 73rd and the 74th Amendments are designed to promote self-governance through statutory recognition of local bodies: the latter are expected to move away from their traditional role of simply executing the programmes handed down to them by higher levels of government and to formulate and implement their own programmes of economic development and social justice.

The ‘Eleventh Schedule’ of the 73rd Amendment identifies 29 areas over which panchayats can legitimately have jurisdiction. Many of these, such as agriculture, minor irrigation, animal husbandry, fisheries, social forestry, small-scale industries, and implementation of land reforms, focus on particular sectors within the rural economy. Others, such as rural housing, rural electrification, and transportation and communication linkages, are primarily concerned with the provision and maintenance of rural infrastructure. Some cover the provision of key rural services, such as health, sanitation and primary, secondary and vocational education. Others still govern the provision of targeted welfare benefits such as the PDS, and benefits for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, women and children and the handicapped.

In short, the 73rd Amendment covers many areas that would enable the panchayats to improve the lives and well being of poor and vulnerable groups. Moreover, it contains specific provisions that guarantee the participation of traditionally excluded groups, such as
sections.

women, SCs and STs, and transparency for local institutions such as the gram panchayats and the Gram Sabha. However, as Mukarji (1999) has argued, the ambiguity surrounding the concept of ‘self-government’ and the substantial power that still rests with the State governments have prevented most States from devolving any substantive power to the panchayats. Such findings are consistent with a wider literature on the problems most commonly associated with decentralization in India.

SECTION - II

2.4. Women and Panchayati Raj Institutions

Women throughout the world have virtually been excluded from the realm of politics. "Although women constitute half the population, only 3.5% of the world's cabinet ministers are women, and women hold no ministerial positions in many countries of the world. All political systems, regardless of ideology, or form, routinely deny women formal political status”.

A narrow definition of politics deems as political all those activities in which political actors engage with conventional political institutions such as political parties, parliament, trade unions, and governments. This definition is very limiting because it excludes arenas where women have played active political roles—the Nationalist struggle, the Tehbbhaga movement, the Telengana struggle against feudal exploitation, to name just a few. Within these movements, women stepped outside the confines of their home—their private
space-and moved into the public territory to take on issues and confront the sources of power that affected their lives.

"It is now a well recognized proposition in women's studies/movement that all spheres of life involving any relationship is political, that many millions of women are silently waging a struggle against the patriarchal and feudal forces that seek to confine and contain them, that, however weak a woman may appear to be, she has much political awareness, and that it is not the lack of political consciousness of her human or political rights but the vicious circle, the trap into which she is placed and from which she is not able to extricate herself that is responsible for her low participation in formal politics".

Therefore, politics has to extend to include the interdependence between the public and the private spheres. Whatever influences or affects women's identity and their roles in either sphere has to be considered political. If women's participation in the political sphere and their role in democracy could be viewed without the artificial divide between the public and the private, then we could begin to see the ways in which women have been part of political life in this country. Numerous reasons have been advanced to legitimize the lack of women within the political sphere both within the Parliament and local bodies of self-government.

Primary amongst them are; a) women cannot be equated to socially backward communities as women are not a homogeneous group, and (b) women's interests could not be isolated from those of other economic and social strata. Although that might hold true,
women need to be active members of formal political institutions so that inhibitions arising from their minority status will disappear faster, leading to increase in political participation. The presence of more women in legislatures would possibly lead to changes in the direction of debates and policy. Yet, the presence of women within the formalized governance machinery of India has been singularly limited.

Table - 2.1.

Representation of Women in the Lok Sabha

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Seats</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>500</td>
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<td>1962</td>
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<td>1967</td>
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<td>1971</td>
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<td>1989</td>
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<td>1991</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tamil Nadu women development corporation
*The President nominated one member
Over the last 47 years only 5.83% of seats have been won by women in the Lok Sabha. These few women gained entry into the formal world of politics either through dynastic advantage, or because of their proximity to the male leaders or because the political party exhibited political acumen in selecting a woman candidate on caste, class or religious lines. In most political parties the women members are by and large thin on the ground if not invisible in the actual decision-making bodies and rarely influence the more significant party policies. Most often they are relegated to the "women's wing" of the party, and made to concentrate on "women’s issues such as dowry and rape.

The women's movement in India started giving priority to the issue of women's participation in electoral politics only within this decade. At the 1990 National Women's Conference held at Kozhikode in Kerala, this issue was discussed. The possibility of forming a women's party was also discussed. Many NGOs and networks have been formed, subsequently, around the issue of women's political participation. "But autonomous women's groups still remain uncertain whether a continuing struggle within formal political structures is more effective than the struggle for women's rights from outside the system."

If women are marginalized in politics at the national and state level, they are practically invisible at the village level, which are more tradition bound. The mandatory creation of space for women at the panchayat level came about with the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992.
Although panchayats existed in India long before British rule, Panchayati Raj, the formal system of local self-government, came into being only after Independence. When the Panchayati Raj was introduced in 1959, very few women contested or got elected. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee recommended that, besides the 20 members of the panchayat samiti, there should be 2 women "who are interested in work among women and children" as co-opted members. A similar provision was suggested with regard to the village panchayat.

Following this a few states did make provision for women's representation. But the co-option principle was undemocratic and it also was dependent on the largesse bestowed by political parties or the dominant social group. Therefore, women's representation became mere tokenism.

In 1976, The Committee on the Status of Women in India recommended the establishment of statutory all women panchayats at village level, with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare, development programmes for women and children, as a transitional measure. However, this recommendation has never been adopted statutorily anywhere, though such all-women panchayats emerged in some places for a short while.

In April 1993, the 73rd (Constitution Amendment) Act came into force and accordingly one third of the total seats in states’ local self-government institutions were statutorily reserved for women. Along with this reservation there were also other changes brought into the Act, notable amongst them being:
Panchayats would be considered political institutions in a truly decentralized structure.

The panchayat would be accountable to the Gram Sabha, comprising the voters of the village/villages.

There would be direct elections to all three tiers of governance.

There would be a separate Election Commission and also a Finance Commission for panchayats in every state.

It was obligatory on the part of the centre and the state to provide adequate funds for the panchayats to enable them to function properly.

At a simplistic level the 73rd Amendment assured women a place within political processes, but what it did, more importantly, was to create the possibility of change within the political discourse in the country. Women, hitherto, were exposed to a style of governance created and led by men and all their reference points for institutionalized politics was the framework that had been structured around male needs and aspirations.

Whether they were co-opted and in the process corrupted by the dominant political structure or their electoral victory and subsequent responsibilities empowered them was not of concern at that point. What was of importance was the fact that women were legally empowered to occupy seats of power and control that went beyond the confines and decisions taken within the home.
The Passing of 73rd and the 74th Amendment to the Constitution of India

These amendments are so powerful that they truly sow the seed of emergence of a new India. They not only allow the women and SC/STs a definite opportunity but also bestow power upon the people to question their elected representatives.

The Panchayati Raj Act provides for people’s active participation in the local administration by granting them power to question and by requiring their participation in planning for the development of their villages. Today, hitherto marginalized women have started enquiring into malpractices and misappropriation in the administration and have started asserting their views.

The amendments have also ensured that a local body, even if questioned and suppressed, cannot remain so for long and fresh elections will have to be held within a period of six months. The first panchayat election under the new amendments took place in Tamil Nadu in 1996. This was the time when the first phase of the IFAD assisted Self-help Programme was just concluding in Tamil Nadu. The State had one-lakh women members in five thousand Self-Help Groups. However, their presence was limited to only a few districts and a limited number of blocks. In spite of it, making use of opportunities, the TNCDW has tried to sow the seed of political participation in the minds of the women through several means such as:
1. Giving them information on elections.

2. Enlightening them about the amendments and reservations for women and SC and STs.

3. Telling them about the Gram Sabha and the difference their participation in the Gram Sabha could make to the community.

4. Asking them to select their representatives properly and making them accountable to women’s issues

5. Giving them training and capacity building in understanding the working of the local governments, and lastly,

6. Encouraging them to stand in the ensuing local body elections.

At that time it was found that the Self-Help Group women were not mentally ready and were lacking the moral courage to stand in the local elections against men of their own village. They were hesitating to stand not only against the men from the upper castes but also the men from their own communities. Culturally, they had always allowed precedence to men. They expressed the following reservations.

1. They were afraid of standing against men.

2. They were being threatened.

3. They did not have financial resources.

4. They did not have social standing.

5. They were poor and marginalized so who would vote for them.

6. They were uneducated or illiterate.

7. They did not know anything about governance.
However, due to the constant urging and encouragement given by the TNCDW, about 80 women contested in the panchayat elections. The idea was to make them stand and face an election even though they might lose. The objective was to teach them how to put themselves forward and gain confidence to stand. Out of the 80 women who stood, 20 got elected panchayat members and one got elected panchayat president.

Keeping in view that these were the most marginalized women living below the poverty line and belong to the SC / ST and backward communities, it was no mean achievement. These early participants were the symbols of great courage who faced a lot of difficulty and humiliation during 1996 but still stood their ground. A much more encouraging scenario emerged during the panchayat elections held in 2001. The women in the Self-Help Group Movement, having undergone a lot of capacity building and having been encouraged by their fellow women, showed a better level of participation. Thousands of Self-Help Group women stood in the elections at every level and many of them won.

The number of places obtained by them may not be spectacular, yet they have made a significant dent at the level of the Village panchayats. Today 276 village panchayats are having women presidents who have emerged from among the members of the Self-Help Groups. Another 216 have become Ward Members. They still have a long way to go but the process of empowerment is on and they will reach there sooner or later. Although only 6% of elected members are from the Self-Help Groups, it is noteworthy that the TNCDW has
made an impressive beginning in the direction of political and
democratic empowerment of women.

Need of the Hour

Capacity building for women representatives through training
programmes is the need of the hour, to ensure active and effective
participation in the process of decentralized administration in the
panchayat system. With more and more resources being placed at the
disposal of the local bodies through devolution and scheme funds, the
women gaining control of the local bodies alone will ensure effective
utilization of these funds. The TNCDW is visualizing a prominent role
for the Self-Help Group women in the Panchayati Raj institution and is
preparing them;

1. To ensure adequate representation of women in panchayats and
to motivate Self-Help Group members to attend Gram Sabha
assemblies.

2. To lobby and get sanctions for infrastructure for the village as a
pressure group.

3. To form activity/issue based committees and ensure focused
action.

4. To create awareness and advocate women’s rights-fight against
violence against women.

Participation

Women who are marginalized and are from the poorer sections
of society have now a direct role to play in planning, decision making
and monitoring of the village development activities. It has been noticed that 90% of the Gram Sabha attendance consists of Self-Help Group members.

2.5. **Women** in Self Governance in Tamil Nadu

Details of women elected representatives in Oct. 2001 local body elections in Tamil Nadu.

**Table - 2.2.**

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<th>Details</th>
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<th>1/3 reservation</th>
<th>Seats won by women</th>
<th>Seats won by SHG Women</th>
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<td>Councillors</td>
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<td>District Panchayat Chairpersons</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ward Members</td>
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<td>219</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Municipality Chairpersons</td>
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<td>Councilors</td>
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<td>Town Panchayat Presidents</td>
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<td>Panchayat Union Chairpersons</td>
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<td>2319</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village Panchayat Presidents</td>
<td><strong>12618</strong></td>
<td>4206</td>
<td>4329</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ward Members</td>
<td>97523</td>
<td>32508</td>
<td>32696</td>
<td>2161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>131135</strong></td>
<td><strong>44045</strong></td>
<td><strong>44507</strong></td>
<td><strong>2612</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tamil Nadu women development corporation

The existing level of representation of women in the local bodies in Tamil Nadu range between 34% and 39% and is only marginally higher than that provided for by the statutes, while it is
satisfying to note that women’s representation in the State is in keeping with the statute provisions.

2.6. Political Empowerment of Women In Tamil Nadu

The political empowerment of women in India has been a very slow process. Even though adult franchise was extended to women in India in the year 1935, they are yet to reach their full political potential. Actually, women’s participation in the political process in India started only after Gandhiji gave them a call to come out of their homes and hearths and join the struggle for freedom. As a result of his call, a large number of women participated in the Swadeshi and Quit India Movements. They participated in the burning of foreign goods, the Salt March and the Satyagraha for freedom. In the then Madras Presidency, women’s political activism began early with Annie Besant coming on the scene. During the Quit India Movement also a large number of women got involved in the struggle for freedom.

After Independence, the Constitution of India conferred equal political rights on men and women. However, the participation of women in the political process has so far been far from satisfactory.

The experience in other places like the Scandinavian countries has shown that quotas or reservations for women have helped in improving their participation. In post-independent India the talk of making 33% reservation for women in legislatures has so far remained a distant dream. The matter has been debated for over a decade but still the men in Parliament are not willing to relent to make some room for women.
The all-India status leaves no room for comfort. Out of a total 4067 Assembly seats in India, only 5.1% were held by women in 1985, which increased to 5.6% in 2000. In the case of Parliament, out of the 790 seats in both the Houses of Parliament, women held 6.1% seats in 1989 and 8.4% in the year 1999. In Tamil Nadu the percentage of women elected to Parliament dropped from 5.13% in 1984 to 2.56% in 1998, much below the all-India average.

Table 2.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Women Member Elected</th>
<th>Women Appointed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tamil Nadu women Development Corporation

This Table shows that the status of women in Tamil Nadu is not very different from that in other parts of India and the situation will improve in the country as a whole only after Parliament approves the Women’s Reservation Bill. Today, many political parties which are ready to increase the participation of women are forced to wait for the passage of the bill. There are many who still think that the women should be in the legislatures on merit and not due to a quota. However,
they do not take into account the factors which affect the political participation of women such as:

- Household status
- Employment and remunerating
- Work-related rights
- Double burden of work
- Education and Literacy
- Health and ability to control fertility
- Access to financial resources
- Legal rights
- Tradition, cultural attitudes and religion
- Socialization and self-confidence
- Violence against women
- Mass media

These are the reasons which make it imperative to provide a separate avenue for the entry of women into legislative bodies. The participation of women has been poor not only in the legislative bodies like the State Assemblies and the Parliament but also in local bodies. For the last thirty years one would have observed that most of the time, in the panchayats and other institution of local governance, women were allowed to remain suppressed and dormant throughout India.
Rarely in any part of India have the local body elections been held continuously and local governance encouraged.

Notes and References


2. Ibid.


8. AVARD, Panchayat Raj: As the basis of Indian polity AVARD, New Delhi, 1962.
9. AVARD, Panchayati Raj; As the basis of Indian polity AVARD, New Delhi, 1962.

10. AVARD, Panchayati Raj: As the basis of Indian polity AVARD, New Delhi, 1962.


