CHAPTER – IV

PROBLEM AND PROGRESS OF WOMEN
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The term ‘Political Participation’ generally refers to those voluntary activities of the members of the society, in the selection of the ruler and in the formulation of the public policy. Since popular sovereignty is one of the inseparable attributes of democracy, the right to participate is an important element of democratic government. Political participation is the principle by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy, and rulers are made accountable to the ruled.\(^1\) Though the foundation for political participation of women was laid down during the nationalist movement, there was neither follow up nor concerted effort to broaden the political base by incorporating women into political processes in the post-independence period.

Requirement for Democracy

The first requirement for democracy in contemporary society is that it should represent all citizens, providing equal opportunities and voice in the governance of the public domain. The possibility for all citizens to participate in the management of public affairs is at the very heart of democracy.\(^2\) Gender equality is a pre-requisite for effective participation of women in strengthening the institutional structure of democracy but women have been marginalized due to a number of socio-economic constraints. The number of women incumbents at the local, district, state, and national levels still is not commensurate with their actual number in the society.\(^3\) This negates a fundamental principle of democracy, and


the Inter Parliamentary Union expresses this in the following words in the Universal Declaration on Democracy: "The achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in equality and complementary, drawing mutual enrichment from their differences".

Women's persistent exclusion from political office is a serious flaw. The social and cultural association of men with political authority makes it difficult for women to aspire for political office. Women's limited participation in formal political institutions thus raises questions about how to reform democratic institutions since these institutions are not automatically equitable any more than they are automatically representative of the diversity of ethnically segmented societies.4

The end of the national struggle was followed by the framing of Indian Constitution by the committee under the chairmanship of B.R. Ambedkar. Congress formed the Government and Jawaharlal Nehru became the Prime Minister of India. Women played an important role in the Congress ever since the beginning of the national movement. After independence other political parties also invited and engaged few women representatives to work and serve on their executive bodies and in other responsible positions. The Parliamentary parties drew women's support in the eighties. This changing attitude of the parliamentary parties towards women is reflected in their election manifesto. Their changing attitude towards women was based upon the overall electoral strategies.5

Even though women have taken part in the struggle for equality, liberty, rights and empowerment, there was no one to lead the women's liberation movement in the post-colonial period in Tamil Nadu for the reason that the

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leading female personalities were accommodated in political appointments\(^6\) such as governor and ambassador.\(^7\) The vast concourse of women, who had poured into the freedom struggle, had slipped back into their old grooves.\(^8\) This has resulted in the *impasse* of the women’s movement.

The Constitution of Independent India ensured the equality of women. Tamil women are the beneficiaries of these rights in the same manner as their men.\(^9\) Article 14 provides that the State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the law within the territory of India. Article 15 and Article 16(1) prohibits discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them. Article 39(a) says men and women equally have the rights to an adequate means of livelihood.

Political equality is granted to women under the Indian Constitution, guaranteed through the instrument of adult franchise. The Constitutional protection, however, is enjoyed only to a limited extent by women in reality. No doubt more and more women are actively participating in the political process but still are not so placed as to be able to influence political thinking.\(^10\)

In 1947, the INC had concentrated on the prime objective of achieving stability and the annexure of independent princely states with the union and hence the INC could not dedicate totally to the cause of women. Though the freedom fighters whole heartedly took part in the independent struggle, in the later period they withdrew themselves from active participation in the political activities. Further, the male chauvinists controlled and confined the women to their families

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within the four walls of their houses, and as a result women had been prevented from taking part in progressive activities. The National Committee on the Status of Women reports that a girl is not be allowed to go for higher status even if she is very intelligent. Since the politicians became a stumbling block in the emancipation of women, women’s movements weakened and in turn women were relegated to their kitchen and domestic chores.

Women in Tamil Nadu were traditionally members of a stratified society, characterized by the ideology and practice of inequality. Women are considered one of the weaker sections of the Tamil society. “Though women do not numerically constitute a minority, they are beginning to acquire the features of marginalised community by the three recognized dimensions of inequality of class-economic situation, status (social position) and political power”.

Legislations for Women

In consonance with the spirit of various constitutional provisions, the Parliament of India has enacted several important pieces of legislation to ameliorate the conditions of women. Such legislations alone do not help the women to participate equally in the public and political sphere. Some important legislations are:

1. The Factories Act, 1948
2. Plantation Labour Act, 1951
3. Mines Act, 1952
4. Special Marriage Act, 1954
5. Hindu Marriage Act, 1955

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6. Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956
7. Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act, 1956
8. The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956
9. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956
10. The Christian Matrimonial Clauses Bill, 1960
11. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961
12. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
13. Indian Foreign Service (Conduct and Discipline), 1961
14. Bidi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Service) Act, 1966
15. Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971
16. The Adoption of Children’s Bill 1972
17. The Factories (Amendment) Act, 1976
18. The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
21. Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill
23. Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act 1983
24. The Hindu Widow’s Remarriage (Repeat) Act, 1983
25. The Family Courts Act, 1984
26. The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
27. Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986
29. Crimes Against Women and Girls in the name of Religion or Custom (Prevention and Abolition) Act 1987
Government Initiatives

In order to secure and raise the position of women, the Government has taken initiatives which seek to ensure participation of women in public life.15

(a) National Commission for Women (NCW)

In January 1990, the Government of India set up the National Commission for Women16, a statutory body with a specific mandate to study and monitor all matters relating to the constitutional and legal safeguards provided to women, to review the present legislation and to suggest necessary amendments wherever necessary.

(b) Reservation for Women in Rural and Urban Local Self Government.

In the year 1992, the 72nd and 73rd Constitution Amendment Acts were passed by the Parliament ensuring one-third of the total seats for women in all elected positions in local bodies, whether in Panchayat or in Municipal Bodies.

(c) Special National Plan of Action for the Girl Child (1991-2000 AD)

The National Plan of Action is to ensure survival, protection and development of the girl child with the ultimate objective of building up a better future for the female child.17 However it is common sense that legislation by itself cannot change society. It has to be properly implemented, enforced and correctly interpreted in the spirit in which it is placed on the statue book.

These initiatives elevated women equally with men at least in a legal sense. However, since the Constitution identified the unequal social position of women, a special clause empowered the State to make special provisions for women. Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in public employment and office under the State. This clause has helped to ensure a significant position and status to the Tamil women, which is demonstrated in the increasing number of women in the public services and in positions of political power and dignity, including such top political offices as Governor, Chief Minister and Prime Minister. The constitutional sanction of political equality to women is enjoyed only to a limited extent in reality, even though more women are now actively participating in the political process.  

Lack of Mechanism and Awareness

A major problem with regard to legal equality of sexes is the myriad personal laws in vogue in the country, which defy uniformity. There is still no uniform civil code. The absence of effective enforcement mechanism tends to make the law ineffective even in areas where women have equal rights with men. Lack of awareness among many women about the rights conferred on them legally, coupled with traditional outlook and fear of societal disapproval, have tended to perpetuate sex discrimination. Even in contexts where advances towards gender equality have been fought for and eventually won after decades and centuries, they can easily be stolen if women are not participating fully and equally in government and political life. The Platform for Action agreed at the Fourth United Nations Conference for Women in Beijing in 1995 links women’s lack of political participation to their continuing economic marginalization, and to abuses of their human rights.

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Education Development for Women

One of the most important achievements of Tamil Nadu has been an improvement in the educational status of middle class women. In every field and level of education, now the women of middle class are advanced and in every field of occupation they are serving and earning as men for their livelihood. The education for women increased two times from 1961 to 2001. In 1961, the educated women in Tamil Nadu was 36.39 per cent and in 2001 it was 73.45 per cent. In the age group of 6-11 years, 98.12 per cent of girls attended school in 2001 but it decreased in the age group of 12 to 14, which was 91.07 and in the age group of 14 to 16, it was 73.61, and in the age group of 16 to 18, it was 43.62 per cent. Female literacy of the age group of 18 and above had risen from 0.69 percent in 1901 to 14.19 per cent in 1981 and to 28.87 percent in 1991. However, as with men, literacy is not keeping pace with the rise in population and the number of illiterates from 14.2mn in 1981 has decreased to only 11.05mn in 2001. Since the majority of women who live in villages are unable to cope up with the demands of new technologies, they are consequently unable to get remunerative employment and remain outside government’s legislative efforts or development programmes.

The recent development relates to the increasing presence and visibility of women particularly in education and administration. The major beneficiaries of the development process have been women from the upper and middle classes. Educated women are able to hold demanding jobs and be house wives and mothers at the same time, thanks to the availability of servants and to their ability to draw upon their wide kin-networks for help in crises. Representation of

women members in the Tamil Nadu Assembly increased ten times from 1967 to 2001. In 1967, the women members in Assembly was 1.2 %, 13.2 % in 1991, and 10.6% in 2001.

Knowledge is often associated with skills, awareness and self-confidence, all of which grant one the power to voice informed opinions as well as enjoy legitimate authority or credibility to participate in active political office. Women with ‘legitimate’ or socially recognized forms of knowledge are granted respect as leaders and enjoy increased opportunities for political participation. Women’s lack of access to formal education and restricted social interactions are products of limited social mobility and seem to translate directly into their inability to have their voices heard in the political sphere.

Moreover there is a relation between literacy and voting. Since majority of Tamil women are illiterate, it reflects in their voting pattern. Male members of the family also influence them. In Tamil Nadu, the women’s traditional role demands full attention to home affairs. In rural areas, the women are mostly uneducated and they are not at all interested in the political activities. Rural women have the additional burden of tending agricultural lands, beyond the family work. After independence, women in the Legislature of Tamil Nadu began to raise women’s issues. Over the years, they could not evolve indigenous political tools to influence decisions on women issues.

28 Ibid., p.440.
30 Ibid.
The Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles are the instruments for attaining national objectives of justice, liberty and equality. The special attention given to the needs of women enabled them to enjoy and exercise their constitutional status of equality along with men. Special provisions are aimed at their participative role in society and the Indian Constitution has become a ‘social’ document embodying the objectives of a social revolution. The sphere of employment is generally considered as an important indicator of women’s status. The employment of women has increased fairly rapidly in the years since independence, at a rate faster than the growth rate in total employment for this sector. This sector however indicates a very small minority of women workers in this country. As reported in 1991 census, the work participation rate of females is higher in rural areas (27.20%) than in urban areas (9.74%). According to 1991 census report, the distribution of rural female workers shows that 38.58% were cultivators, 48.83% agricultural labourers and 12.59% other workers. The number of women employed in the organised sector increased from 1.7 lakhs in 1962 to 35.7 lakhs in 1989. This represented an increase in women’s share in employment in the organized sector from 11.3% in 1962 to 13.7% in 1989.

Prime Minister, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, speaking on the National Commission for Women Bill on 8th August 1990 in Lok Sabha said: “The Constitution guarantees equal rights to women. But despite that the fact remains that 75 per cent women are uneducated, their dropout rate at the primary level of education is 55 per cent and 90 per cent of them are engaged in the unorganized sector, of which more than 80 per cent are in the agricultural sector alone”. Commenting on this, the Committee on the Status of Women observed thus: “It is the greatest indicator of increasing poverty employment and not of improving rights and opportunities for economic participation”. Middle class women found new opportunities for

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31 Pitam Singh, *op.cit.*, p.36.
employment and public service. The profession of teaching, medicine, engineering and government service absorbed increasing number of educated women. These women preferred to combine their work with their family responsibilities.  

**Women's participation in Public Decision Making Bodies**

Women participation in decision making bodies is gradually improving in India. In the administrative machinery also, there is an increased representation of women. The male monopoly in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) was first broken in 1951. Since then, women have been joining every year in increasing numbers. Though Constitution of India gave equal rights to women, in matters of employment, women were debarred from entry into the Indian Police Service (IPS) till 1971. In 1972, the discriminatory rule was removed and thereafter women are working at various levels from IG to constable.  

There is a very low representation of women in IAS and IPS i.e. less than 10 per cent. It was at 7.2 per cent in 1977 and increased marginally to 7.6 per cent in 2000.

**Table – 4.1**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Services</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IAS</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>4204</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPS</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2418</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>6622</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Personnel & Training, Government of India, New Delhi.

The Table 5.1 clearly demonstrates that women prefer Administrative Services to Police Services. The calculation of women's share as administrators or

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35 Genevieve, *op.cit.*, p.45.

as managers, showed that they constitute only 2 percent.\(^{37}\)

In Tamil Nadu, women employment in organized public and private sectors increased from 97.6 thousands in 1971 to 402 thousands in 2001 and in the public sector, women employment increased from 129.4 thousands in 1971 to 327.5 thousands in 2001. In 2001, 117302 women panchayat members were elected in Tamil Nadu.

Generally, women workers are deprived of good status and good positions in the organizations. The major problem confronting women at higher positions is hostility and jealousy from the male colleagues and male subordinates, as it is emotionally difficult for them to take orders from a female boss. They think that women by nature are shy, indecisive, dependent and inconsistent which make them poor managers. They do not want women boss. Therefore, women workers are not given higher positions in the workplace. In the field of work, women are facing a lot of role conflict.\(^{38}\)

Tamil Nadu has advanced satisfactorily on the road towards economic independence for women. This is hinted when Kollontai writes, “Only a change in the economic role of women and her independent involvement in production, can and will bring about the weakening of these mistaken and hypocritical ideas”.\(^{39}\) In this process the most welcome development is women’s participation in political and decision-making process. The liberated atmosphere created for them by providing special constitutional provisions is basically to create more consciousness in them. The concept has been beautifully explained by the late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi in the following words: “To be liberated, woman should feel free to be herself not in rivalry to man but in the context of her


own capacity. Women should be more interested, more alive and more active in the affairs of society not because they are women but because they constitute half the human race".  

But to achieve equal status, women are expected to demonstrate their capabilities and efficiency in every field equally to men. They have to shed their economic, physical and mental dependence on men. The most crucial point to consider is that while doing so, men are not to be made enemies but their continued cooperation is to be sought in the process of achieving the target as well as in the maintenance of the new state of affairs. This is possible only when men themselves understand the value of giving equal status to women and are willing to practise it in their life.

Voting Behavior

**Table -4.2**

Voting Pattern in the Tamil Nadu State Assembly Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Electorate</th>
<th>Voters actually voted</th>
<th>Voters actually voted as %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>10317227</td>
<td>10480008</td>
<td>7899195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>11482912</td>
<td>11493768</td>
<td>8560554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>14271082</td>
<td>13890336</td>
<td>9136431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>14769424</td>
<td>14428458</td>
<td>10211365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>15643044</td>
<td>15304829</td>
<td>11641845</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>17887957</td>
<td>17406494</td>
<td>12580729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>20209586</td>
<td>19699201</td>
<td>13327036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>21405752</td>
<td>21073213</td>
<td>14788077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>23854950</td>
<td>23624050</td>
<td>14622260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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### Table 4.3

**Voting Pattern at the Parliamentary Election**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Electorate</th>
<th>Voters actually voted</th>
<th>Voters actually voted as %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>10311863</td>
<td>10484837</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>11522538</td>
<td>11542445</td>
<td>8581684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>13704042</td>
<td>13483375</td>
<td>9429965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>14095745</td>
<td>14018148</td>
<td>9888469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>15631870</td>
<td>15326210</td>
<td>11566874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>20288231</td>
<td>19738981</td>
<td>13932315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>20213453</td>
<td>19704324</td>
<td>13344664</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>21397687</td>
<td>21090335</td>
<td>14762574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>22955873</td>
<td>22621915</td>
<td>13926223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>24037287</td>
<td>23696377</td>
<td>14652826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>23269301</td>
<td>23982970</td>
<td>15090157</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As per the Table 5.2, ever since the first general elections in 1952, participation of women voters in various elections has decreased from 76.58% in 1967 to 56.83% in 2001. As per the table 5.3, participation of women voters in parliamentary elections has decreased from 69.17% in 1967 to 56.89% in 2001. But their representation in Parliament has never crossed 10% and representation in Tamil Nadu State Assembly has never crossed 8%. In spite of this poor representation, there has been a rise in the number of women in key positions of power.

The Congress Ministry in Tamil Nadu did not have more than one woman minister and she was given the insignificant portfolio such as social welfare and women welfare. On noticing it, EVR of Tamil Nadu was much worried and he convened Women’s Conferences continuously and debated the issue in Tamil

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Nadu. Tamil women have become more aware of their rights but the level of political information of women voters is low. The low turnout of women is also due to the lack of effective mobilization of women at the grassroots level. Urban educated women are aware of their rights and exercise their franchise, but in the rural areas the importance of their vote has to be explained to them. Political workers and activists should make more efforts to interact directly with the vast majority of women in the villages and awaken their political consciousness and encourage them to exercise their franchise. Only then the elections will mirror the true will of the people.

Women Reservation Bill

Five decades of struggle by the women groups at the national level has brought the subject of women to the forefront for discussion, deliberation and to the level of policy intervention. As a result of all these activities, a series of legislations have been enacted to liberate the women from the existing clutches of backwardness. Yet, the condition has not changed. The Platform for Action adopted at the Beijing conference mandates affirmative action and calls for ‘legislative and administrative reforms to give women full and equal access to economic resources’.  

The framers of the Constitution perhaps believed that law would lead to social change and bring about equality between the sexes. Yet, the crime of inequality and discrimination continues to persist in all spheres of public and private life. This is quite evident from the fact that the participation of women in

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44 Anjana Maitra-Sinka, *op.cit.*, p.58.
politics and in other decision-making bodies after attaining independence is very limited.\textsuperscript{48}

Given this situation, the Indian Government has to take some corrective actions to ensure that women participate equally in the political sphere. Also, it is imperative to adopt certain affirmative action to eliminate the existing discrimination to ensure political equality as guaranteed in the Constitution.

Between 1935 and 1974, the option of special provisions to ensure women’s political representation was rejected three times. In 1939, the Women’s Sub-Committee created by Jawaharlal Nehru and S.C. Bose to evolve the future economic policy of Independent India rejected the option of quota for women.\textsuperscript{49} The WIA expressed its opinion on Lothian Committee’s recommendations and opposed the proposal of separate electorate for women and reservation of seats and also opposed communal representation and reservation of seats.\textsuperscript{50} The Constitution of India incorporated equality between men and women as one of the Fundamental Rights and rejected reserved seats for women. In 1953 a National Backward Classes Commission was constituted under the chairmanship of Kala Kalelkar. In his report Kala Kalelkar observed: “The position of women in India is peculiar. The condition of women among the backward classes is much worse. In view of the important role women could play in the regeneration of society, we are reluctant to leave their problems unnoticed”.\textsuperscript{51} The Balwantra Mehta Committee recommended the cooption of two women members, one each from

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{48} Shantha Mohan, Ruth Manoroma, Geetha Devi Papanna and Late Martha Pushpa Rani, \textit{op.cit.}, p.6.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Golden Jubilee Celebration Souvenir 1917-1967}, Women’s Indian Association, Madras, p.8.
\end{flushleft}
the Scheduled Castes and Schedules Tribes to Panchayat level bodies. The Ashok Mehta Committee laid special emphasis on the need to strengthen and reorganize women’s constructive decision-making and managerial roles. This committee considered women as the most important part of population and recommended that decisions should be taken by women members themselves on priorities and choices in welfare and development programmes which are designed for women and children. The Narasimham Committee recommended that five per cent of the posts of panchayat in each block (a group of villages) should be reserved for women. Towards Equality, a report prepared and published by the Committee on the Status of Women in India in the year 1974 as part of the preparations for the Women’s Decade (1975-1985) proclaimed by the United Nations, argues in favour of reservation for women in political assemblies. But this option was finally rejected on the grounds that: ‘separate constituencies for women would narrow their outlook’. Women’s interests as such cannot be isolated and the minority argument cannot be applied to women. Women are not a community but they are a category. CSWI recommended that ‘women panchayats’ may be formed in every village as an integral part of the structure of local government.

Margaret Alva, a Congress MP, initiated in the 1980s the ‘National Perspective Plan on Women’, which, for the first time, spoke of reservation for women from Panchayat to Parliament. But there was quite a lot of opposition at that time. The core group set up by the Government of India, in its report in the

56 Ibid., p.304.
year 1988, pointed out that political power and access to positions of decision-making authority are critical prerequisites for women’s equality in the process of nation building. The group further felt that thirty per cent of the executive heads of all bodies from village to district level bodies and a certain percentage of chief executives of Panchayat Raj at the lower, middle, and higher levels must be reserved for women.  

**Reservation at Local Bodies**

The largest share of women in Parliament occurred in 1985 when the women’s movement was at its peak. If the issue of reservation is meaningful for women’s leadership it is for the feminist arguments and advocacy to validate their claims about the quality of leadership. Leadership is essential because feminist claims on the political arena are not just to share power but to change the nature of power; not just to govern but to change the nature of governance.

The Karnataka State had reservation for women in institutions of local self-governance. The Janata Party Government in Karnataka in 1991 passed a bill to implement 25 per cent reservation for women in local elections. This spurred a national debate on the issue of reservation for women in several other states. Sharad Pawar announced 30 per cent of seats in local bodies to be reserved for women in Maharashtra State.  

The Government of India, noting the low participation of women in politics, acknowledged the recommendations of the Committee on the Status of Women Report in 1974. Drawing from the pioneering experience of Karnataka which provided reservation for women in its three tier Panchayat Raj System in the year 1983, the Government of India adopted an affirmative action for

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providing reservation for women in these institutions. The National Perspective Plan for Women, a document prepared under the Rajiv Gandhi Government, updated the data compiled under Towards Equality and recommended that 33 percent of seats in all elected assemblies from the village to the union level be reserved for women. The Janata regime came up with the National Commission for Women.

The Congress in the 1991 election manifesto laid emphasis on reservation of 30% membership for women in local government and other statutory bodies and committees. In this connection, an important step was taken when Parliament of India voted the 73rd and 74th Constitution (Amendment) Bills, 1991, which prescribed reservation of seats for women (including those belonging to SC/ST) to the extent of not less than one-third of the total seats to be filled by direct elections to the Gram Panchayats and the Municipalities. The Bills were passed by Lok Sabha on 22 December, 1992 and by Rajaya Sabha on 23 December, 1992. The 33 per cent reservation bill legitimized the entry of women into mainstream politics at the grassroot level, and is seen as a first step towards empowering women to participate more effectively in political decision-making. With these Constitutional Amendments, over three million women are now actively participating in shaping the policies and programs of the country, though only at the local levels of governance. However, such affirmative action is lacking at the higher echelons of governance at the State and Central levels.

59 Ibid.
61 Jain, C. K., op.cit., p.23.
62 Ibid., p.25.
The States of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Pondicherry did not hold panchayat elections since the 73rd amendment came into force. Elections were held only after the intervention of the High Court and Supreme Court. It is clear that male members in politics were not interested in the political participation of women because they were afraid of losing seats.

In the recently held panchayat elections in Tamil Nadu, 33% of seats were reserved for women, and women who contested in the elections were daughters, wives or close relatives of the active male political activists. When these women were elected to the respective posts, only the men related to these women ran the system from behind the screen.\textsuperscript{64} In most of the places, women do not even come to panchayat meetings or group discussion and they are not allowed to discuss by male dominated assemblies.\textsuperscript{65} The elected women representatives are facing innumerable odds.\textsuperscript{66} The ‘proxy’ phenomenon has emerged as a source of criticism of the legitimacy of both participating women and the system itself.\textsuperscript{67}

Women’s representation in the local-level self governance institutions has brought out the advantages of proximity. Leaders are available within easy reach to address the problems faced within their geographical constituencies. This has allowed for mobilization of struggles around a variety of issues affecting the people.

**Reservation at Parliamentary and State Legislative Level**

The Women Reservation Bill in its present form has serious defects. The one-third of the total parliamentary seats to be reserved for women is to be selected through a lottery system. This implies that at random at least 180 male

\textsuperscript{64} Murusoli, 1 December, 2002.
\textsuperscript{65} Bikis Vissandjee, Shelly Abdool, Alisha Apale and Sophie Dupee, \textit{loc.cit.}, p.438.
\textsuperscript{66} Vibhuti Patel, \textit{loc.cit.}, p.43.
legislators will be uprooted from their constituencies at every election. In their place, 180 women will be assigned those constituencies before every election. Then, at the time of the next election when the new list of 180 reserved constituencies is declared in the same manner, these 180 women will not be able to contest from the seats they are holding at that point of time because the same constituency cannot be reserved twice in succession under the bill’s rotation system. Reservations to co-opt women into decision-making position in the Lok Sabha by assigning 12% could help to arrest such marginalization trends, by giving women a greater voice in policy-making.

In order to increase the involvement of women in politics and government structures, reservations were implemented for women by law. Due to the show of strength and determination of women’s movements and the government-regulated quotas, women’s presence in the political arena is increasing, particularly in terms of women’s voting pattern and decision-making power in local bodies, as well as in women’s access to public office. However gender norms are strongly relevant to an understanding of women’s political participation, particularly in rural areas.

Political activity seems to fall outside the boundaries of social norms and socially acceptable activities for women. Such perspectives are echoed in the statement of women who maintain, “If women participate in politics, they get a bad name...because politics is dirty”. Low levels of political participation by

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women are explained in part by traditional public-private societal divide wherein politics is considered public (male) and familial affairs are private (women).\textsuperscript{73} Furthermore, the perception that politics is ‘dirty’ and therefore not an appropriate venue for female participation explains the reticence displayed by both male and female participants to discuss political issues and women’s involvement therein.\textsuperscript{74} It has been found that women’s participation in politics worldwide has been of a very low degree and this is not a phenomenon peculiar to Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{75}

The space for women in the political arena has declined since independence and their participation in politics has been guided by family connections rather than convictions and commitment. Women have been promoted to political positions only when there are no other male available to continue the family’s distinctive place and thus, it is a device to perpetuate the privilege of the family. By putting women in these positions, the family could still have control over the powers vested with the office.\textsuperscript{76} In the case of women leaders in Tamil Nadu, commonly understood gender roles for women are transposed from the private sphere of the household to the public sphere or politics and with them their sources of authority and social capital. Women’s symbolic sacrifice for the family is continued by a symbolic sacrifice for the nation. Women leaders in Tamil Nadu become ‘sister’ and ‘amma’. Many women leaders have capitalized on this imagery, such as Indira Gandhi who internalized and promoted her image as ‘Bharat Mata’ and Jayalalithaa as ‘Amma’.\textsuperscript{77}


\textsuperscript{74} Bilkis Vissandjée, Shelly Abdool, Alisha Apale and Sophie Dupéré, \textit{loc.cit.}, p.437.


\textsuperscript{76} Shantha Mohan, Ruth Manorama, Geetha Devi Papanna, and Late Martha Pushpa Rani, \textit{op.cit.}, p.6.

The response of women to the elections that followed in several states, and the political dynamism demonstrated by them persuaded women's organizations into putting forward a joint demand for one-third reservation in state assemblies and Parliament. The demand was accepted and almost all pre-election party manifestos contained promises to implement 33 per cent reservation for women. The United Front Government introduced the 81st (Constitutional) Amendment, also known as Reservation Bill. In September 1996, a private member moved a bill, introducing reservation for women, a day before the closing of the monsoon session. The 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill of 1996 seeking to reserve one-third seats for women has become a highly debated issue till date. The motion for consideration was mooted on 16 May 1997, but it lapsed, following the dissolution of the 11th Lok Sabha. Najma Heptulla, the Deputy Chair Person of the Rajya Sabha, declared that 'we must have more women if we want democracy to flourish.' The Bill (84th Amendment) was again brought before the House during the 12th Lok Sabha on 14 July 1998. It is an irony that the very parties that were most explicitly in favour of pushing for such reservation, put up the same proportion of women as candidates, as the other parties and certainly not more than the other parties that had opposed the Bill. The Bill again lapsed, following the dissolution of the 12th Lok Sabha. Then the Constitution (85th Amendment) Bill, 1999, popularly known as Women’s Reservation Bill, was introduced on 23 December 1999. An alternative Women’s Bill was recently drafted by the Forum for Democratic Reforms, proposing to make it mandatory for political parties to give 33 per cent of seats to women candidates, thus shifting women’s quotas to the party level. The Election Commission of India supported this option. But this

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78 Veena Poonacha, *Understanding Women’s Studies*, Research Centre for Women’s Studies, SNDT Women’s University, Mumbai, 1999, p.168.


has been rejected on the grounds that “parties will then field women in constituencies where they have no chance of winning”, thus ensuring that women do not supplant men in Parliament. On 22 December 2000, it was once again shelved. On 5 May 2003, during the Budget Session of Lok Sabha, the Women’s Reservation Bill was resisted amidst loud protests from many opposition parties and some sections of the ruling NDA alliance.\(^{82}\) The 81\(^{st}\), 84\(^{th}\) and 85\(^{th}\) Constitutional Amendment Bills providing for reservation for women in Parliament and State Legislatures were not passed because there was a claim for reservation for women on the basis of caste. The women’s delegation emphasized the crisis facing India’s democracy with increasing political instability and growth of irresponsibility, fragmentation and criminalisation. Despite their efforts, the bill was not passed due to the lack of majority for the ruling party in the Parliament and strong opposition from male members across parties. In this context, the lapse of women’s reservation bill, seeking one-third of the parliamentary and legislative seats is extremely distressing. It leads to further decline in the participation of women not only in legislatures, but in many other areas such as political and public spaces.\(^{83}\) Women governance and development are the major subjects for debate and discussion among academics and policy-makers all over the world at present. Debate and discussion have further deepened after grassroots level institutions were created through the 73\(^{rd}\) Amendment to the Constitution of India for governance and development.\(^{84}\)

The most recent formula seeks to reserve 33 per cent of seats for women at the time of election within the party level. This could be achieved by an amendment, enjoining political parties to allocate 33 per cent seats to women


candidates. But this idea is not successful due to domination of the male leaders of the party. Even the women leaders of the party such as Jayalalithaa of AIADMK of Tamil Nadu, Mamtha Banerjee of Trinamul Congress in West Bengal and Sonia Gandhi of Congress, do not concede this demand. Only in the AIADMK has there been a conscious move to bring many more women into decision-making levels and posts within the party. Male control of the party hierarchy severely reduces any hope of equality of status for women in all aspects of public life.

The common accusation is that women’s entry into political domain was sudden and they were not prepared for such positions in their whole life. The elected women representatives were totally directed by the male family members while discharging the duties and responsibilities.

Women continue to be under-represented and excluded from decision making processes. In the almost total absence of a favourable environment for women to enter into politics, they are neglected by the larger society from the mainstream political culture. Because of the domination of men in politics, women are compelled to take a back seat. Most of these women are illiterate, poor, and unfamiliar with the mechanisms of governance. Some have indeed been elected as “rubberstamp” candidates for aspiring male relatives. But recent studies have shown that women learn the ropes quickly, given a little training and they could function more effectively than males over a period of time. Despite illiteracy, poverty and patriarchal socio-cultural handicaps, some of the women have shown extraordinary self-confidence and initiative. The Women Reservation Bill merely seeks to extend this empowerment at the state and national levels.


Jean Mann, *op. cit.*, p.244.

Men dominate the political party machines\textsuperscript{91}, but women, by having two million voters more on the electoral roll than men, decide the issue. Thus women at the grassroots level are getting politicized. As they understand and deal with hard politics, they also push for its transformation to accommodate their own location and needs. This political astuteness has to be recognized, rather than demeaned.\textsuperscript{92}

The Panchayat Raj system believes that the quality and the atmosphere of politics will improve if more women come in. Their entry into the public arena through these movements has further enabled many neo-literates to get elected to the panchayat level councils.\textsuperscript{93} It was perhaps because of the overwhelming poverty and vulnerability of women in Tamil Nadu that much of the political expressions of the women’s movement have been around development issues through which politics emerges.\textsuperscript{94}

Men are worried that they may not return to Parliament if 181 seats become reserved for women. Vajpayee himself conceded in December 1999 that the political parties swear by affirmative action only with an eye on the 300 million voters, not because of commitment to women’s advancement. As Mulayam Singh, a senior political leader in Uttar Pradesh says “We welcome reservation for women, but it should not be at the cost of men”.\textsuperscript{95}

\textbf{The Diplomacy of Male Politicians}

Tamil women are not able to get proper reservation in the electoral process or within the party level. Women fail to mobilize their power for the cause of reservation because the party and the politics are still under the control of men. Politicians are very reluctant to allow a woman into the highest level of

\textsuperscript{91} Jayati Ghosh, \textit{loc.cit.}

\textsuperscript{92} Devaki Jain, ‘Behind Every Women...lies History’, \textit{The Hindu}, 30 April, 2002.


\textsuperscript{94} Veena Poonacha, \textit{op.cit.}, p.160.

\textsuperscript{95} \textit{The Hindu}, 24 December, 2000.
hierarchy. Women’s paradoxical position in the society is reflected in politics also. It is no surprise that many women politicians from Indira Gandhi to J. Jayalalithaa entered into politics only under the shadow of a man. Most of them have risen to prominence as daughters, wives and associates of powerful men. Their position in politics is not evolutionary but clear case of induction and at times they expressed the traditional mentality of Hindu women in their political performance.

Women Panchayat leaders are not corrupt as it is evident from the studies conducted among the Panchayat women Presidents. They are open and their activities are transparent. They give accounts periodically to the people through the Panchayat meetings. The Women Panchayat leaders are always honest as observed by the officials. It is therefore a measure of success of the Indian women that the present Government is considering extending reservations for women in Parliament and State Legislature.

Inducting women into decision-making levels in Parliament through reserved seats is one of the ways of promoting affirmative action. But despite Constitutional guarantees of gender equality, the women’s reservation bill has failed to become law because divisions along gender seem stronger than those along caste-class lines. In what could be a manifestation of a ‘backlash response’, gender united male policy-makers block legislation for women’s empowerment. Though women parliamentarians seem united by gender in their support for the bill, their numbers are insufficient to alter the status quo towards greater equality.

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96 Elizabeth Bumiller, op.cit., p.178.
98 Palanithurai, G., loc.cit., p.359.
A constitutional remedy alone can help because the social alternative would take a longer time.

**Socio-Economic Background**

An analysis of the financial status of those who contested the election till 2001, reveals that most of them belonged to the middle-class families at the time of their first contest. Majority candidates from the general constituencies had higher educational qualifications as compared to those contested from the reserved constituencies. Today, women elected from reserved constituencies also are of the higher qualification. Karuppaye, a AIADMK candidate in the Kulathur constituency at Pudukkottai district, is well educated and she was awarded Doctoral Degree in Tamil literature but she was not allowed by the party to contest assembly election the second time. Most of the candidates were married to persons who themselves were political activists. Though they were elected in their party capacities, their role was primarily supportive to their husbands or sons or family male members who had leading positions in the politics of their respective areas. Their qualifications to a public office has been the fact that they are somebody's wife, daughter or relative and no wonder they have hardly made any impression in the legislatures or have initiated any significant legislation that would improve the lot of women. Political parties are to be blamed for this because they have failed to induct women of substance. But today there are instances of politicized families where both the husband and wife together are active in politics of the area. However, there are clear indications that the involvement as also their election to Lok Sabha was due to the influence of the male member.

There are two contradictory processes in the electoral system. On the one hand, there are powerful women leaders who are mainly elite and articulate and

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on the other hand, there are women who are mere rubberstamps. However, the elite women gain their political presence because of their relations with male politician-husbands, brothers, fathers and fathers-in-law. One important factor relating to women’s participation and involvement in politics which overcomes the cultural barriers is the socio-economic status. If the socio-economic status of the parents were high, the women are encouraged to be aware of the external environment which creates interest in public and political activity. If the parents are active in politics, the women get an opportunity to be exposed to the political environment. Greater personal attainment is necessary if a woman is to overcome the barrier presumably created by sex role typing in the society.

Another fact is that after the death of an MP or MLA, his wife is given ticket in the same constituency to fill the void. ‘Widow succession’ is not an unusual phenomenon in Tamil Nadu politics, as it has been recorded in countries like Sri Lanka, Argentina or the Philippines also. Even in America, an ex-Congress woman has conceded in the early twentieth century that being a political widow was almost the only way for an American woman to gain access to high public office. Richter asserts that the most important political posts open to women have been through familial ties to prominent male politicians – the opportunity for such women having been greatly enhanced by their husbands’ deaths and often dramatic martyrdom.

The largest number of candidates were fielded from the neighborhood of Chennai, the state headquarters, compared to other districts in Tamil Nadu. Sathyavani Muthu was repeatedly elected from the Perambur, a reserved constituency for four times. She did not belong to a princely family. Assessing the

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103 Elizabeth Holtzman and Shirley Williams, ‘Women in the Political World: Observation’, *Deadalus*, Fall 1987, p.29.
family background of women candidates, it can be generalized that they belong to the politicized family background.  

**Position of the Political Parties**

Political parties play an important role in selecting candidates. Very few independents have been recruited to political offices in Tamil Nadu. In selecting the women candidates, the party gives a boost to them to participate. In fact, the Congress party, during the leadership of Indira Gandhi, was very keen on bringing women into positions of leadership.

In Tamil Nadu, major parties like DMK and AIADMK do not have separate list of women members in the party. T.K.S. Ilangoovan, an Organisation Secretary in the DMK Headquarters, asserted that the separate list of women members is not maintained by the party. Political party is still a man’s world, said Alice Horan, an organizer for thirty years of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers. According to her, “As long as women are treated as second class citizens, they will behave like them”.

In general, the scholars cite that social discrimination of women is reflected in politics also. A politically ambitious woman cannot escape the consequences of social beliefs of gender differences, which are politically relevant. First, she must come to the understanding of herself as a person and a political figure that resolves her tensions. Such mental metamorphosis has happened in cases of Indira Gandhi and Jayalalithaa. Indira Gandhi rose to a powerful position in the country in which women are mostly impoverished and neglected. Women politicians like Jayalalithaa of AIADMK, Mamta Banerjee who heads the Trinamool Congress and Mayawati of the Bahujan Samajwadi Party are powerful and have toppled the respective previous governments. Yet it is to be noted that however powerful they

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105 Shanta Bhatt, *op.cit.*, p.70.
106 Interview with T.K.S. Ilangoovan, Organisation Secretary of DMK on 31 November 2006.
107 Jean Mann, *op.cit.*, p.244.
may be, the general nature of women is reflected in their role contrary to the tendency of women politicians of western countries. In Tamil Nadu political scene, women MPs and MLAs are the relatives of political heavy weights.\textsuperscript{108}

Women's involvement in highest decision-making bodies of various national parties is not at all encouraging even though women have been president of parties like Congress, BJP, and AIADMK. The Congress Working Committee had twenty one members of whom only three were women and two out of four general secretaries were women. BJP's parliamentary board consists of nine members of whom only one member is a woman.\textsuperscript{109} Hence women's association and women social workers insist on the quota system for women.

Tamil Nadu has strong regional parties, founded on a cultural discourse of regional identity or a spatially concentrated representational base. These parties have proved to be a crucial mechanism in the alliance and coalition-building process for the national catch-all parties to access supporters of these regional parties from 1991 onwards. In exchange for increased power and representation at the national level, state level parties enter coalitions with the national parties, and the latter in theory receive an amount of cooperation and support from the state level parties. Jayalalithaa's withdrawal of support for the BJP in 1999, which led to the collapse of the central government that had been elected by a marginal victory, is another demonstration of the rise in importance of the state level parties, which has political repercussions in the national level politics, especially with regard to the ability of national parties to win elections and to dictate policy once in government.\textsuperscript{110}

However, in spite of so many women in important positions, women's impact on politics has been marginal. They constitute nine per cent of central

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\textsuperscript{108} Anjana Maitra-Sinka, \textit{op.cit.}, p.59. \\
\textsuperscript{110} Carole Spary, \textit{loc.cit.}
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ministers. They continue to remain in the minority in spite of the fact that they constitute the single largest numerical majority. This asymmetry is due to inequalities in power and status. Their token representation in the political sphere is because they are part of a political culture that is patriarchal and non-participatory.\footnote{111}

Women's issues appeared in a variety of party platforms. Women, though only a handful, were chosen as candidates by political parties in the elections and policies were occasionally adopted that would appeal to women voters.\footnote{112} In Tamil Nadu, Dravida Kalazhagam(DK), known for its strong social movements including women's movements, did not help them to move into political position. Instead of social movements strengthening political parties, as many had hoped, party politics demobilized the movements.\footnote{113} Women's presence in world institutionalized politics (political parties, elections) remains disproportionately low. Political parties continue to be male spaces where women face serious obstacles, and many women still believe that political parties are not for them.

There is an increase in the number of women in the electoral process in view of political parties with their meaningful contribution to women-specific issues. Qualitative change in political goals and processes is taking place as a result of accommodating women's perspective and priorities. Increasing number of meetings, welfare programs, and national conventions are organized by different political parties for their women cadres. If the Congress Government brought out a half-baked National Perspective Plan, the Janata regime came up with Women's Commission and DMK Government in Tamil Nadu brought out the equal property rights with men in 1989.\footnote{114}

\footnote{111} Indian Express, 5 June 1999.
\footnote{112} Shahra Razavi, loc.cit., p.204.
\footnote{113} Ibid.
\footnote{114} Vibhuti Patel, op.cit., p.2.
Tamil women are far more sensitive in nature. Her entry into public life requires the redefinition of herself as a social being in addition to her traditional image. Tamil Nadu so far has witnessed only few women of this nature. Role of Jayalalithaa in the Dravidian movement exemplifies the aesthetic concoction of traditional and modern image of Tamil women. A number of active women political leaders and members of political parties both in India and abroad feel that the main reason for women being reluctant to contest elections is a well thought out discrimination on the part of men who lead political parties and wield a decisive influence so far as the final selection of party candidates is concerned. As Duverger points out “in the realm of politics, the promotion of women comes up against a barrier of male opposition”.

Undoubtedly men, as well as women leading political parties, deny this charge and assert that it is mainly the difficulty of getting sufficiently qualified women candidates rather than their prejudice against women, which is responsible for fewer number of women candidates. It may also be noted that women members of the Lok Sabha and State Assembly have, on the whole, given a good account of themselves by actively taking part in the debates and making substantial contribution to discussion in the legislatures on matters of general interest and social justice.

Women in public life have obviously stayed away from their base and broken their links with women at large. No attempt is made by them to rally and purposefully organize public opinion on vital issues. For the benefit of the community well being, no attempt has been made to educate for purposeful action. The vast army of voters, who possess a powerful weapon, do not initiate collective action for getting absolute essentials like water, housing, transport, educational facilities. These are the most intimate elements of everyday existence, which cast a light or shadow on lives. Women in public life do not make make a

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dent where public issues are concerned. No cause seems to warrant their whole-hearted drive and active energy.\textsuperscript{117}

With more and more women entering the public life, one looks in vain for a woman’s powerful hand trying to bring redress and demand better living. Unfortunately there is too great a tendency on the part of these women to try to acquire positions of power, sometimes deluding themselves into believing that such power gives them an opportunity for better service. Women’s everyday life is sometimes so harsh that the question of participation in politics hardly arises. They delude themselves, because what is needed of women in public life is not mere power but closer kinship, an understanding and identification with the ignorant, the dispossessed, and the vulnerable for the purpose of educating and rousing them to action as conscious intelligent pressure groups. Women in public are tempted to assume the hallmark of success, the symbol of leadership and power without making an attempt to work for the cause of women. All the increased opportunities of education and employment have brought about changes in her positioning at home and in society. They have membership in the Indian Parliament and States’ Legislatures and an increasing number of them are taking an active part in the affairs of their country. No doubt the traditional conceptions regarding the position of women in India have changed and are still changing. S.C. Dube too makes similar observations.\textsuperscript{118} A woman’s own conceptions with regard to her position in home and society have also undergone a change. Various studies of Merchant\textsuperscript{119}, Desai\textsuperscript{120}, Kannan\textsuperscript{121} indicate the trend towards this change in the desirable direction.

\textsuperscript{117} Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, \textit{loc.cit.}, pp.95-96.
\textsuperscript{120} Neera Desai, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 59-117
\textsuperscript{121} Kannan, C. T., \textit{Inter-Caste and Inter-Community Marriages in India}, Allied Publishers Private Limited, Bombay, 1969, pp.201-241.