CONCLUSION
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During the vedic period, women were educated and they held high position in the society. In other words, the status of women was appreciable. Further, they took part in the social activities too. But after the invasion of Mohamedans and their rule in India, women were degraded and their status was denigrated. Owing to the Muslim law, women were treated only as a commodity to provide pleasure to men in the society. The advent of the British, the English education and the impact of the western culture, inculcated a spirit of awareness among women to re-define their social and political role.

Women’s liberation movement in India did not pursue the path preferred by the western feminists. For example, we do not hear of bra-burning in India as it was reported in the West. Gandhi prescribed the style women’s liberation movement ought to adopt in India. According to Gandhi, women in public life should not compromise on their parenting responsibilities. In view of this constraint, only a very few women from affluent families, especially from families with political involvement, could participate openly in the political arena. Hence the first hypothesis ‘higher domestic pre-occupation and unawareness of women creates lower opportunity for participation’ is sustained by the findings of this study.

Gandhi worked for the uplift of women and tried to annihilate the impediments that stood as a stumbling block in the progress of women and turned his attention to women’s welfare. He encouraged women to take active participation in the freedom struggle and trained them for their proper participation in the public affairs. The independence struggle and the struggle for women’s liberation went hand in hand simultaneously. Women’s organizations such as AIWC, WIA worked for the progress of women, enfranchisement of women and for the active participation of women in public space. As a result of
the women’s reform activities, many women participated actively in the public affairs. They took decisions independently and judiciously. This is evident from the vital roles they played in the independent struggle. The women’s movement has underlined the need for women’s political empowerment.

The unflagging enthusiasm of women and the untiring efforts of the social reformers brought the right of franchise for women in 1919 and women exercised their right in the 1921 election for the first time in India. Muthulakshmi Reddy became the first legislator to enter the legislative assembly of the Madras Presidency. It was because of the perseverance and the irrepresible efforts of Muthulakshmi Reddy, the Devadasi system was abolished through an Act in 1929. It is remarkable to note that India was one of the first countries in the world which sanctioned the ‘right to vote’ for women even in the 1920s.

When India achieved Independence in 1947, women also obtained the privilege of equality with men in all walks of life. Though this equality has been granted to women constitutionally, it has been a ‘mirage’ in practice. Women have been confined to the household chores like wifely duty, child care and the household maintenance. Indeed they are cowed down by the domestic duties under the pretext of ‘female’ duty. Hence the Government of India appointed a committee called CSWI to investigate the condition of women in 1974. The report submitted by the CSWI recorded the still persisting pathetic plight of women and this made the Government of India to plan and to take remedial measures for the uplift of women. The Government proposed several programmes and plans such as NCWI and special plan of action for the girl child to promote the welfare of female children. The active measures taken by the Government resulted in the improvement of educated women from 36.39 per cent in 1961 to 73.35 per cent in 2001 in Tamil Nadu. The percentage of working women also increased from 1.7 lakhs in 1962 to 35.7 lakhs in 1989. Yet, the representation of women in the decision making bodies was negligible. The number of women in IAS increased only a little from 339 in 1987 to 535 in 2000. This is not proportionate to their participation. Similarly there is negligible
increase in IPS officers from twenty one in 1987 to one hundred and one in 2000. On the other hand, 515 men were IAS officers and 3301 men were IPS officers in 2000. From 1967 onwards, very few women were in a position to influence political thinking or decision making. The low proportion of their representation and participation reveals that only a few women have really achieved the highest levels of political success. This is portrayed in the Table 5.9. It is evident that the public participation of women is far from satisfactory. Hence the second hypothesis ‘whether women have proportionate opportunity in the political arena and in decision-making’ is not established by this study. In other words, their political participation is not proportionate to their population.

Indira Gandhi had Nehru, her father, as her mentor. Muthulakshmi Reddi, the first woman doctor from the undivided Madras Presidency, hailed from an influential family in Pudukottai Samasthanam. Her family was very close to the Raja of Pudukottai and this factor helped her to get the medical education. Rani Annadurai was nominated MLC in Tamil Nadu simply because she was the wife of former Chief Minister, C.N. Annadurai. Similarly, Janaki Ramachandran could become the first lady Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu even though for a very short period of time, simply because she was the wife of former Chief Minister, M.G.Ramachandran. Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins, both from Britain, had the advantages of western thinking which was brought to bear upon the social issues of the day. While women leaders in the pre-1967 period were generally from families with political background, women leaders after 1967 did not enjoy these advantages. For example, Sathiavanimuthu, who was a State Minister three times and a Central Minister once, did not have this advantage of a family with a political background. The recent example of Selvi. J. Jayalalithaa also illustrates the fact that post 1967 women leaders emerged into prominence despite lack of a family background. Hence the third hypothesis, ‘many women came from political elite families and led their political life under the influence of their family members’ is partially supported by this study.
From 1937 to 1962, there were five general elections to the state assembly. The Table 5.2 clearly illustrates the fact that women participation in state legislature was very moderate. But it dramatically increased in 1991 election and also in 2001 election. Hence the researcher concludes that political participation in the state assembly has increased considerably. In the case of elections to the Parliament also, the number of women contestants as well as the number of elected women members increased since the first Parliament election in 1952. Hence the fourth hypothesis, ‘women participation in the state legislature was high in the decades after independence’ is sustained by this study.

In the recently held panchayat elections in Tamil Nadu, 33% of seats were reserved for women. The changing political system has only worked to catapult a few women into positions of power. Nevertheless, female political participation and leadership in the local panchayats does have potential implications for the future generation of political leaders and the political participation of women. The number of women who have gained political office and power is smaller as compared to their male colleagues. However, the low proportion of their representation and participation cannot conceal the fact that a few women have really reached the highest levels of political success.

The 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. In most of the places, women did not even come to panchayat meetings or group discussion and they were not allowed to discuss by male dominated assemblies. The elected women representatives are facing innumerable odds. The ‘proxy’ phenomenon has emerged as a source of criticism of the legitimacy of both participating women and the system itself. Hence the fifth hypothesis, ‘Whether the effective functioning of women representatives in political office is impaired by their spouses. ’ is proved by the study.
Suggestions and Recommendations

✓ To enact the 85th Constitutional Amendment Bill pending in the Parliament, providing reservation for women, thereby involving women in the political and decision making arenas.

✓ To ensure that an enabling environment is provided for women in the elected bodies and that their positions are not always threatened with premature removal from their posts.

✓ To ensure that women are taken seriously in their elected post by allotting important portfolios and not just limiting their functions to social welfare and women and child development.

✓ To introduce special mechanisms to induct women at all levels of decision-making to ensure that they form a critical mass to contribute and influence administrative planning and policy measures.

✓ To amend the Representation of Peoples Act in order to make it mandatory for every political party to have one-third of its nominees to be women.

✓ To de-legitimise the traditional community-based Panchayat.

✓ To make training mandatory for all elected representatives to attend so that women are not denied this opportunity. This must be done equally for all women who have been elected into rural and urban governance.

✓ To create awareness amongst women through mass media about the electoral process, thereby eliminating powerful men taking advantage of the ignorance of women and controlling their decisions in exercising their right to vote.

✓ To educate women about the right to vote and strengthen the women’s constituency.

✓ To facilitate the formation of women’s associations, collectives and cooperatives to support and strengthen women’s political participation.

✓ Encourage more women to come forward and take an active role in politics at local, municipal, regional, and national levels.

✓ Train potential women candidates and their campaign teams in the skills and understanding of democratic politics. This should cover women
candidates for parliament as well as local, municipal, regional, and national levels.

✓ To change the culture of political parties and the media to help politics become 'women-friendly'.
✓ Increase public awareness about the importance of including women at all levels of decision-making, including politics.
✓ The government should enact legislations for periodical review and the progress of women folk.

In conclusion, the mood of the women’s movement is restless. It is not sufficient just to be given political space in the Tamil Nadu Assembly, Parliament, and local bodies of governance. The struggle for women’s reservations at the higher level of political office must continue. The enactment of the 85th Constitutional Amendment Bill is still a distant dream. The struggle for equality in economic, social and political spheres will continue until they are achieved.