Neelamma, a women Panchayat member suffered because she did not know how to read and write. She is landless labourer from Nikunda Village in Bidar District of Karnataka. She realized that she could not read. All the three women elected in her Panchayat are illiterate. Now she has learned how to sign her name and has made sure that all her children are educated. She observes, "before Panchayati Raj, we never got anything. We used to feel afraid to go to the gram Panchayat. But now we are
not afraid and we go and sit on the chair in the gram Panchayat. Panchasheela Mahila Sangam is active for the last 8 years in this region.

With this introduction, an attempt has been made in this chapter to present the problems of women representatives in Minjur Panchayat Union.

To empower women, GramSabha has been considered as a suitable mechanism as it has easy accessibility to rural women. Hence to be desirable to describe the composition and functioning of GramSabha and its power. To understand the functioning of GramSabha few Photos have been used.

Thus, gramsabha are evolving as social audit mechanism, where in all voters in villages get a chance to ratify the decisions of the Panchayat councils, set priorities and most importantly, question the decisions about use of funds. The Government had directed all the 'gramsabhas' to ratify the local list of families below poverty line. GramSabha meet is not merely a place to read out income expenditure statements, but an occasion for every villagers to seek clarifications, question the priorities and perhaps even set an agenda for local development. The villagers could pass resolutions about their grievances about the working of an official or a department and sent it to the collector for follow up action.

1. The Hindu, October 3, 1999
Towards Empowered Gram Sabha Towards Gram Swaraja

All villagers above the age of 18 years are members of the Gram Sabha and have an inherent right to determine their own destiny.

Gram Sabha is the forum where the oppressed and the poorest of the poor can influence decisions affecting their lives.

Gram Sabhas shall:

➢ Plan and prioritise development works to be taken up in the village.
➢ Approve annual plan for the Gram Panchayat.
➢ Seek active participation of women, SCs and STs.
➢ Ensure transparency in the Gram Panchayat.
➢ Exercise the right to check the accounts of the gram panchayats (Social Audit).
➢ Select beneficiaries under Indira Awaas Yojana, Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana and Swarnjayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana.
➢ Approve the works to be undertaken under Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana.
➢ Move towards full control over management of natural resources of the village.
➢ Meet at least four times every year, preferably on 26th January, 1st May, 15th August and 2nd October*.

---

26.1.2000
இயற்ற நாளில் கோஷியக்கலைக்
காய்த்தூண்

...
Panchayat, particularly, the GramSabha is considered more accessible unit for the local women involved in politics of Panchayats. As such women participation in Pachayati Raj has immediate as well as long terms implications in as much as their leadership in quantitative terms is just too much below their own population in the country at present. Hence, in the immediate future the rural women have to take up the cudgels and reap the full advantage of the opportunities now given to participate in rural affairs through the medium of PRIIs2.

A women, by nature, is an honest person and perfect in balancing the family budget. This quality could usefully be employed in managing the financial matters of PRIIs as well3. However, it is observed during the course of this study, GramSabha meetings were not attended willingly by both men and women at villages. If convened, the elected members come and sit for a while and disperse. GramSabha as a tool to further the interest of the village Panchayat is not yet reached the villagers. Hence, the Chief Minister makes an appeal to attend the GramSabha.

The signed appeal from the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu appeared in news papers on 26.01.2000 request the Members of Parliament, Members of Legislative Assembly, delegate from local government and other officials to take part in the GramSabha to be held on 26.1.2000.
It also explains the importance of the local government at Gram Sabha. Chief Minister also explained his happiness for convening the Gram Sabha 4 times in a year.

Though this appeal Chief Minister request the people of the village to audit the performance of self help scheme (Namakkku Naame Thittam) Anna Marumalarchi Thittam. He also requests that it must be communicated to the collectors and Chief Minister. The basic needs of villages such like drinking water, street lighting must be given 100%. He directs that the Gram Sabha should function in this direction.

This advertisement is not only appearing in the Newspapers, also available on the Internet. It shows that government is going Hi-tech but the story in the villages is different. It must be critically viewed that whether the Gram Sabha is really convened in its true spirit and village are capable of browsing through Internet.

The subsequent photo seen explains the story of village Panchayat and Gram Sabha that has been convened in various occasions. The first Photo of Gram Sabha convened in a Tamil Nadu village exhibits its artificial nature, in which we can see the official arrangements made by the government official to exhibit maximum advertisement. It has become ceremonial affairs. Because, in most places, Gram Sabha are
At a gram sabha meeting in Tamil Nadu.
convened as mandatory routine. Only, President and Ward Members
assemble and disperse. Common man and women are not interested to take
part in GramSabha.

The Second Photo provides a picture of a GramSabha meeting held
in Kerala, where local plans were reviewed. From this picture it has been
seen that GramSabha in Kerala is organised with people's participation and
remains as a model to be followed. People in Kerala take part in
GramSabha voluntarily, which is lacking in Tamil Nadu.

In records, all the official procedures are strictly followed.
Members are informed. Peoples are invited through bit notices and
GramSabha is convened. To substantiate, the notice given to the people,
letter send to a women ward member is provided here.

Further, a photo showing the convening of GramSabha in
Thirupalaivanam Village is exhibited, in which we can observe that not
more than 20 members attended this GramSabha meeting. Among them
10 were children, who came to take sweets after hoisting National Flag on
26.01.2000. In this meeting no question were raised by the villagers. The
officials explained the need for attending a GramSabha meeting and
importance of various government schemes.
A gram sabha in session at the Tirumala ward of the Thiruvananthapuram City Corporation. The decentralised planning process in Kerala has yielded positive results within a short period of time.
Gram Sabha - Thiruplaivanam. 26.01.2000
With the aid of few more visuals an attempt has been made to reveal a profile of women representatives, as different types of model women would enhance our understanding of the processes involved in political empowerment of women.

Kattur - A Women Representative with her Husband.
The First type of model women who acquired the status of President in Kattur Panchayat is Jeeva. Her husband has more than 5 acres of land. He is a retired government employee. The husband being a political and influential man of local standing decides the matters of panchayat. He indicated the person to be elected as representative - all are his relatives - daughter and daughter-in-law.

She being an illiterate, aged and unaware of Panchayat rules (or) procedures only sign in the agenda book. The Thalaivar (Leader) a dominant male who had been the president of that panchayat for a long time still has nexus between officials in the panchayat union. He draw more funds from the panchayat union, name any scheme of the government, this panchayat will get its evident share.

Here it must be noted that the President of panchayat, a sixty years old woman without any difficulties manages the panchayat affairs. In this model the patronage from the family, the name of the husband earned for a long and his influence plays important role in the decision-making activities of the panchayat. Don’t worry whether the women president is literate (or) illiterate, whether she is able to read and write or not, whether she is taking active part in panchayat or not- the panchayat will revolve around her husband and grow.
The second type of women representative of panchayat is a ward member from Vallur panchayat - belong to S.C community. She appears to be more religious, and in the circle of her husband - aged 40. She only talks with the permission of her husband, if you pose any question she looks her husband, if you asked which ward you belong she asked her husband and confirms that she belong to first ward. For each and every
information she look towards her husband for help. Then what she will do in panchayat?

Her husband replies - Because of the tradition in the society women are not active in politics on behalf of her he discharge her duty except signing the agenda book and other official records. However, he is very happy to accept the fact that because of her, he gets some contracts like road laying, installing drinking water kids and so on. He is employed in a central government corporation.

Here the participation of this women representative in panchayat is quite nominal- she attends the meeting, sign the documents, receive the benefits and enjoy the status of panchayat membership. She is a primary school dropout. This family is having about 4 acres of land and two members, the husband and the elder son are government employees. She, being a panchayat member takes not much responsibility. No efforts she takes for the empowerment of women. She mentions that the immediate concern of her ward is to open a ration shop in the neighborhood.

Think of 33% reservation for women in grassroots and even legislature and parliament and the dependency of women on their husbands.
The Third type of women representative, we would like to highlight a shopkeeper/women ward member aged about 38 years. She belongs to S.C community. She is running a shop near the New Attipattu railway station. Her husband is employed in a private company in Ennore. She also hold the post of secretary of women wing of (DMK) of her
village. When we asked how you would discharge your responsibilities as a panchayat member with tidies job of shop keeping.

She claims, I am close my shop and attend the important meeting, and she smiles and say that minor adjustment can be done here and there. What are the felt needs she was able to provide to her ward - we asked. Then she replies that I know the minister and I can influence the officials in Minjur panchayat union because of my political background. But she denied revealing what she has done for her ward people.

Here the women representative is capable of manipulating the system itself, it must be noted that what she has told, minor adjustment can be done here and there. A semi literate, having a regular income and some political influence is capable of becoming panchayat member. Here also the empowerment of women is at stake. Because, the real purpose behind the empowerment of women is not reached the needy and deserving section. The manipulating section of the women grabbed the opportunity.
The Fourth case, we would like to present is a Vice-President of a
village panchayat aged 34, having three children, housewife belongs to S.C
community. Her husband was formerly occupying the post of vice-
president. Now the turn is for his wife. She regularly attends all the
meeting of panchayat, because a president a male businessman is always
not seeing in the village. She was very happy to reveal that official visit
her home to discuss development plans for her village. She is however illiterate not able to read and write but can sign, thanks to adult education provided by the literacy mission (Arivolly Iyakkam). Her husband, former vice-president of the village is a business man who vent chairs and mike sets and utensils for various ceremonies like marriage.

Here, the vice-president, a women representative is really active and in the ladder of political empowerment for her also the patronage from her husband, the absent of president in the village created opportunity to develop her political personality.
The Fifth case, a woman of Minjur Town panchayat aged 45, is a ward member, she belongs to S.C. community. She is a widow - when we asked what motivated her to contest in the panchayat elections, for her the local magalir sangam nominated her. She is an agricultural cooli. Having two school going children living in thatched house - have no regular income, hence active in panchayat politics, backed by magalir sangam.
Whether she is capable of discharging her duties - at once. She said "No I ’am not capable. Because the persons occupying various post in the panchayat are well educated, have direct link with ministers and politicians, I am being an illiterate, what can I do?.

Here, though the women representative is backed by magalir sangam, she is not able to excise her poser. She belongs to Congress party. Even her magalir sangam has not taught the meaning of political empowerment.
The next women representative is a vice-president of Neithavayal village- she belongs to 8.C community. She studied upto higher secondary level. She take active part in self help group organised under the auspicious of district administration. She is politically neutral. Really she represent, the sample of women who grabbed the opportunity provided by the 73rd Amendment. Though her husband is a carpenter having less than
two acres of land, two school going children. She finds time to engage in panchayat activities.

She is very eager to list the felt needs of her village like ration-shop, drinking water, opening of sub-primary health center and a high school. She belong to middle income group-educated middle age-more articulate, clear in her perception of the problem and decide to continue in politics of panchayat in future also.

Here two factors deserve mentions. First is the awareness created by the self help group and second the education of the women representative, which is a step towards the empowerment.
The last case in our consideration is a young woman aged 26, mother of a 5 year old child - having higher secondary school education - belong to S.C community. She is a ward member of Vallur Panchayat. Her husband and father-in-law are active in politics. Besides, more relatives live in a same locality. Nobody contested against her. She can also list the achievement being panchayat member. She is less articulate and act
according to her husband and father-in-law. For her membership in panchayat is a status symbol. When we asked would you contest in the next election, she denied for her the present position is enough. She is quite happy with family life rather than politics.

The above discussion manifests the fact that the women from different walks of life have entered in to politics at grassroots level. Their entry is sudden. They are first timers. They have to go miles before they attain political empowerment.