

## PERFORMANCE OF DALIT WOMEN PANCHAYAT PRESIDENTS (A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO NAMAKKAL DISTRICT IN TAMIL NADU)

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### **Abstract**

*In the daily news and magazines we read many cases about political exclusion of Dalit women Panchayat Presidents in Tamil Nadu. But still hundreds of cases related to this report remain unreported. Panchayat raj administration is male-dominated with low participation by women in spite of the provision that one-third of the members have to be women. Political minorities stayed away since they felt they wouldn't be 'heard', scheduled castes and tribes did not feel encouraged to participate since political leaders were frequently from the higher castes. The gender and caste bias have thus had serious impact on the participatory nature of this system. In general people of the Scheduled Castes are discriminated, exploited, and placed at the bottom of caste society even today. Women Panchayat Presidents are ill-treated from different dimensions. All these victimization are manifested in different forms and finally may lead to extreme forms like suicide, female infanticide and abnormal behavior. The panchayati raj, after the enactment of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, brought in measures to overcome these past indignities, and provided a quota within ordinary seats and among the office bearers of the panchayats.*

*Dominant caste and Dalit men help them to be elected and then take the control, menacing and threatening them. The voice of Dalit Women Panchayat is not taken seriously. And when women are chased away, no actions are taken, everyone refuse to provide them assistance. There are major weaknesses in the current interpretations and implementation of reservation in Panchayat Raj which reduce the ability of panchayat to fulfill core objectives of equitable development and social justice. So, the political participation of Dalit Women should not be viewed in isolation. Creative ways must be explored, with Dalit Women, Non - Dalit Women and Dalit men to capitalize on the success stories of Dalit women's political leadership. Efforts should be taken to lead a supportive environment for these women's political participation in the society in order to promote human rights and equality for all. The present study is proposed to be descriptive one based on primary and secondary data collected from appropriate sources and the tool of interview schedule administrated on the chosen respondents.*

### **Introduction**

Panchayatraj plays an effective role in Village administration. This system is as old as hills. In this research paper the author concentrates on the Dalit women Panchayat Presidents in Tamil Nadu in general and the sample is viewed from Namakkal District in Particular. It is true that the Dalit women Panchayat Presidents are not treated equally in the society. There is no social justice. A wide inequality prevails between the higher caste and lower caste in the society. The Dalit officials are affected both mentally and physically. Hence this paper brings to light the various problems faced by the Dalit women Panchayat Presidents in the village Panchayats. This research paper provides the findings and suggestions to eradicate these evil practices in the society. It is a descriptive study based on secondary data.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To bring out the Dalit Women exclusion in Panchayatraj.
2. To highlight the status of Dalit women in grass root governance.
3. To find out the problems faced by the Dalit Women Panchayat Presidents in rural areas.

### **Research Methodology of the study**

Literature review and Case studies of Dalit women as Panchayat Presidents were composed. Based on the Literature review and case studies, the findings, Suggestions and conclusion were given.

### Status of Dalit women Panchayat Presidents in Tamil Nadu State

According to the data released by the Union Census Directorate, Tamil Nadu has 7.2 % of Dalit Population. Dalits form around 16.6% of India's population<sup>1</sup>. Dalit women Panchayat Presidents are not respected in the society. They are for the name sake leaders and in reality higher caste people take the authority in their hands and ill-treat the Dalit women panchayat officials. They are socially excluded in the administration, decision making body, meetings and in all means in the village panchayat. The Dalit women Panchayat Presidents do not have confidence, they have inferiority complex they feel shy to express their skills and talents during their tenure of administration. They are dominated by the other caste Presidents. Sometimes they are dominated by the Dalit male Panchayat Presidents. Some of the Dalit women act as proxy leaders. They have poor background in education, social, economic and political field.

### Profile of Namakkal District

As of 2011 census, Namakkal district had a population of 1,726,601 with a sex-ratio of 986 females for every 1,000 males<sup>2</sup>. For local arrangements, the district has been divided into 5 Municipalities, 15 Panchayats Unions, 19 Town Panchayats and 322 Village Panchayats<sup>3</sup>.

### Analysis and Interpretation of the study

#### Distribution of the Women Panchayat Presidents in Namakkal District, Tamil Nadu: Table 1

General Women Panchayat Presidents	SC Women Panchayat Presidents	ST Women Panchayat Presidents	Total Women Panchayat Presidents
74	32	6	112

In Namakkal District, there are 112 women Panchayat Presidents, among them 74 are General Women Panchayat Presidents, 32 are Scheduled Caste Women Panchayat Presidents and 6 are Scheduled Tribe women Panchayat Presidents.<sup>4</sup>

The researcher after analysing the performance of the Dalit Women Panchayat Presidents at Namakkal Block in Namakkal district found the following in the **Case Study Analysis**.

1. The Personal, social, Political and economic background of the Dalit women Panchayat Presidents are not up to the expected level.
2. The Dalit women Panchayat Presidents are not fully aware of the schemes meant for their social, Political and Psychological upliftment.
3. They are not ready to attend the programmes in distant places without a male counterpart.
4. Their decisions are not taken into consideration by the ward members and higher caste Panchayat Presidents.
5. Their hard work is not recognized.
6. They are dependent on the male counterpart for implementing all the schemes.
7. They are only the signing authorities.
8. They are dependent upon their Father /husband / Son / influential members in the socio, economic and political backgrounds.

### All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) movement:

It is a movement initiated and promoted by NCDHR (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights) at the national level to focus exclusively on Dalit women. Its genesis is rooted in an attempt to address severe vulnerabilities faced by the 80 million Dalit women and girls who are socially excluded and lie at the bottom of India's caste, class and gender hierarchies. AIDMAM aims to support and strengthen Dalit women to address violence and access justice and rights through networking, enhancing skills and leadership at district and state level. AIDMAM's objective is to Empower Dalit Women to challenge against Caste, Class and Patriarchal Norms. This movement is to Support Dalit Women and to liberate Dalit Women from their multi-dimensional social issues.

### Dalit Women in the Panchayati Raj

The direct political participation of Dalit Women in the local Governance is a Human Right in itself. An analysis was made to determine how Dalit Women are enabled to claim their rights to political participation in local governance and the extent to which this participation is an effective

tool for empowerment and realization of Human Right for excluded social groups. The research has been carried out in Gujarat and Tamil Nadu on 200 Dalit Women. It was found that only 1/3 of 200 Dalit Women are able to act with dependence and freedom to win Panchayat elections. On the one hand, 85% are pushed by their husbands or the dominant castes, they become proxy politics. 3/4 of Dalit Women in the Panchayats are proxies and they faced strong oppositions while attempting to work for the benefit of their community. Only 1/3 of 119. Dalit women elected president are able to discharge official responsibilities with freedom and independence. Dalit Women are not taken seriously. When women raise issues during the Panchayat meetings, it is rarely discussed or approved.

#### **Active obstruction and disabling factors for participation:**

There is a clear obstruction to Dalit Development. The Panchayat does not prioritize Dalit development needs and the dominant castes refuse to share the knowledge that could enhance women's responsibilities and capabilities. 23% of Dalit Women are restricted by others from active participation in Panchayat council meetings by blocking the approval of development projects, delaying release and misappropriating development funds. Less than 1/3 of the women came from families with prior experience in Panchayat governance. 37% of women president reported direct obstruction while undertaking their responsibilities. 90% of the Dalit Women elected representatives felt as treated differently from others, even when it deals with the usage of utensil like plate, glass, cups etc. Only 18.5% of Dalit Women presidents felt that they had a significant say in the distribution of development schemes. Moreover, another factor which disables Dalit Women to participate in the Panchayat is the influence of dominant caste people. When women are chased away, no actions are taken; everyone refuses to provide them assistance.

#### **Review of Literature**

Dalits are the part and parcel of the village communities all over Indian subcontinent.

**Narendra Kumar and Manoj Rai, (2006)**, in their work on 'Dalit Leadership in Panchayats: A Comparative Study of Four States' have attempted to study the emerging patterns of rural leadership in relation to the Dalit leadership and how quota system has helped Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular to gain rational legal authority in local governance and what impaired them to participate effectively in it.

**Prem Prashant, et al. (1996)**, in their work 'Popular Participation in Rural Development' has made an attempt to understand the pattern and nature of emerging leadership. This study notices that a large number of Panchayat Raj leaders are younger and hail from the weaker sections of the society. The study concludes that the Panchayat Raj legislation that has provided for the reservation of weaker sections like SC's ST's and women has widened the social base of the popular participation in the village decision making process.

**Dhaka, Sunita and Rajbir S.Dhaka, (2005)**, 'Behind the Veil: Dalit Women in Panchayat Raj' have identified the patterns and process of social mobility among Dalits and its impact on the political participations in the changing scenario after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act.

**Nagar.N.S, (2008)**, 'Women and Politics' deals with the political roles the Women have played and continue to play in world politics. The body of politics is made dominant and the women have been excluded as if this power play is not suitable to them.

**Reddy, T.Chandra Mohan and U.R.Kaliappan (1987)**, in their article 'Status of Scheduled Castes in Rural Power Structure: An Analysis' have attempted to study the rural power structure from the stand point of Scheduled Castes. This paper makes an attempt to ascertain their position and participation in the rural power structure in the light of changes that have taken place in the recent past.

**Mahi Pal, (2004)**, in his article 'Caste and Patriarchy in Panchayats identified the inter link between caste and Patriarchy and how both act as impediments for Dalit women to exercise their rational legal authority as elected representatives<sup>5</sup>.

**Irudayam, Mangubhai, Sydenham, 2009**, is a study on women's role in panchayats in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat shows that only one-third of the 200 women researched were able to win the panchayat elections. Eighty-five per cent were pushed into panchayat politics by dominant castes or husbands and only one-third of the 119 panchayat presidents were able to work with freedom. The status of being a proxy, fear, lack of confidence, lack of knowledge, poor level of education, traditional caste and gender roles were cited as related issues that led to low political participation.

**Kumar, N and Raj, M 2006** Traditionally, leadership in the village was confined to rural elites. Who were aged and belonging to higher castes. In the year 1993, 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment in the constitution granted reservation to dalits, tribals and women in local government. This amendment made it compulsory that one third of the seats are reserved for dalits is filled by dalit women. Dalit who stood for election were beaten, and dalit women were raped and ill-treated.

**Irudayam, Mangubhai, Lee, 2006**. Intrinsic to these denials and exclusions is violence, in particular against Dalit women and girls. A study of 500 women from 32 panchayat unions/blocks/mandals in 17 districts of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, and Uttar Pradesh showed that the most frequent forms of violence included verbal abuse (62.4 per cent), physical assault (54.8 per cent), sexual harassment and assault (46.8 per cent), domestic violence (43 per cent) and rape (23.2 per cent).

According to, **The Hindu, 29 June, 2003**, the concepts of Social Capital and Common Property Resources dominate most of the discourse in development; however the former is neither social nor the latter common in a caste society. For instance, Dalits of Kanganickenpatti in Namakkal district were forced to live as refugees in their village because they made a claim for a share in common village resources. The demand from Arunthathuyars for a share in the proceeds of sale of sand, which was being mined, provoked a strong reaction from caste Hindu, who imposed a series of restriction on the 50-odd families of all farm labourers. The local shopkeeper was instructed not to supply groceries to the Dalit.

In **The Indian Express, 26th March, 2002**, an example of caste culture could be evidence from Madurai. As part of empowerment of Dalits, positions of power in panchayats are reserved for them. The Thevars in Madurai district opposed this move. They ensured that the scared Dalits do not come forward to file nominations, and that they won't serve under a Dalit. The demand of the Thevars was to de-reserve the councillorship for 4 panchayats. Ms.Saraswati, a Dalit woman filed nomination at Nattarmangalam, as a result one of these four panchayats and her house was stoned<sup>6</sup>

### **Reservation**

One-third of the positions at all levels of the bodies are reserved for women. SC and ST gets reservation of positions at all levels of the bodies in proportion to their population.<sup>7</sup>

### **Significance of the Study**

Dalit Women Panchayat Presidents are excluded politically. In this background, the study of the role performance and problems of Dalit women Panchayat Presidents evaluates the changes in the political status of the Dalit women in Indian society. Even though the Dalit women are empowered as Panchayat Presidents, they are viewed in a lower level and they do not have self respect in many village Panchayats in and around Tamil Nadu.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The study is confined to exploring the status of elected Dalit women Panchayat Presidents in Tamil Nadu with reference to Namakkal district. This study concentrates on Political status and various Problems faced by the Dalit women Panchayat Presidents of Tamil Nadu. The other areas of women development and welfare programmes for women and so on are not focussed in this study.

### Social Impact on Structural Interests

Research data showed little evidence of the third level of change envisaged by Dalit women's active political participation, that is, the restructuring of gender and caste social relations towards social equality and justice. What changes occurred were mostly at the personal and family levels. Examples of personal changes were: greater self-confidence (55%); greater social contacts (37.5%); greater freedom of movement (31.5%); increased leadership skills (31%); and heightened awareness of socio-political problems in society (29.5%). The most common changes at the family level for 66 women (39.8%) were that families shared responsibilities in looking after the children while the elected women were fulfilling their official duties, consulted these women more on important family matters, and allowed them greater decision-making power in family affairs. According to 34.3% of Dalit women elected representatives, their political participation had generated some change among women, mainly that some women were able to speak up in their households and *gram sabhas* more freely. Other Dalit women also increasingly recognised their own capacities for leadership and expressed greater willingness to contest panchayat elections. Only 21.1% of Dalit women elected representatives mentioned some change, mainly in terms of greater ability to interact with dominant castes as a result of their public office, greater freedom to walk along dominant caste streets in the villages, and being able to wear shoes while on official panchayat duties. In the case of Kamachi, twice-elected village panchayat President from Coimbatore district in Tamil Nadu, she faced constant opposition from dominant castes during her tenure as President. Then, after her defeat in the 2006 election, her chair was removed from the office and the dominant castes performed a *pooja* (religious ritual) to 'purify' the office. Only after this did the next dominant caste President come and *sat* on the president's chair in the office<sup>8</sup>.

### Training for the Panchayat Presidents

The Capacity building exercise for Gram Panchayat presidents has to go a long way to achieve its results. Lot of information has been exchanged. Their potentiality has been drawn out. 60% of attendance has been ensured despite the instruction from the government. Material supplied in their training is properly used by the participants. Women are more enthusiastic than men. So they need a supporting base as government is not favourable to them.<sup>9</sup>

### Findings from the study area

1. Dalit Women Panchayat Presidents are not allowed to take their own decision in the grassroot governance.
2. There is male dominance at all levels of the administration of the village Panchayat.
3. Most of the Dalit Women Panchayat Presidents are for the name sake leaders and they cannot act on their own accord.
4. Caste discrimination is a hindrance for the Dalit women Panchayat Presidents to carry out their duties effectively.
5. Most of these Dalit Women Presidents suffer for want of self confidence.
6. The elected Dalit Women Presidents do not fight for their rights in the society.
7. The Dalit Women Presidents face innumerable problems from various quarters.
8. Many issues of the Dalit Women Panchayat Presidents are not attended to and brought to light.

### Suggestions

1. Caste discrimination should be eradicated in the society, for the progress of a nation.
2. All the people should be equally treated without any bias irrespective of caste, religion and gender.
3. Caste violation in the Village Panchayat should be prohibited.
4. Potentiality of the Dalit women Panchayat Presidents has to be utilised properly
5. The innovative ways must be explored from the elected Dalit women
6. Panchayat Presidents to cultivate their development.

7. Efforts must be taken to create a supportive environment for the Dalit women's political participation.
8. Reservation Policy should be promoted for the Dalits to stand for the election.
9. Special trainings for the Dalits women elected representatives should be conducted for the smooth performance of the grassroot governance<sup>10</sup>.

### Conclusion

Thus it is concluded that the status of Dalit women in the village Panchayat has to develop in all the ways and means. The Dalit women Panchayat Presidents still face a lot of problems. Many policies have been framed by the government for the rights of the Dalit. But in reality, there is no social justice. Many research articles, journals and books emphasize this concept that Dalit women empowerment is needed and their ability and intelligence can be utilised for the wellbeing and progress of a nation. Dalit Women Panchayat Presidents are ill-treated in the society. In most of the villages the Dalit Women Panchayat Presidents act according to the wish of their husband in implementing the schemes in the grassroot administration. Numerous cases of injustice towards the Dalite women remain unnoticed. So all the educated youths and Social servants should take effective steps to end this evil practice prevailing in the society even today

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