

Research Article

Political Inclusion of Dalit Women in Panchayats: A Study from Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu

A. Bhagath Singh

Ph.D Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Pondicherry University, R.V. Nagar, Kalapet, Pondicherry-605014, India.
Email id: bhagath.red@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Although the constitutional guarantee of equal political rights is made available to every individual, half of the Indian population is not represented in the political arena in the name of caste, religion and gender. Until now, advantages of development and rights have not reached all sections of the society. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act passed in 1992 brought new reforms in the Panchayat Raj Institution. It had a relatively positive impact on the participation and empowerment of SC/ST and women in rural India. Although inclusive provisions are given to the marginalised communities, it has not succeeded fully, and still the active participation of Dalits unduly remain unexpiated. The dominant communities in our society oppose the opportunities and provisions given to them. This is even worse in the case of Dalit women who are even lower of the lower stratum and face double the oppression on the basis of caste and patriarchal domination.

In this background, three case-studies from different villages are discussed to illustrate the actual reality in the working of the panchayats led by Dalit women and the problems faced by them and their achievement. The data are generated through qualitative methods.

They remained marginalised politically, socially and economically and faced various types of oppression. However, some social factors like education, young age, family economic situation and community background resulted in the better participation of the representatives.

Keywords: Decentralisation, Dalit Rights, Panchayat Raj, Village Politics, Exclusion, Institutional Violence

INTRODUCTION

The Indian democracy proclaims equal opportunity to every citizen in availing democratic rights, including political participation. It provisions a milieu in sharing of power to all sections of the society from the higher level to lower political organisations like the Parliament, State Legislative Assembly and the local government institutions to make democracy a reality. However, the real situation has deviations from the statute realms. More than six decades have passed after the country declared itself a republic state; still the constitutional

proclaim of equal right to every individual is a questionable issue. In the Indian scenario, social exclusion is not a new phenomenon; it prevails in the name of age-old feudal caste and patriarchy. Schedule castes (SCs), schedule tribes (STs) and women have been always considered marginalised from the society and deprived of their rights. Women being half of the total number of voters in the country, their involvement, participation and representation in public affairs and offices are considerably low. The constitutional guarantee of equal political rights has been achieved only

partially due to the socioeconomic set-up of Indian polity. It is never possible to construct a true democracy, leaving behind half the population away from taking part in the political decision-making process. The assurance of women involvement, representation and participation in public affairs through the offices of political power is an important step towards gender equality, development and empowerment.

The inclusive measure of the Indian government to empower women through providing 33% reservation in the state and central legislation has been a long-term key debate in the Indian political and social arena. It was passed in the Raj Sabha and is yet to be passed in the Lok Sabha, which is still pending. The 33% of reservation for women in state and central positions are rifted by some of the political parties; few oppose it due to their stand against women empowerment, and on the other side some oppose it in the notion to develop this provision to extend it with internal allotment for backwards and Dalits. Although for a few political parties, the intention of internal allotment is to stop the reservation from being amended for the time being on their stance on patriarchy.

In this awful situation, the fortunate thing is the decision of the UPA-II government to increase the seats for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) by allotting 50% reservations for women. It is a welcoming effort made by the central government, but has a criticism as, “to deviate from the debate of failure in 33% women reservation”. Whatever may be the criticism and intention, the PRIs are to be allotted 50% seats for women. In this background, it is necessary to review the status of political inclusion of women in the PRIs.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act passed in 1992 brought new reforms in the PRI, thereby endeavouring a reform and contributing as a major step towards democratic decentralisation. This act provided an opportunity for the marginalised groups like SC, ST and women to participate in panchayat activities at all levels from Council Member to President. In all the three tiers, one-third of the positions are reserved for women, SCs and STs according to their population (Singh 1994). The

impact had a positive effect on the participation and empowerment of SC/ST and women in rural India (Baviskar 2008). Although inclusive provisions have been given to the marginalised communities, the active participation of Dalits and women are being questioned. The traditional dominant communities in our society oppose the opportunities and provisions given by the judicial system (Inbanathan 2001). Dalits and women are at the lower stratum of the Indian society, and suffer oppression economically, socially and politically. In specific, Dalit women are the lowest of the lower stratum who face double the oppression.

Implied with these conditions, caste prejudices have emerged as the major stumbling block in the way of the functioning of Dalit women representatives of panchayats. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar rightly characterised the Indian village as “sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism” (Mathew and Ramesh 1996). More than half a century has passed since he expressed these views in the context of extending panchayati raj to Indian villages. Still there is hardly any reform in the system, as in terms of exchange of political empowerment in the hands of women.

Tamil Nadu is one among the backward states in the implementation of the 73rd Amendment in South India. Meanwhile, the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act, 1994, provided an opportunity for women to participate in local democratic politics by mandating the state by provisioning one-third reservation for women in PRIs. The provisioning of this has increased the participation of women in PRIs and has increased to 34% in Tamil Nadu. These measures have brought political and social exposure to women from the Dalits and the backward sections (Tiwari 2009).

METHODOLOGY

This paper deals with the reviewing of working situation of Dalit women in PRIs; three case-studies are illustrated from the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu state and are from different cultural milieu. The data are generated through qualitative methods like interviews and observation.

CASE-STUDY 1

Thiruvenkatanathapuram Panchayat

The Thiruvenkatanathapuram Panchayat is situated in Palayamkottai block; it is an interior village with good water resources and fertile lands. Two mini-buses connect the panchayat with the district headquarters. The total population of this panchayat is 3135 with 1520 males and 1615 females. This is relatively a small-sized and multi-caste village panchayat with 1698 voters. Significantly, the concentration of SC population is very high in this panchayat.

The community-wise distribution with accordance with the number of households is: *Pallar* (580), *Konars* (175), *Pillaimar* (100), *Brahmin* (50), *Paraiyars* (45), *Maravars* (15) and others (27). The Pallars are the major community in this village, constituting about 58.47%, and the remaining 41.53% are the combination of *Pillaimar*, *Konar*, *Paraiyar*, *Brahmins*, *Maravar*, *Vannar* and others.

This village is named after the Thiruvenkatanathan Temple situated within the village, and is also known as southern Tirupathi; it is one among the nine important temples of *vaishnavaites* (*nava Tirupathi*) in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. The panchayat has four hamlets comprising the Pallars with the dominant population in all these hamlets. More than fifty Maravar families have migrated from this village after two consecutive murders and clashes within their community.

Before the 1960s, the whole panchayat was administered by Brahmins and Maravars. Most of the land holdings under this jurisdiction were acquired by Brahmins, Maravars and Pillai communities. *Jajmani* relations were commonly prevalent in these villages. The landless low-caste labours had to work in their patron's land and a major portion of the produce was for the landlord, while the remains were divided among the workers. Locally it is called as "Kattu Kuththagai sevagam". Until very recent years, severe caste discrimination prevailed in the village. Except for the Brahmins and Pillais, others were not allowed inside the Venkatanathan Temple, and Dalits were not even allowed in the *mada* streets of the temple where the Brahmins domiciled. After a long period of

struggle, some reforms have taken place in the past two decades; and now the land ownership is also with the Pallar community. The Brahmin community lives around the *mada* street of the temple, but nowadays most of the houses remain closed or are occupied by older people since most of them have migrated and have settled in towns for education and occupational facilities, thereby isolating themselves from the daily village affairs and other communities.

Panchayat

The panchayat incumbent Tamilselvi is consecutively holding the post of Panchayat President from the introduction of PRIs in 1996. This panchayat was declared reserved for women during the tenure 1996-2006, and during the last 2006 panchayat elections, it was again declared as a general constituency. Out of the five contestants, she was the only women candidate to compete with the males. Among them one was from the *Konar* community and the remaining were Dalits. Even then, she won the elections and became the incumbent by a margin of 300 votes.

She was elected three times consecutively as the Panchayat President. She managed to win it not only when the constituency was reserved but also when declared a general quota. This shows the ample support gained from people, and also the commitment she rendered to public works.

This panchayat has a unique condition as only SC people represent the whole panchayat council because they are evenly distributed in all the hamlets. Thereby, all panchayat works are carried on smoothly without any discrimination of caste domination in the administration. This had a negative view on non-Dalit people; while interacting with the Konar (OBC) community, they expressed that the panchayat has done better service for the village, but maximum of the panchayat proceedings are hidden within the Pallar community. Even the work order contracts are always offered to the Pallars. While interacting with an old Brahmin community person, he was happy and envied many views regarding the temple, but expressed discomfort in attitude during the conversation towards happenings in the panchayat

affairs. Another Brahmin old man viewed that the Dalits were the dominant caste in the village; hence, all the authoritative powers are vested with them. They even become board members for the *Vaishnavaita* temple, which was earlier represented only by Brahmins and dominant castes.

Profile of the President and her Achievement

The Panchayat President P. Tamilselvi is 45 years of age and is an undergraduate in science. Her husband is a Clerk at the Union Panchayat office. Being educated, the President is well-versed in handling the administration and also overtakes patriarchal values and dominations. She knows the importance of the 73rd Amendment Act and the Tamil Nadu PRI and advocates it in an effective manner. She takes care of all panchayat affair works including chairing the panchayat meeting without getting any assistance from anyone else. Moreover, she is the President for the forum – Dalit President’s confrontation of Tirunelveli district – who with the help of NGO organise many training programmes for the Dalit Presidents.

The President is a member of DMK and maintains good relationship with the M.P, M.L.A, Union Panchayat and District Panchayat Presidents. Therefore, she can influence higher authorities to allocate more funds for her panchayat. Even though she is a ruling party (2006-2011) cadre, she never compromises with her villager’s rights. She has actively organised two protest movements with the villagers in large participation. While discussing with E. Ganapathy, who contested against her, he opined positive views about the President that she is educated and well-talented to govern the panchayat and she meets the people regularly. A person from the Arunthathiyars community said that, “she is interested in the empowerment of Dalits and is working for their upliftment”.

Under her Chair, the panchayat has built a separate water tank for every hamlet; hence, there is no water problem in this panchayat. Under the I.A.Y (Indra Awas Yojana) housing scheme, she has allotted maximum houses to the Arunthathiyar community. For the Panchayat School, new concrete buildings were built replacing old thatched

huts. Her aim is at developing tourism in the village, which may increase the revenue of the panchayat. She expressed that, “even with much support from the people, she is not able to organize the *Gram Sabha* meeting with mass participation. The financial status of the panchayat is very low and hence it cannot fulfil the basic needs of the people, making the public frustrated to attend the *Gram Sabha* without fruitful results”.

Being a Dalit women President, she works and overcomes her limitations and deals with the higher officials, particularly men in a subtle manner. The objectives of empowering the Dalits and women are not so far if the social environment permits.

CASE-STUDY 2

Thalaiyuthu Panchayat

The Thalaiyuthu Panchayat is located near the Nellai-Madurai highway. It is one of the highly populated panchayats in this district. The total population of the panchayat is 21,685. The sex ratio of this panchayat is combined with the Tirunelveli district; thus the female population is more than male populations. The enumerated population is 11,085 females and 10,680 males. In Thalaiyuthu panchayat, Muslims constitute the majority (1000 households), followed by Nadars (400 households), Konars (50 households) and Pallars (88 households). The Arunthathiyar community though in good number (250 households) are dominated by the upper-caste groups.

The majority of the land holdings are in the hands of Maravars and Muslims; Pallars and Nadars own few. The Maravars and the Muslims are economically and politically dominant in this panchayat. Thalaiyuthu is the place near Shankar Nagar town panchayat; hence, a semi-town structure can be seen here. A majority of the people depend on agriculture for their subsistence. Some people work in the stone quarries and few Maravars and Muslims have their own workshops related to cement production, as this area is situated next to a cement-manufacturing company. This panchayat has high-income sources from the factory, small-scale industries and stone quarries. Since it has good income source,

there is lot of competition in taking over the leadership position of this panchayat.

Panchayat Election

It is one of the biggest panchayats in this district, with eight hamlets and twelve wards. From the introduction of the PRIs in 1996 in Tamil Nadu, the Pallars and Muslims represented this panchayat consecutively in the 1996 and 2001 elections. In the recent 2006 election, the Presidential tenure was allocated to a SC woman. Two women contested in the election, Kalliammal from the Pallar community and Krishnaveni from the Arunthathiyar community. The caste-wise mobilisations of the voters took place vigorously; it was an open contest between the two candidates. The dominant caste individuals backed up Kalliammal, supporting her economically. Krishnaveni faced harassment from the dominant communities even for filing her nomination for the post of Panchayat President. However, she managed to contest and win the election with a marginal difference of just eighteen votes; for this victory she has struggled and suffered severely facing a lot of hurdles and hindrances from her opponents.

Panchayat President

Krishnaveni, the President of Thalaiyuthu Panchayat is 32 years and is educated till the ninth standard. Her husband works as a lineman in the Tamil Nadu Electricity Department and they have two daughters studying in schools. She is a dynamic woman involved in all kind of panchayat activities, working everyday during the office hours and managing the panchayat proceedings and accounts independently. She has good support from her husband; he never interferes in the panchayat activities, but at the same time, he has been a moral support for her to take over the panchayat activities effectively without any family stress. Moreover, she also receives good support from her own community and from the other community women.

Krishnaveni is very conscious in maintaining transparency in administration works, especially to avoid the controversies in allotment of construction contracts and in selecting beneficiaries for various developmental schemes. The NREGA is a mega-budget scheme, which

was implemented successfully in this village without any bribe or forgery or commission in distributing job cards and salary. Krishnaveni has a very good rapport with the taluk and district administrators; she regularly visits these officers for panchayat proceedings. Even the District Collector knows her in person as she often visits the district head office a number of times to log complaints and petitions; and because of her commitment to the post, she is tremendously facing ruthless problems within her own panchayat administration. Although the Vice-President Meerankani and other council members do not cooperate with her in the administration, because of her active involvement in public service, she has received the “Sarojini Naidu” Award from the President of India for being the “Best Women Panchayat President from Tamil Nadu” and another award from the district administration for being the best President in Tirunelveli district.

The Vice-President of this panchayat belongs to the Muslim community. There are twelve ward members in this panchayat, four from *Pallars*, three from *Nadars*, two from *Konars* and three from the Muslim community. As the incumbent of Presidential post, she faces many troubles from the Vice-President and other ward members. They do not cooperate with her; the Vice-President and other dominant community members in the panchayat expect her to remain at home so that they can administer the panchayat. Being a woman and coming from the Arunthathiyar community, which is the lower most category in the locality, she has risen up to the power as Panchayat President in spite of domination from the upper-caste representatives who are always trying to capture the administration.

She is reluctant in accepting their interests and administering the panchayat as the incumbent. During the first 3 months of her tenure, the Vice-President and the ward members did not sign the resolution, the minutes and refused to sign the cheques too. Hence, she was unable to withdraw money for the day-to-day activities of the panchayat. Works, salaries of panchayat staff and other expenses were also delayed. She constantly registered complaints to the B.D.O. and the District Collector, but every time she was advised to

compromise and adjust with the co-council members. She never supports or encourages ward members who seek personal benefits from the panchayat like work order contracts, IAY scheme house, approval of false document, etc. However, non-cooperation of co-council members persisted for more than 2 years; hence, she lodged many complaints to the panchayat inspector, and sometimes she even met him directly to explain the barriers in performing her roles honestly. On the basis of her complaints and requests, the District panchayat inspector gave her an individual power to sign the check for 6 months to perform the panchayat activities regularly.

In July 2008, the District Collector, under “Neglected to perform their duty as elected representatives”, suspended the Vice-President and all the other members for 6 months from their post. Still from the beginning of the year 2008, the members boycotted the meetings and sessions and accused the President for misusing the panchayat resources and fund. Moreover, they boycotted the special session of council meeting conducted by the B.D.O. They also filed a written complaint against the President to The Additional Panchayat Director and an Auditor was set to crosscheck the accounts of the panchayat who then stated, the accounts were clear and no discrepancy was found. At the same time, the Vice-President and other council members in an interview to a local television channel stated that corruption took place in the panchayat and that the President was involved in it. Later, the District collector suspended all council members including the Vice-President for 6 months for propagating wrong details to the public through their interviews.

During the period of field study, the council members and Vice-President were reabsorbed after their suspension from the office; the Taluk administrators advised them to cooperate with the President, yet they still created hindrances to the smooth functioning of the Dalit woman’s President-ship. Mostly, the council meeting sessions were stopped half the way; every time in the midst of a session, the council members deliberately walked out. The Vice-President never entered the panchayat office while she was at the office.

They also forced the public not to participate in the Gram Sabha meetings. No matter what the situation is, she is successful in her role as Panchayat President because of her commitment to village development. She said that initially the Pallars cursed her lot, not rendering any support because they felt their political representation was overtaken by her (as Arunthathiyar), but now seeing her commitment to the post, they too encourage her with their support.

CASE-STUDY 3

Appaneri Panchayat

The Appaneri panchayat is placed in the Kuruvikulam union block, one of the familiar blocks known for its atrocities against Dalit representatives. Two Dalit representatives Chervaran and Jakkaiyan of MaruthaKinaru and Nakkalamuthanpatti were brutally murdered by the dominant caste people during December 2008 to February 2009. It is a small village panchayat, located 5 km away from the Kovilpatti town inhabiting various caste communities like *Nayakkar* (310 households), *Maravar* (230 households), *Konar* (240 households), *Pallar* (190 households), *Arunthathiyar* (23 households) and others constitute 12 households. The backward caste category is the dominant caste and among them the *Nayakkars* are the landholders and are majority in number. The *Pallars* outnumbered the other two groups among the Dalit category and were recessive to the dominant caste in the panchayat.

The main occupation of the village is agriculture and most of the agricultural land holdings are held by the dominant caste. Dalits worked in their field as wage labourers to earn their daily bread. Apart from agriculture, the village had a match box industry where most of the women are engaged in preparation of match sticks. Under this panchayat, there are three villages, namely the *puthiya appaneri*, the *palaya appaneri* and the *puthur lakshmiyapuram*.

In the last by-election, the Appaneri panchayat was declared as a reserved panchayat, subsequently a middle-aged widow woman from the Arunthathiyar community was elected as the Panchayat President. Chellama, the President of the panchayat, is a destitute widow, illiterate

and is from a poor economic background. She works in a private hospital as a maid servant in Kovilpatti. Spending most of her time in the hospital, she was unable to involve herself in the day-to-day panchayat activities. The following are the words as depicted by the local people about her President-ship, “she has nothing to do with the panchayat affairs; she doesn’t even come regularly to the panchayat office”.

Despite her role as the Panchayat President, it was more crucial and significant and rather interesting to know the way she was forcefully pulled into this dice of political arena and the problem she is now facing in the office. On one hand, it is the traditional caste domination that suffers the shift in the hegemony of the politics, and on the other hand the distress and hatred of other Dalit groups for being incompetent to win over the panchayat election. This case represents the most arduous condition prevailing in most of the reserved panchayats in rural India. Initially when interviewing Chellama, she said that she is involved in panchayat activities fully and doing all works with full cooperation from the co-members. Only after a prolonged discussion (rapport), she revealed most of the facts regarding the intrusion of the dominant caste elites in gambling her in the political arena.

Panchayat Election

Initially, she was not interested in the panchayat elections, but the dominating attitude of the upper caste pressurised her to participate in the political game. It is normally a usual phenomenon that whenever a constituency is announced as a reservation category, immediately inter-caste bargains take place *vis-a-vis* between non-Dalit and Dalit groups. The maximum possibility of this interaction has certain motives in it. On one hand, Dalit groups try to utilise the judicial opportunity for their community development, while on the other hand; the dominant communities try to keep a hold of overlooking the political power under their control. The Dalits can be persistent enjoying the political power only when the social environment permits to fulfil their motives; otherwise the dominant caste retains the power.

At any level, the panchayat system is considered not only as the political power but also as a factor of economic favours. When the election was announced, the caste factions that existed in the village became narrower. The rivalries between the inter-castes and intra-castes began to express their faces. The *Pallar* of the Dalit group with a majority of population participated in the election with two contestants and at the same time a women candidate from Arunthathiyar community named Chellama contested the election with the backup support from the Nayakar community. Being the dominant caste group in the village with good economic and numerical strength, the Nayakars were strong enough to manipulate the panchayat elections. Chellama conquered the majority of support of the backward caste category votes, while the other group due to the intra-competition within them could not deny the victory of Chellama. Although the candidate from Arunthathiyar community had only twenty households in this settlement, she still won the President post with a vast margin by support of backward communities.

During the hype of election she faced threats from both the parties. The Pallars criticised and advised her not to stand as a proxy for dominant communities. Every time she was on for election campaign among the villagers, she earned lot of curse from them. In the due course, she even decided to withdraw from the election, but her patron threatened her not to do so. She was forced by the dominant caste elites to be their proxy. Although the elections were in favour of Chellama, there were new forms of problems waiting to encircle her. The patron who made her participate in the election planned to become the Vice-President by contesting for Member of Council, but unfortunately, he was defeated by his rival person from his own community. Hence, he was not in a position to involve in the panchayat affairs. The newly elected Vice-President Ravishankar, ill-treated Chellama from the inception of swearing in event of the panchayat. On the first day, she was denied and not allowed to sit in the President chair. He continued to express his agitating tendency by not cooperating with her and by not allowing her to work independently. Among the six ward members, four stood in favour of

the Vice-President, and even the ward member from the Pallar Dalit category also stood against her because they thought that she has taken away the provision which was for them. The Vice-President allegedly stood against her at every point. Sometimes he refused to sign in the minutes and cheque books. In one such incident, he refused to sign on the resolution in council meeting to change the OHT motors that facilitate drinking water in the panchayat. This continued attitude of negligence and non-cooperation of the Vice-President made her appeal to the Block Development Officer and got recommendation to implement that work. Assuming that she had overpowered him, the Vice-President lodged a fake complaint to the district collector that there is a misuse of power and fund in changing the OHT pump in their panchayat. The District Collector as a Panchayat inspector investigated the situation in the panchayat, concluded and ordered that the Vice-President Mr. Ravishankar had not been cooperating with the President and violated his duty to sign in cheque and other documents of the panchayat. On this basis, the power to sign the requirements was directly authorised to the B.D.O. as per 204(3) of Panchayat Act.

As routine, she carries out the duty in the hospital every week day and in the weekends she engages herself in the Panchayat office works. The works are carried out by the panchayat clerk as per the guidelines of the B.D.O., Mr. Ayyalusamy and he also assists her to furnish the panchayat affairs and to read down the documents and communications received by the panchayat office.

On the way to Panchayat office, she has to pass through the Pallar village. Until now she had to shut her ears to escape from the abuses of the villagers while crossing the village. Apart from continuous mistreatment from the villagers, she has to face continues troubles from the Vice-President too. Soon after the release of order over the investigation of OHT pump allegation by the collector, the Vice-President accused her of misusing public property. With well-established rapport and influence with the Inspector of a local police station, he tried to threaten her along with the panchayat office clerk by keeping them in the police station from morning until late night 10 pm and tried to convince her to cooperate with him.

Finally, the Vice-President filed a petition against the President, panchayat clerk and also on the District Collector for improper utilisation of panchayat resources and for helping the culprits by supporting their fault. Intolerable of the trouble given by the Vice-President, she decided to resign her post, but government officials advised and encouraged her to continue without resignation and face the case. Chellama did not have enough financial support to face the case in the court; hence she asked the villagers and other well wishers to help her. Finally, her own patron who made her contest in the election helped her to run the case, and the court judgment was also in her favour. This case was dismissed by the court for not having basic evidence for the acquisition. After that she and even her son constantly received life threats from the Vice-President's brother who got bail from remand for a murder case. Hence, frightened of these dominant caste individuals, Chellama sent her son out of their village to stay in her kin's place.

CONCLUSIONS

The idea of local democracy is of course premised on the belief that the quality of political participation, and therefore of public life, will be substantively transformed only when people collectively debate and deliberate upon issues of common concern, and possess the decision-making powers to give effect to their shared concerns. However, there is much gap between the ideal and ground reality. Where on the one hand the Panchayati Raj Act provides *de jure* powers to the office of the Presidents and on the other, *de facto*, they remain bereft of these powers (Pal 2004).

The percentage of Dalit and women representation in the panchayats has increased in Tamil Nadu during the past one decade. The above case-studies of the panchayat Presidents are just examples of it and show the elected representatives exercising commendable work, with their positions and also faced cruel oppression too. By analysing these case-studies, we can arrive at certain important inferences. Variables like literacy, economy, reservations, support from co-representatives and support from the community play a vital role in their indomitable performance in the administration (Mangubhai *et al.* 2009). However, at the same time,

they also face many problems. The reason may vary from village to village, including non-cooperation of the co representatives, illiteracy, caste, patriarchal dominance, etc. (Baviskar and Mathew 2009).

Education plays a vital role in the performance of the Presidents. It makes a lot of difference in empowering themselves with administrative strategies. Those Presidents who have good education have the ability to handle the administration and upper-caste domination. Tamilselvi and Krishnaveni, being well-educated, not only govern their administrative works skilfully but also perform their best for the development of their village. Their education status has fetched them a special importance in their village and it is the main reason for their success in their works.

Economic independency of these Presidents have made them perform well because they are free from economic constrains. In these three cases, Tamilselvi and Krishnaveni are from a good economic background, so they need not have to work for their personal needs and at the same time, they are independent from the upper-caste elites. In case of the Appaneri panchayat, the situation is very worse because of the President's economic dependency. President Chellama is economically dependent on the dominant caste individuals and she does not have enough voice to speak against the patrons. The upper-caste elites make use of her as an object for their game of power politics. Being a member of a downtrodden caste group of the society, she cannot neglect the act of the elites. Without empowering Dalit masses particularly in economic terms, one cannot empower Dalit leaders in the real sense because it is felt that only those Dalits who are economically well-off can really function as leaders without any fear or compulsion. The important point to establish here is that mere reservation alone cannot fulfil the need to achieve an equitable society. The reservation has provided only a political position, while the socioeconomic conditions of the candidates play a vital role in the socio-political empowerment of the marginalised communities.

The community support to the President has a significant role in ensuring the political will of the President. For

strong political leadership, the representatives need community support. In Thiruvengatanatha puram, Tamilselvi has enough support from her own community; Dalits were dominant in population and their assertiveness stood as the backbone to overcome obstacles. In case of Thalaisyuthu and Appaneri, the situation is much different. Both belong to the Arunthathiyar community, a minority Dalit group. They are not only isolated by the non-Dalit groups but also the other Dalit communities.

In Thiruvengatanathapuram and Thalaisyuthu villages, Dalits were able to exercise their duty and political positions. Nevertheless, in Thalaisyuthu, Krishnaveni is still troubled due to non-cooperation from the dominant caste council members due to age-old feudal values like caste and patriarchy. Although the social settings is not in her favour, still she struggles against this domination with her individual effort and through enough support from the district administration. Here, the roles played by officials like the panchayat inspector and taluk officers are vibrant. They have rendered enough support to her, to fight against the obstacles. In addition, at the same time, they have recognised her efforts by giving her an opportunity to receive national level awards. However, in case of Appaneri, the Dalit women representative was not able to perform her basic duty because of domination of the upper-caste Vice-President and clerk.

From these case-studies, it can found that wherever the Dalit representatives were oppressed and obstructed by the dominant castes, they came out openly to resist, and to struggle against the oppressors. Importantly, it was also found that whenever the women panchayat leaders were literate, they were more assertive than the others (Pal 2004). Henceforth, the two Presidents (Thiruvengatanathapuram and Thalaisyuthu) had the competent ability to administer the village panchayat where the social milieu favoured them. These were the role model villages vibrant in providing proper livelihood, providing basic infrastructure facilities and carrying out rural development programmes with people's participation. The third case represents how the village panchayat is lacking behind, by restricting the

participation of marginalised communities in leadership. These case-studies are not the universal nature of village panchayats in India, but they represent the impact of the decentralisation process in ensuring the empowerment of the marginalised communities.

From the long history of oppression of Dalit women in our society, it would take some time for these sections to acquire and exercise real power given by the constitutional amendment fully. The age-old traditional social institutions are very strong and deep-rooted based on the caste system in the semi-feudal Indian society. If the state does not take enough efforts to break these feudal economic forces and without a change in the rural social structure, the process of democratic decentralisation will not be effective to that of the desired level.

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