

## Social Inclusion and Changing Representation of Rural Women in Panchayati Raj of Tamil Nadu

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### Abstract

A focal point of the current discourse on democracy is the agenda of Gender Quota in political representation, while a change in power structure and gender relation is central to the strategy of transformative politics. In this respect, Gender Inclusive legislation in different States was ratified following the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Indian Constitution. Concomitantly, the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994 has legalized reservation and rotation of seats and offices for women in Panchayati Raj in this State.

A decade of political experiment has been made with one third reservation for women in Panchayat administration in Tamil Nadu. Hence, this article is an attempt to evaluate the role of social inclusion through constitutional and legislative stipulation for Gender Quota with reservation and rotation of positions for women representation in the three tiers structure of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu.

The specific objectives of this article are:

- To inquire in to the changes in the extent of women representation in positions of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu.
- To analyse the district wise proportion of women representation in the three tiers of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu.

This paper is based on the data gathered from Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994 and Tamil Nadu Panchayati Raj 1996 and 2006 Election results. Based on the empirical evidences, this article propounds that inclusive legislation has provided legalized reservation and rotation of positions through which women not only have found opportunity for participation in Panchayati Raj but also are instrumental in enhancing the proportion of women representation in Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu.

**Keywords:** Panchayati Raj; Social inclusion; Rural women; Gender Quota; Reservation of seats; Changing gender representation; Gender inequality; Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act.

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### Introduction

Gender inequality and gender discrimination are so profoundly deep rooted in Indian social structure that women in this country are inevitably succumbed to denial of access to opportunities and participation in the public sphere. The ideology of social division of labour forces women to be confined to the private sphere of life and restricts women's

existence within domestic roles as wives and mothers. The male hegemony prevails in the decision-making processes both in private as well as public domains.

Conversely, the idea of democracy is to ensure 'a government of the whole body by the whole people, equally represented'. [1] A focal point of the current discourse on democracy is the concept of political representation. The "politics of ideas" have come to be "challenged by the alternative politics of presence". [2] Accordingly, there is a growing demand for increasing presence of women in political decision-making with the feminist cry 'political is personal'. It is argued that women need to be 'empowered' in the realm of political decision making so as to facilitate their 'real' empowerment.

A change in power structure and gender

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relation is central to the strategy of transformative politics. Even the country Report proposed by the Government of India for the Beijing Conference admits that "Women's empowerment' and participation is a political question linked to changes in power relations.[3] Therefore, the Central and State Governments of India have endeavoured to ameliorate the socio, economic and political conditions of women through various legislations, policies and programmes. One such institution to bring about comprehensive rural development with a specific focus on women representation and empowerment is the Panchayati Raj. In this scenario, this paper endeavours to portray a gender analysis of representation at three tiers of Panchayati Raj in 29 districts of Tamil Nadu with a view to explicate the extent and proportion of women representation in Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu.

#### *Women representation in Panchayati Raj in India*

In India, women constitute 50 per cent of the rural population. This gives them the legitimacy to play an important role at the grassroots level. Indeed, the equality guaranteed by the Constitution of India, demands active political participation by women which is integral to the whole issue of the progress of women.

In this respect, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Indian Constitutions effected in 1992 brought about a number of fundamental changes in the Panchayati Raj system. These legal provisions, amongst the other things, have stipulated one third reservations of seats for women. Such promulgations have certainly have implication in the Indian context where women were subjected to discrimination and injustice over centuries.

Article 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> of the Constitution relates to reservation and rotation of seats for women in rural bodies. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act mainly aims at decentralizing the power and also removing the gender imbalances and bias in the institutions of local self government. He

justifies the rationale to provide reservations for following reasons, what is the actual intention of our policy makers. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment actually aims for shared perception of justice, deprivation and oppression. Shared experience of marginalization vis-a-vis power structure, collective empowerment through representation and democratic process will give them voice, feeling of solidarity and democratic polities. Affirmative action to build a critical mass of local leadership of such group that engendered active participants in the strategic decision-making.[4]

The main position of 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment involves the participation of women as voter, women as members of political parties, women as candidates, women elected members of PRI's taking part in decision making, planning implementation and evaluation.[5] The main intention of the policy makers behind this reservation is two-fold; one is the democratic justice and second is human resource utilization.[6] Similarly, by providing reservation, our policy makers' intention is not only to improve the number of elected leaders but also to improve their economic independence, access to resources as well as to education so by examining their socio-economic situation.[7]

#### *Significance of women representation in Panchayati Raj*

Participation and representation of women in Panchayati Raj is of great significance in terms of the following:

- To initiate, formulate and implement policies and programmes which will benefit women. It has been observed that in most of the Panchayats the decision-making has been in favour of men, and the needs of rural women go unnoticed.
- To bring in a feminine perspective to the process of planning, policy formulation and execution of rural development programmes. It is expected that more women would change the focus of rural

administration towards important facets of life like health, nutrition, children's welfare, family care, drinking water etc.

- Election of more women to Village Panchayats would play a major role to empower women. Empowering women refers to strengthening their innate capacities through acquiring knowledge, power and experience. Power here means not power to dominate but power to reduce helplessness and dependency. Thus women's access to power structures would help them in overcoming inequality and subordination they have been experiencing for ages.
- The entry of more and more women into the realm of grassroots politics suggest that their increased number will offer them equally increased opportunity to influence the local decision-making. Once a group reaches a certain 'critical mass' then its position, power and influence is likely to increase. Thus, increase in number will help women in becoming an effective pressure group through the instrument of collective bargaining.
- Women are the active agents of socio-economic transformation in rural areas. They have potentials for effective networking and pooling of resources. They can understand better their problems, identify them, give priorities and preferences, and are aware of strategies towards its solution. Hence their active participation will not only enhance the status of women in the village, but will also help in development of the village.
- The elected women can act as an intermediary between the government and the women in rural areas. Their accessibility to other women in the village, their contacts at the grassroots, and their awareness of the needs and interests of women will improve the condition of women in rural areas.
- Larger participation will provide women

an exposure to outside world. Their participation would improve their status in society as well as at home. It would also give them an opportunity to work in groups on projects of common interest and associate with on going programmes.

- It will provide a platform for women to gain experience, overcome their fear and build in confidence; break the shackles of patriarchy and orthodoxy. It will create an access to women at state and national level politics.

In this respect, Anne Philip has presented the arguments favouring the increased political representation of women into four broad categories:

- Successful women politicians act as kind of role models for the others
- States increasing the proportion of the women elected would ensure the principles of justice between the sexes; and
- Ensuring the fulfilling of certain interests of women, which may otherwise be neglected; and
- Enhancing the quality of political life [2]

Thus, there has to be gender mainstreaming with a bottom up approach rather than one where women are mere observers and total dependents in Panchayati Raj.

## Methodology

Political empowerment of women has been envisaged by the implementation of reservation for women representation in Panchayati Raj. A decade of political experiment has been made with one third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu.

Therefore, the overall objective of this paper is to appraise the role of the constitutional and legislative provision for reservation and rotation of positions for women in bringing about changing gender representation in

### Panchayati Raj of Tamil Nadu.

The specific objectives are:

- To inquire in to the changes in the extent of women representation in Panchayati Raj positions in Tamil Nadu.
- To analyse the district wise proportion of women representation in the three tiers of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu.

This paper is based on the data gathered from Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994 and Tamil Nadu Panchayati Raj 1996 and 2006 Election results.

#### *Women representation in Panchayati Raj of Tamil Nadu*

Government of Tamil Nadu enacted the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act in 1994. It came into force with effect from 22.04.1994. This act has introduced reservation of one third of total number of seats and offices for women with provision for rotation. The sections 11, 20, 32 and 57 of the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act provide for reservation and rotation of seats for SC/ST and women in rural local bodies. These are supplemented by Tamil Nadu Panchayati Raj (reservation of seats and rotation of reserved seats) Rules, 1995.

This legislative initiative has provided entry to rural women into Local Self government in Tamil Nadu.

The data presented in Table 1 brings to light the statutory provisions made for reservation of one-third seats for women in all six positions of three tiers of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu. Evidently, 10 seats in District Panchayat

Chairpersons, 140 seats in Panchayat Union Council Chairpersons and 4,275 seats in Village Panchayat Presidents have been reserved for women. Accordingly, women have obtained legal opportunities for occupying leadership positions in Panchayati Raj. Further, the table brings to light that 226 seats in District Panchayat Ward Members, 2,302 seats in Panchayat Union Ward Members and 32,638 seats in Village Panchayat Ward Members have been reserved for women.

These evidences unambiguously amplify the fact that by the one-third reservation women in Tamil Nadu have gained opportunities to participate and represent in Panchayati Raj.

#### *Extent of women representation in Panchayati Raj of Tamil Nadu*

The first elections to three tier Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu were held in October 1996. The number and proportion of representatives elected through this election is portrayed gender vice in the table 1.

The data presented in Table 2 summarizes the gender-wise representatives of Panchayati Raj elected in 1996. It is amplified by the table that rural women in Tamil Nadu have found opportunity to represent in local government through the enactment of Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act with 33% reservation.

As revealed by the data presented in the Table 2, a sizeable proportion of women were elected to the offices and seats in different tiers of Panchayati Raj. It is evident that a proportion of women (35.31%) entry into

**Table 1: Reservation of positions for women in Panchayati Raj of Tamil Nadu**

Positions	Total No. of Positions	No. of Positions Reserved For Women
District Panchayat Chairpersons	29	10 (34%)
Panchayat Union Council Chairpersons	385	140 (36%)
Village Panchayat Presidents	12,618	4,275 (34%)
District Panchayat Ward Members	656	226 (34%)
Panchayat Union Ward Members	6,570	2,302 (35%)
Village Panchayat Ward Members	97,458	32,638 (33%)

**Table 2: Gender wise distribution of representatives of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu (1996)**

Tiers	Elected Representatives		Total
	Men	Women	
Village Panchayat	62756(66.55%)	31548(33.45%)	94304 (100%)
Panchayat Union Council	4204(64.69%)	2295(35.31%)	6499(100%)
District Panchayat	423(65.28%)	225(34.72%)	648(100%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>67383(100%)</b>	<b>34068(100%)</b>	<b>101451(100%)</b>

**Table 3: Gender wise distribution of representatives of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu (2006)**

Tiers	Elected Representatives		Total
	Men	Women	
Village Panchayat	67632(61.64%)	42103(38.36%)	109735(100%)
Panchayat Union Council	4059(58.37%)	2895(41.63%)	6954(100%)
District Panchayat	419(61.17%)	266(38.83%)	685(100%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>72110(100%)</b>	<b>45264(100%)</b>	<b>117374(100%)</b>

**Table 4: Proportion of reservation vs elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj of Tamil Nadu**

Tiers	EWRS-1996	Proportion of Reservation	EWRS-2006
Village Panchayat	33.45%	33.50%	38.36%
Panchayat Union Council	35.31%	35.50%	41.63%
District Panchayat	34.72%	34.00%	38.83%

panchayat union councils in contrast Elected Women Representatives have fulfilled the minimum number of seats as such reserved for women in case of village panchayat in 1996. Therefore it can be inferred that the actual offices and seats reserved for women were occupied by Elected Women Representatives in the election of 1996 in Tamil Nadu. This finding is corroborative with the observation by G. Palanithurai (2001) that women have come to position in the local bodies as provision have been made in the Constitution.[9]

The Table 3 brings to light the proportion of elected representatives of Panchayati Raj in the elections held in October 2006. It is significant to note that a sizeable proportion of women have been elected to represent in Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu. Evidently greater proportion of Elected Women Representatives (41.63%) is found to be occupying offices and seats in Panchayat Union Councils. On the other hand a sizeable number of Elected Women Representatives are occupying the

positions in Village Panchayat (38.36%) and District Panchayat (38.83%) respectively. It can be inferred that there is a perceptible increase in the proportion of Elected Women Representatives in Panchayati Rajs of Tamil Nadu in 2006. The evidence provided in the foregoing tables about the extent of women representation should be analysed against the actual reservation made for women in Panchayati Raj.

The Table 4 summarizes the comparative analysis of the data about Elected Women Representatives of 1996 Vs 2006 in the light of the actual proportion of reservation made for women if three tiers of Panchayati Raj. It is unambiguously clear that in 1996, Elected Women Representatives merely filled the offices and seats reserved for them. Statistically in Village Panchayat 33.45 percent against 33.50 percent in Panchayat Union Councils 35.31 percent against 35.5 percent proportion of Elected Women Representatives occupied

the Elected Women Representatives in Panchayati Raj. In fact the proportion of Elected Women Representatives marginally fell short of the actual proportion of reservation for women.

In contrast Elected Women Representatives in 2006 occupied greater proportion of positions exceeding the reservation for women. Evidently, the proportion of Elected Women Representatives is 38.36 percent against 33.5 percent in Village Panchayat, 41.63 percent against 35.5 percent in Panchayat Union Councils and 38.83 percent against 34 percent in District Panchayat in Panchayati Raj. It can be inferred that the proportion of Elected Women Representatives has exceeded the actual seats and offices reserved for women in all tiers of Panchayati Raj.

Thus, the proportion of Elected Women Representatives exceeding the proportion of reservation denotes that women have contested and got elected through non reserved general seats and offices in Panchayati Raj.

*District wise proportion of elected women representatives in three tiers of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu*

There are 29 districts in rural Tamil Nadu. The proportion of elected women representatives in these districts at three levels of Panchayati Raj are taken up for analysis in the following pages.

Table 5 presents the proportion of Village Panchayat women ward members in different districts of Tamil Nadu. As stated in Table 1, the proportion of positions reserved for women

is 33 percent. Hence, the Table 5 classifies the districts into three categories based on the proportion of Elected Village Panchayat Women Ward Members.

1. Districts with High proportion of elected Village Panchayat Women Ward Members ranging from 43 to 48%
2. Districts with Moderate proportion of elected Village Panchayat Women Ward Members ranging from 38 to 43%
3. Districts with Low proportion of elected Village Panchayat Women Ward Members ranging from 33 to 38%

It is significant to note that in all districts women have occupied the seats of Village Panchayat ward members exceeding the actual reserved number of seats. It is highly significant to note that there is one district where women constitute more than 43 percent of Village Panchayat Ward members. It is Cuddalore district where Village Panchayat Women Ward members constitute 44.02 percent in the seats of Village Panchayat.

Table 6 presents the proportion of elected Panchayat Union Councils women Ward members in 29 districts of Tamil Nadu. As stated in Table 1, the proportion of positions reserved for women is 35 percent. Hence, the Table-6 classifies the districts into three categories based on the proportion of Elected Panchayat Union Councils Women Ward Members.

1. Districts with High proportion of elected Panchayat Union Councils Women Ward Members ranging from 45 to 50%
2. Districts with Moderate proportion of elected Panchayat Union Councils

**Table 5: District wise proportion of Village panchayat women ward members in Tamil Nadu**

Proportion of Elected Women Representatives	No. of Districts	
	F	%
33-38%	15	51.72
38-43%	13	44.82
43-48%	01	03.44
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 6: District wise proportion of panchayat union councils women ward members in Tamil Nadu**

Proportion of Elected Women Representatives	No. of Districts	
	F	%
35-40%	9	31.03
40-45%	17	58.62
45-50%	03	10.35
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100</b>

Women Ward Members ranging from 40 to 45%

3. Districts with Low proportion of elected Panchayat Union Councils Women Ward Members ranging from 35 to 40%

It is significant to note that in all districts women have occupied the seats of Panchayat Union Councils ward members exceeding the actual reserved Number of seats. It is highly significant to note that there are three districts where women constitute more than 45 percent of Panchayat Union Councils Ward members.

Table 7 portrays the proportion of elected District Panchayat women Ward members in 29 districts of Tamil Nadu. As stated in Table 1, the proportion of positions reserved for women is 34 percent in the case of District Panchayat Ward members. Accordingly, the districts are classified into five categories based on the proportion of Elected District Panchayat women Ward members.

1. Districts with highest proportion of elected District Panchayat women Ward members with more than 49%
2. Districts with High proportion of elected District Panchayat women Ward

**Table 7: District wise proportion of district panchayat women ward members in Panchayati Raj**

Proportion of Elected Women Representatives	No. of Districts	
	F	%
>34%	04	13.79%
34-39%	11	37.93%
39-44%	08	27.05%
44-49%	04	13.79%
50%	02	06.90%
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100%</b>

members ranging from 44 to 49%

3. Districts with Moderate proportion of elected District Panchayat women Ward members ranging from 39 to 44%
4. Districts with Low proportion of elected District Panchayat women Ward members ranging from 34 to 39%
5. Districts with Lowest proportion of elected District Panchayat women Ward members with less than 34%

It is significant to note that in a vast majority of districts women have occupied the seats of District Panchayat women ward members exceeding the actual reserved number of seats. It is highly significant that there are two districts where women constitute more than 49 percent of elected District Panchayat women Ward members. Nevertheless, there are 4 districts with less than 34 percent proportion of elected District Panchayat women ward members. They include:

1. Kancheepuram
2. Thiruvallur
3. Karur
4. Dharmapuri

Thus, there is a significant number of districts (37.93%) have 34 to 39% of elected District Panchayat women Ward members in Tamil Nadu.

Table 8 presents the proportion of Village Panchayat Women Presidents in 29 districts of Tamil Nadu. As stated in Table 1, the proportion of positions reserved for women is 34 percent among Village Panchayat Presidents. Hence, the Table 8 classifies the districts into three categories based on the proportion of Elected Village Panchayat

**Table 8: District wise proportion of village panchayat women president**

Proportion of Elected Women Representatives	No. of Districts	
	F	%
34-39%	13	44.83
39-44%	14	48.83
44-49%	02	06.89
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100</b>

### Women Presidents

1. Districts with High proportion of elected Village Panchayat Women Presidents ranging from 44 to 49%
2. Districts with Moderate proportion of elected Village Panchayat Women Presidents ranging from 39 to 44%
3. Districts with Low proportion of elected Village Panchayat Women Presidents ranging from 34 to 39%

It is significant to note that in all the districts women have occupied the seats of Village Panchayat Presidents exceeding the actual reserved number of seats. It is highly significant that there are two districts where women constitute more than 44 percent of Village Panchayat Presidents. They are Kanyakumari and Karur district where Village Panchayat Women Presidents constitute 44.44 percent and 47.13 percent in the offices of Village Panchayat.

Moreover, a sizeable proportion of districts (48.83%) have 39 to 44 percent of elected Village Panchayat Women Presidents in Tamil Nadu.

The proportion of elected Panchayat Union Councils Women Chair Persons in 29 districts of Tamil Nadu are summarized in Table 9. The Table 1 reveals that the proportion of positions reserved for women is 36 percent in the case of Panchayat Union Councils Chair Persons. Accordingly, the districts are classified into four categories based on the proportion of elected Panchayat Union Councils Women Chair Persons.

1. Districts with high proportion of elected Panchayat Union Councils women Chair Persons ranging from 54 to 63%
2. Districts with Moderate proportion of elected Panchayat Union Councils women Chair Persons ranging from 45 to 54%
3. Districts with Low proportion of elected Panchayat Union Councils women Chair Persons ranging from 36 to 45%
4. Districts with Lowest proportion of

**Table 9: District wise proportion of panchayat union councils women chairpersons in Tamil Nadu**

Proportion of Elected Women Representatives	No. of Districts	
	F	%
30-36%	02	06.89
36-45%	14	48.27
45-54%	10	34.48
54-63%	03	10.34
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100</b>

elected Panchayat Union Councils women Chair Persons with less than 36%

It is significant to note that in a vast majority of districts women have occupied the seats of Panchayat Union Councils ward members exceeding the actual reserved number of seats. It is highly significant that there are three districts in which women have occupied more than 54 percent of elected Panchayat Union Councils women Chair Persons. Nevertheless, there are districts with less than 36 percent proportion of elected Panchayat Union Councils women Chair Persons. They include Sivagangai and Salem districts.

### Conclusion

A focal point of the current discourse on democracy is the concept of political representation. A change in power structure and gender relation is central to the strategy of transformative politics. Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994 has legalized Panchayati Raj in this State. Political empowerment of women has been envisaged by the implementation of reservation for women representation in this political process. A decade of political experiment has been made with one third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu. Therefore, this article has attempted to appraise the role of constitutional and legislative stipulation for reservation and rotation of positions for women in bringing about changing gender representation in the three tiers of Panchayati Raj of Tamil Nadu.



The analysis of the 1996 election results of Panchayati Raj reveal that the merely actual offices and seats reserved for women were occupied by Elected Women Representatives in all the three tiers in Tamil Nadu. On the other hand, the analysis of the 2006 election results amplify that there is a perceptible increase in the proportion of Elected Women Representatives in all the three tiers of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu. Thus, the proportion of Elected Women Representatives exceeding the proportion of reservation proves that women have contested and got elected in non reserved general seats and offices of Panchayati Raj.

In fact, one of the key factors that have contributed for this outcome is the amendment of the rule 7 of the Tamil Nadu Panchayat (reservation of seats and rotation of reserved seats) rules, 1995 on 01.09.2006, by the Government of Tamil Nadu. It provides for the rotation of reserved offices and seats for women once in ten years. Indeed, the reserved offices and seats for women were rotated for the first time after ten years in October 2006 elections.

Thus, the legal provision of rotation of reserved seats and offices for women is one among the significant factor for the proliferation of women representation in Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu. The implementation of 10 years of reservation for women followed by rotation of positions indeed has enabled women to occupy their reserved positions, besides they have contested and got elected in non reserved general positions in Panchayati Raj.

Thus, these evidences and findings prove the

fact that by means of legalized reservation and rotation of positions, women not only have found opportunity for representation (inclusion) in local government but also are instrumental in changing gender representation in Panchayati Raj of Tamil Nadu.

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