

Regional Seminar Report

“Gender, Governance and Grama Sabha”

Presentations from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh

on
13th –14th December 2001

at
ISI, Bangalore

Organised by

Institute of Social Studies Trust
Bangalore

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Regional Seminar

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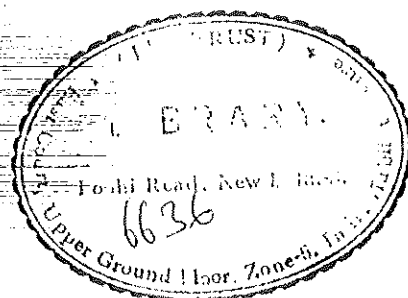
Organized by

Institute of Social Studies Trust

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1. Welcome and Introduction

The decentralization process has made possible the entry of thousands of women into politics through Panchayath Raj Institutions. Society's response to such a monumental change has been mixed. One witnesses even a set of people who eagerly wait for women to make mistakes and criticize women's administration. Fortunately there are other people and organizations who believe in the significance of political participation in women's empowerment and who are working closely with women at the grass roots for the promotion of PRIs. These initiatives have contributed to better awareness through trainings, resource materials, field studies, exposure visits and networking.

It is proved time and again that strengthening of Gramasabha is essential for the effective functioning of Panchayath Raj institutions. Towards creating a platform for sharing and learning ISST Bangalore organized a regional seminar on 13th and 14th of December 2001 at ISI, Bangalore. The seminar aimed at creating a space to ponder about women in the context of Governance and Gramasabha; to facilitate sharing of ideas for future course to strengthen Gramasabha and engendered Governance. Towards this purpose, the convention had invited EWRs of 3 different states to share and exchange their experiences, struggles and achievements in their respective areas.

2. Inauguration

Participants comprised of Elected women representatives (EWRs) who have shown their capability to deal with difficult situation without any hesitation or apprehensions because they are now aware of their political status and opportunities. Others present at the convention included activists, academicians, govt. officials, bureaucrats, political activists, media representatives both print and electronic media. It included individuals and consultants committed and actively working for Panchayath Raj process, representatives from NGO's and experts.

Ms. Meera M, Associate Director, ISST, Bangalore extended a warm welcome to the gathering. She shared the objectives and background of the Regional Seminar. Also presented the salient components, experiences and outcome of the project "Strengthening Women in Local Governance" supported by Action Aid India as part of which this regional seminar was held.

Lighting of the lamp was done by the elected women representatives who had arrived from different parts of the region.

Honorable Chief Guests Smt. Venkatalashmamma, Sanganakallu Gram Panchayath, Bellary District of Karnataka, Dr. K. S. Krishnaswamy, Former Deputy Governor to RBI and Dr. Rameswari Varma, Honorary Treasurer, IAWS joined the lighting the lamp ceremony.

2.1 Inaugural Address

Inaugural address was delivered by Mr. K.S. Krishnaswamy, former Deputy Governor, RBI. He elaborated on the following points in his speech.

- ◆ Women have a very significant role to play in decentralized administration. It has become easier for women to enter the politics because of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution. This phenomenon has brought in qualitative change in the administration.
- ◆ Gramasabha is based on the principles of decentralization and people's participation. The Panchayath Raj Institutions bring people and government closer.
- ◆ PRIs have not yet been vested with sufficient powers to function autonomously. It has still remained as an organ of state government; the Deputy Commissioner still being supreme power in districts.
- ◆ Projects are planned and decided at higher levels and only specific schemes are thrust on the Panchayats. Panchayat has no role in the planning process.
- ◆ The act needs to be reformed further. Functions of State Government and Panchayaths shall be specified clearly and separately. The role of bureaucracy should also be delineated clearly. Health functionaries and teachers should be brought under Panchayath administration.
- ◆ Administrative power of the Panchayath is still a conundrum and essential financial resource is another area of concern. Panchayaths don't have their own budget, all that they have are a few schemes instead.
- ◆ We can hope improvement in administration only after addressing these issues.
- ◆ Powers bestowed on Gramasabha too are insufficient it does not have control over anything. Given the meager frequency of Gramasabha meetings it is impractical to expect the budgets to be approved there. Guideline should be laid down regarding the regularity, place, and procedure of Gramasabhas.
- ◆ Families of the elected women representatives must understand and accept that these women have a public identity too. Similarly, society must acknowledge her public identity as a natural fact. Support system to elected women representatives should be enhanced.

3 State Presentations

3.1 The Tamilnadu Experience

Session Chairperson:
Mrs. Renuka Viswanathan, I.A.S;
Member Secretary, Tax Reforms Committee
Government of Karnataka

Presentation by:
Mrs. Kalpana Satish,
Senior Co-ordinator,
Human Rights Foundation,
Chennai.

Summary of the presentation

Tamil Nadu lacks politically conducive environment with respect to Panchayath system. The state government is not ready to part with its powers. And hence benefits of developmental programmes are being appropriated by a few of the upper class.

Status of Gramasabha

Gramasabha has become an official programme convened by the president according to the instruction of the Deputy Commissioner. Gramasabhas are held on Republic day, May day, Gandhi Jayanthi and Independence day. The mandatory 1/10th of the quorum is overlooked and people's participation is hardly visible. Thus it has become a ritualistic programme of bureaucracy leading to degeneration of grassroot politics.

Women Panchayath Presidents

In areas where there are Women Panchayath Presidents women have utilized Grama sabhas to effectively bring about following changes:

- ◆ Protest against illegal liquor preparation and distribution.
- ◆ Successfully protested against encroachment on Panchayath and Govt. land by vested interests.
- ◆ Drive to achieve 100 percent enrolment of children in school.
- ◆ Fought against child labour

- ◆ Attention to improve water , sanitation and health facilities including organizing health camps.
- ◆ Work towards elimination of untouchability and encouragement to inter-caste and inter-religious marriages.
- ◆ Distribution of common land to poor people.
- ◆ Proper management of schools, health units and ration distribution.
- ◆ Struggle against environment polluting industries.
- ◆ Dharana demanding public amenities like transportation, road, water supply etc.

Problems of elected Women Representatives:

- ◆ Even after five years' experience about 30% of elected women representatives are dependent on their families as decisions are taken by exclusively by men. In the case of women from backward class/communities, oppression from upper caste men is common.
- ◆ They crush any attempts of questioning corruption and seeking accountability and transparency.
- ◆ Panchayath clerks (just men!) creating problems without giving necessary information is common.
- ◆ If men are presidents and women are vice presidents, women vice-presidents have to succumb to president's pressure and sign cheques. (In Tamil Nadu President and Vice-President jointly look after financial transactions of the Panchayath).
- ◆ Women face problems in the absence of adequate and strong support system.

Oppression and discrimination on Dalits:

Though Panchayath Raj opened avenues for dalits to enter into politics, atrocities and oppression on them has continued. Brutal incidences during October 2001 elections are witnesses to this. People belonging to the upper caste sold through auctioning about 120 posts of panchayaths. In four villages they did not allow conduct of elections because these are reserved for dalits. In spite of unabated atrocities and violence dalits are trying to reclaim their rights.

Government policy and regulation obstructing decentralization process:

Though the 29 subjects of Government Departments come under the purview of pachayats, they are controlled by the higher officials of the departments who are not accountable to Panchayaths. There is a need to schedule separate programme for panchayaths.

- ◆ Zilla Panchayath and District Planning Committees are helpless without any real power. Though it is a statutory body ZP does not have its own funds. It has been rendered idle for years together intentionally. Present political parties of Tamil Nadu also have no plans to change the situation.

Finance to Panchayaths:

Since last five years, 8% of the tax revenue of the state goes to rural and urban local bodies (55% of this being panchayaths' share). The state government had assured that this would be increased to 9% in 1998-99 and 11% by 2001. However nothing has materialized yet.

- ◆ 80% of the tax revenue of the Panchayath come from state/central contribution. This fund comes with specific directions for the utilisation and Panchayaths do not have any say in it.
- ◆ Panchayaths are burdened with financial shortage.

Oppression by officials:

Aspects in the 10th chapter of the Tamil Nadu Panchayath Act-1994 contradict the constitutional principles and values of decentralization. Most of the Panchayath Presidents dismissed by the Deputy Commissioner during the last five years are women and dalits.

Governing system and staff:

There are no office buildings or staff for the efficient functioning of Grama Panchayath or Zilla Panchayath.

Federation of Elected Women Presidents:

At present there are 38,540 elected women representatives in the Tamil Nadu Panchayath system. Out of this 4,264 are elected women Panchayath Presidents. Women presidents' achievements are better compared to men presidents with regards to basic necessities of the people. About 300 women presidents have joined to form state level federation. And about 69 NGO's have extended their support in the process. The federation aims at working towards women's issues and strengthening Panchayaths. Much can be expected from this venture.

3.1 Experience Sharing by Elected Women Representative

Presentation by:

Smt. Rani Muniyakannu,

President, Vaanduvancheri Panchayath

Member of Executive Committee of the Federation.

Summary:

Smt. Rani who is the president of Vaanduvancheri Panchayath of Nagapattanam district made a lively presentation of her experiences. She has won the elections consecutively for two terms. Since then she has been working for the development of the village. Drinking water was her first priority and electricity supply, roads, transportation, school, bridges etc. followed.

A commendable fact is that she has made herself approachable and accessible to women always. They come to her and share their problems without any hesitation. They support her in all her endeavors. 'If there are people who are non-cooperative, they are village level officials' she says. Whenever she set to work to evict encroachments, information regarding the land was not forthcoming.

- ◆ Major struggle put up by her was against mining of silicon silt. Since this mining destroys topsoil, deteriorates agricultural lands and affects water resources. To make things worse contractors were illegally mining more area than that was sanctioned by the license. In the struggle police arrested eight women; a huge group of 400 women went in support to release arrested women. The case is still being fought.
- ◆ They conduct Gramasabhas regularly. Women attend Gramasabhas in large number. Now the situation is such that whenever women come out in large numbers people assume that there is Gramasabha ! But the only problem is if the Deputy Commissioner orders them to restrict their activities.
- ◆ There is no salary to the President and members of the Panchayath. Now they are demanding through the federation for salary. Their another demand is that women's reserved constituencies should not be changed in every election.
- ◆ Mrs. Rani's husband is a farmer and he supports her activities. She has studied up to 12th standard and it helps her a lot.

- ◆ 'Women should not confine themselves to the four walls of the house, instead should come out and participate in decision making process' is her passionate call to all women.

3.2 State Presentation From Andhra Pradesh

Session Chairperson:

Dr. Rameswari Varma,

Honorary Treasurer, IAWS,

Former Member, State Planning Commission for Women

Presented by:

Mr. Bhandary Ankaiah,

Secretary, Lok Satta,

Hyderabad.

- ◆ Lok Satta is an extension of the movement started by Jayaprakash Narayan. It is working for the issues concerned to people's power and self-governance.
- ◆ Main thrusts of the organisation are reforms in governance, prevention of corruption, prevention of wasteful expenditure in political parties.
- ◆ Even in Andhra Pradesh the overall situation is not promising. Attempts are being mooted to involve women in the campaign.
- ◆ In Andhra Pradesh there are 6,846 women sarpanchs, 7 Presidents of zilla panchayaths, two Mayors of corporations and 38 chairpersons of Municipalities in power. There are more than 60,000 members of the Panchayaths. Though women are working effectively, non-literacy, poverty, lack of experience, non co-operative bureaucracy and family hinders their work.
- ◆ Women need various kinds of support to function effectively. EWRs require regular training and a forum at district and state levels. Men in the family need to change their attitude. Institutional legal support should be accessibly to them. Support should be given to the families of the women for self-reliance.
- ◆ In A.P. District Planning Committees are not yet formed. The Deputy Commissioner is the supreme officer and most of the power vests with them.
- ◆ Only MLAs and MPs get a chance to participate in the planning process while Panchayath representatives are left out. There is a need for the schemes to be formulated at lower levels and consolidated at various levels.

- ◆ The aspect of 29 subjects coming under the purview of Panchayath is not implemented seriously.
- ◆ Management of education and distribution of ration are the only responsibilities bestowed on Panchayaths. However most of the Sarpanchs do not know about this.
- ◆ They have responsibilities but not powers. 'How can Panchayaths be strengthened without any power?' is his fervent question. Especially when none of the departments at the village level feel accountable to Panchayaths.

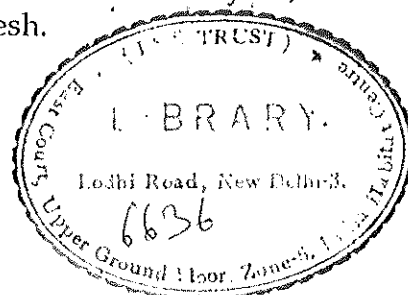
Gramasabha:

Gramasabha is not a new concept to Indian administrative tradition. History of Gramasabha stretches back by 2500 years. Every village had Gram Panchayath and Gramasabhas. All major decisions were taken at Gramasabhas including collection of tax from landlords and traders. Gradually villages level administrative system collapsed during the regimes of Moghuls, British and Nizams.

- ◆ Once again it has obtained prominence through 73rd amendment to the constitution. But necessary powers are not given to the Gramasabha. Rules and regulations say that beneficiaries should be listed at Gramasabha to be approved by gram panchayaths, but Gram Panchayaths are not made accountable to Gramasabha. Gramasabha has no hold over grama panchayath. 'Gramasabha is reduced to mere *loansabha*' he says with disappointment. In A.P. *Janmabhoomi* is another government programme - a process that involves people. But Gramasabha is neglected in the process.
- ◆ A scheme to form 'village secretariat' to make developmental programmes of the village easily accessible to the people is envisaged from next January. Though detailed information on this is not available, it sounds beneficial to the rural populace. 'One will know only at its implementation stage' says Mr. Bandary Ankaiah.

3.2 Experience Sharing by Elected Women Representative

Presentation by:
Mrs. Sudha,
Sarpanch,
Mehaboobabad Gram Panchayath,
Andhra Pradesh.



Smt. Sudha has entered politics for the first time. Since her family is very cooperative she has not had too many problems. She learned to mingle with people and people also cooperate with her. Her major problems are from government policies and from local executive officer. He is not cooperative and misappropriates public funds. There was no action taken even after her complaint to the Deputy Commissioner.

- ◆ Main objective of the Gram Panchayath is to work for the village. It is not an employment generating institution. She felt that in reality local governance has been existing only for 'namesake'.
- ◆ It is completely dependent and for any financial assistance it has to look upto the higher authorities.
- ◆ Pressure from the political parties is also high and members cannot speak anything against the party, she said.
- ◆ Govt. does not give due importance to Gramasabha.

She elaborated following aspects while answering questions raised by the audience:

When asked about supporting other woman representatives as a woman, she said others face oppressions from their family. Since I am a new comer I have to gain necessary experience before giving support to others. It may happen gradually.

Since Panchayath has very little financial resources a question was posed seeking instances of Panchayaths taking up developmental programs by managing their own resources. Mrs. Sudha cited a few instances where such work were taken up with help from NGO's.

3.3 Karnataka State Experiences

Presented by:

Smt. Chennamma Patil,
President, All Women Gram Panchayath,
Athnur, Gulbarga
and

Smt. Rasheeda Begum,
Mahila Samakhya Karnataka,
Gulbarga .

Smt. Chennamma and Smt. Rasheeda Begum presented their experiences jointly.

- ◆ Smt. Chennamma is elected to the Panchayath for the second time. During the first term she was hardly involved. She could not get any experience apart from signing whenever asked for.
- ◆ But the second time, before the elections she went through an orientation process. Mahila Samakhya worked to make Athnur an All Women Panchayat because of the inspiration they got from Maharashtra experience. In the all women panchayath of Athnur all the 16 women representatives discuss the concerned issues and work in unison. They meet at the houses of representatives every week informally, without any class and caste discrimination. They discuss all matters of the Panchayath.
- ◆ All the villagers support and encourage them. To enhance women's participation six self help groups are formed. Now they have no hesitation to go to police stations and Zilla Panchayaths.
- ◆ Major achievement of the women members of Athnur Panchayath is the decision to manage the weekly market through the panchayath itself instead of auctioning to private parties. Every week Panchayath earns revenue from the market thus it has collected about Rs.40,000/- in three months.
- ◆ Earlier the village had no proper bus facility, but now they made suitable arrangements. There was a severe water problem in the village. Women representatives decided to stage *rasta roko* and publicized the incident. The problem was addressed by the officials.
- ◆ With the same strategy they solved the problem of public toilets.

Achievement of Women Panchayath is very promising. Now they bustle with enthusiasm. They celebrated last year's Independence Day with a difference -till then men did the hoisting of the flag. For the first time women organized it themselves proudly.

Presentation by:
Smt. Suman Kolhar,
Ex-Vice President, Zilla Panchayath Bijapur
Co-ordinator, Singamma Srinivas Foundation

- ◆ Smt. Suman explained the objectives and process of forming Elected Women Representatives' federation in Karnataka.
- ◆ Even before the 73rd amendment women received reservation in Karnataka. We have been growing through learning phase in every period. We have to

take many measures to strengthen panchayath and for effective participation of women.

- ◆ Allotting 29 issues to grama panchayaths has remained only in paper. Similarly changing of women reserved constituencies is inconvenient.
- ◆ Political parties also do not identify women. All these reforms are not necessary if whole purpose is just to utilize the funds and finish allotted work.
- ◆ Members of the panchayath also work hard therefore arrangements have to be made so that they get honorarium.
- ◆ People usually criticize about women who are not working at panchayath, but words of appreciation don't come forth when they see women who are working hard.
- ◆ Many more reforms are needed in the aftermath of 73rd amendment. To address all these issues we require a forum in the form of a federation. The process is already in progress in Bijapur.

Highlights of the Session on Discussion of State Presentations:

Session Chairperson:
Dr. Abdul Aziz,
Member, State Planning Commission,
and Retd. Lecture, ISEC, Bangalore.

- ◆ Given the context wherein the State has hardly devolved real powers reforming and strengthening improving the Gramasabha is a difficult task. Smt. Chennamma used a technique to make people come to Gramasabha- as women have the practice of going to the temple, Smt. Chennamma brought all gods of the village to her house. Women started to go to Smt. Chennamma's house instead!
- ◆ Generally, there are differences between the priorities of men and women representatives. Men representatives give priority to construction of community hall, bus stop and road. But needs of women representatives are drinking water, toilets, street light etc. There is even an example of women identifying the village need for a graveyard for the dalits.
- ◆ Gramasabha should be looked as a statutory organ of the constitution. NGO's and people together need to work together and build it as a people's movement. Here is an example to show the strength of women- this incident

is reported from Kanjeevaram, Chennai. A private company tried to bribe a women Panchayath president. But Gramasabha protested against this and even police could not snub peoples' determination.

- ◆ Since the mode and means of gramasabha participation is not assured how can any decision be taken there?
- ◆ During the discussion a member of Jignur Panchayath (Karnataka) Smt. J.B. Gangamma shared her experiences. They have formed a self help group with 16 members, seven years ago. She proudly said that, they saved more than Rupees one lakh seventy five thousand through the income generating activities like cattle rearing. Their commendable achievement is that now they need not ask money for their expenses from men.

Day one ended with a play called 'Rekke Kattuvira' on a mother and daughter's suffering in Japan during world war II

DAY 2: 14th December 2001

4. Presentation Of Experiences From Elected Women Representatives Of Karnataka

Elected Women Representatives who came to participate in the regional seminar had a lot to share. They were eagerly waiting to share their experiences. It was a pleasure to see them take center stage and an enriching experience to listen to them.

Experience Sharing by:
Smt. Muniratnamma,
Member, Attibele Gram Panchayath,
Anekal Taluk.

Summary

Smt. Muniratnamma, before starting her speech asked the audience to stand up and observe two-minutes silence to pay homage to the people who died while protecting the parliament against terrorist attack in Delhi the previous day. Her presence of mind and sense of responsibility as the citizen and politician came in for a lot of appreciation during the seminar.

Smt. Muniratnamma hails from an lower middle class dalit family. Her father had political experience and he taught Muniratnamma the primary lessons in politics. First time she did not show any interest when women's reservation was introduced but she was aware of the attitude of women representatives of the constituency who used to sign according to the male representatives' wishes.

That made Muniratnamma decide to contest in the next election. During elections she campaigned extensively through house to house visits assuring them that, 'I will work hard if elected' and after the victory she lived up to her assurance.

Some land belonging to the Panchayath was encroached. Even though they were willing to give Rs. 2 lakhs as bribe, she refused and filed a case against them. Because of her honesty Panchayath gained 3.50 acres of land. They organised Gramasabha once in three months. Sitting fees to the members is low. Their village faces a severe water problem. They have decided to ask Chief Minister to provide Cauvery water to their village.

Experience Sharing by:
Smt. Gangamma, Member,
Tarikere Gram Panchayath, Chikmagalur.

Summary

Smt. Gangamma shared her political experiences. In the beginning only rich people used to contest and win the elections. But now common people also win the elections. She was totally unaware of the politics. Male representatives behave very badly with women representatives. Because of the training she received, she gathered courage to stand through all these problems.

She worked to create awareness among women about Gramasabha and now around 40-50 women attend Gramasabha regularly.

Experience Sharing by:
Smt. Venkatalaxmi,
Member,
Sanganakallu Grama Panchayath, Bellary District

Summary

Smt. Venkatalaxmi started with the introduction 'I was an ordinary woman and am happy to share my journey of change till now'. She won the election with a thumping majority. In the beginning male oppressions at the Panchayath was severe. She narrated that her turning point was when she attended ISST's 3 phase training Program for EWRs. She gained courage, clarity and the encouragement to work for the people. 'And my dream of working for the development of the village is coming true, she says. People appreciated her for her efficient work. Secretary of the Panchayath was hands in glows with the president and did not do any work. Smt. Venkatalaxmi motivated others and together they complained

about him to the higher authority. They did not give up till the authorities changed the secretary.

In the training she realised the importance of Grama Sabha. Now she along with other women in her Panchayath usually start publicity a week before the Gramasabha. All women representatives visit their constituency and see that even women attend the Gramasabha meeting.

Experience Sharing by:
Smt. Sonu Bai, Member,
Muddebihala Gram Panchayath, Bijapur.

Smt. Sonu Bai said that the very thought of going to the Panchayath offices and signing papers was giving her a shiver. But, she said, now she has gained confidence. Her major achievements are the construction of road, making more people attend Gramasabhas. Support from women's organization is advantageous to her work. She was full of spirit while addressing the large gathering.

5. Experiments And Experiences

Chairperson:
Mr. C. Narayanswamy,
Ex-MP and Ex-President,
Zilla Panchayat, Bangalore Rural

Presentation by:
Ms. Jaspreeth, Prajayathna,
MAYA, Bangalore.

MAYA has taken up an initiative, as part of CIEE project, experiment to revive Gramsabhas and to influence it to raise the issues of education. They are motivating people to meet as Gramasabhas on their own to complement the meeting that comes under the Panchayath purview. Functionaries of MAYA collect detailed information on schools and present it before the people for analysis. Advance preparations will be done so that all the village units take part in this gramsabha.

Till now MAYA has organised about 500 Gramasabhas in which more than 6000 people have taken part. Factors of girl children leaving school, the problems of schools etc. are discussed therein and the community is made to take responsibility of the school. *Interest groups* are formed then and there which have been successful in bringing changes at school level.

Prajayatna was seen as one of the effective strategy adaptable in the context of people's participation in panchayath raj processes.

Presentation by:

Smt. Laxmidevamma, Member,

Mugali Gram Panchayath, Tarikere, Karnataka

Smt. Laxmidevamma began her sharing with a folk song. She has a long experience in politics. She was a Panchayath member in 1978 it self. Male dominated society will not allow a woman in the place of power and hence she did not get the Presidentship. This time also she won the election, but again presidentship gone to men.

Only when she attended a ISST training program did she realize that there are people who are concerned about women's political participation.

She advocated for regular training for elected women representatives. She related their fight in the court of justice to retain the gomala (grazing yard) for the use of villagers. And the attempts at erecting washing place in the village.

In her opinion,

- ◆ Nobody from the govt. departments is bothered to attend Gramasabha. They speak about 29 departments but nobody is concerned about the problems of village. Nobody can make KEB function efficiently.
- ◆ Members of the Panchayath should be given honorarium. It should be possible for the representatives from NGOs to come to Panchayath; even nominating them to the Panchayath is a possibility.
- ◆ Women should be united though others will not allow that.
- ◆ She closed by recalling one of Master Hirannayyas' (a popular Kannada dramatist and comedian) stories to support her argument. It seems in heaven, Devendra was sitting in his throne where Vajapayee paid a visit. Devendra gets up to wish and gives him a seat. After Vajapayee, Devegowda comes there and Devendra treats him likewise. But when Indira Gandhi arrived Devendra did not budge from his throne. Instead welcomes her sitting tight on his throne. Narada questions this peculiar behaviour, "Devendra, why you are not giving due respects to Indira Gandhi? She governed India for such a long time." And Devendra's reply was, "True, that's my worry. If I get up from my throne to even wish her, in no moment she will be on my throne and I dare not lose it!"

And Laxmidevamma concluded her narration with the comment - "this is the attitude of men towards women coming to power!"

Presentation by:
Smt. Nirmala Siraguppi,
District Co-ordinator,
Mahila Samakhya Karnataka,
Bijapur District.

Nirmala explained the work of Mahila Samakhya regarding Panchayath Raj with emphasis on Grama Sabha and gender. Women who in the beginning thought that politics is dirty and meant only for rich people are now efficient political leaders. This achievement has been possible because of continuous training, follow-up, and sangha support. Now women ensure that the Panchayathis conduct the Gramasabha. They participate and discuss issues concerned to women and to the village. She cited an example of Bheemavva - one who contested and lost the election but is active in politics. Bheemavva pressurized Panchayath to form Panchayath Standing Committee. She brought instances of atrocities perpetrated on women in the family to the 'legal committee' and tackled it. Now women have gained confidence to compete at higher levels of PRI.

Mr. C. Narayanswamy consolidated the session. He said that given an opportunity women work hard and prove their mettle. They should develop an attitude of responsibility as representatives. Revolution is not possible within a year or two, but we can mark the beginning of revolutionary changes. NGO's have contributed significantly to create awareness among rural population and appreciated work done by ISST Bangalore.

6. Resource Book Release

Mr. Narayanswamy, active political activist, ex-MP and ex- President, Zilla Panchayat, Bangalore Rural released the three new publications of ISST Bangalore and congratulated ISST for the feat. New Publications released were "*Gramasabha- Janarasabha*" (Kannada); "*Grama Sabha-People's Sabha*" (English), *Anubhavaguchha* (Kannada resource book on training techniques and stories).

Display of resource books, training materials, wall magazine, UMA prachar newsletter was another feature that was welcomed by all participants of the regional seminar. Invitations were also sent to other NGOs to put up their IEC materials. Many leading NGOs displayed and disseminated their materials.

7. Gramasabha - A Dialogue

Session Conducted by:
 Dr. Shanta Mohan,
 Fellow, Gender Studies Unit,
 National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

An open session was scheduled to facilitate in depth discussion, sharing of experiences and clarifications on Grama Sabha.

Following are the major issues raised in the session.

- ◆ As per the Act, Grama Panchayath should organize at least two Gramasabhas in a year. It was clearly felt that two gramasabhas are not enough for it to live up to its true expectations.
- ◆ Assumptions like, women are not experienced enough and they are not effective compared to the men are baseless. Priorities of male representatives are on visible things like roads, buildings etc., but women prefer to think about drinking water, education and health related issues. This is a major difference between men and women representatives.
- ◆ Venue of Gramasabha is very important. Usually it will be conducted in the central place of the village. But women and dalits and people from distant places cannot attend Gramasabha. Therefore place of the Gramasabha should be decided considering the priorities of all the sections of the society. Changing the place of Gramasabha is also important.
- ◆ In many places, when Gramasabha is going on in a particular constituency the representative of only that consistency attending the Gramasabha has become a practice. This is not a right attitude; all the members should participate in all Gramasabhas. The members will get a better understanding of the issues and it becomes easy to raise the issue at the panchayath. It also usher the practice of taking collective decision will become a practice.
- ◆ Following are the hindrances to the effective functioning of Gramasabha - arranging gramasabhas in 2-3 places in a day, limiting it for few hours and lack of proper publicity.
- ◆ Gramasabhas should also have quorum other wise only some people use their power in the Gramasabha.
- ◆ Gramasabha is not a place of listing beneficiaries or implementing govt. schemes. Gramasabha is a place where schemes are prepared. Gramasabha is a forum to manage implementation of schemes of different departments.

People's decisions should be final here. And this should be the basic principle of the government.

- ◆ Should be aware that people have the right to information. Make people understand that efficient administration is possible only when the relevant information is readily accessible to people.
- ◆ It is essential to work for capacity building and skill enhancement when we speak about women's empowerment. It is also essential to have dialogue with men representatives and make them understand the issues. They too must join hand in the process of women's empowerment.
- ◆ At Panchayath levels giving an identity and visibility to women's issue is necessary. Usually at Panchayath notice board exhibiting the details of developmental work is common. Similarly details of the atrocities against women, number of girl child dropouts etc. should also be exhibited in the notice board. It should be realised that issues related to women and children are issues of human rights.
- ◆ This session was felt as a much needed forum for airing and sharing concerns regarding grama sabha. The participants shared that they have better idea of the bottlenecks as well as possible initiatives now.

8. Plays on Women's Lives

On the evening of Day 1, Ms. Saraswathi and Ms. Chitra founder members of Jarubande Women's Troupe, Bangalore staged a play called "Rekke Kattuvira". This is a play that presents the futility of war and violence through the lives of a mother and daughter. This play was developed based on true life experience of a mother who survived the bombings of Japan during World War II. The play raises governance issues and the difference good governance can make across the globe.

On Day 2, second play "Baaki Ithihasa" written and enacted by Smt. Vani Periodi a development consultant of Karnataka was staged. This play projects daring decisions taken by ordinary women. It projects empowerment of women and nurturing of dreams, thoughts, dignity and self-esteem of women in ordinary as well as extraordinary life situations.

The participants responded to the play very spontaneously. Some had tears in their eyes and shared that as EWRs its important for them to realise that women's lives and their dignity should be a matter of prime concern.

8. NABARD's Role in Women's Empowerment

Presented by: Mrs. Prafulla Kurien, Manager, NABARD.

Mrs. Prafulla introduced NABARD and shared its role in empowerment of women to the participants. She explained how NABARD can extend support. NABARD has a separate women development unit. NABARD trains officers at various levels on gender. She introduced schemes by NABARD for women and invited women to take advantage of them to empower themselves and other women.

9. In honor and recognition of women in panchayaths

ISST Bangalore, in honour of the commendable efforts being made by the elected women representatives and to encourage them further, presented them all the EWRs from the 3 states with trophies and souvenirs. The chief guests presented it on Day one during the inaugural session and for those who arrived late due to train delays, the mementoes were given away during the valedictory.

10. Valedictory

Smt. Shakuntala Narasimhan, noted journalist and Dr. Shantha Mohan, Fellow, NIAS presided over the valedictory function. Ms. Meera M. thanked the gathering and particular mentioned the EWRs who had arrived from far and near and wished them a long and successful innings in politics and social change. She reciprocated the hope and confidence expressed by the participants that work towards empowering grassroot governance will be further strengthened by the enriching sharing and deliberations of the seminar.

10. Kaleidoscope of Cases

- ◆ Women's participation at Grama Sabha in Valyur panchayath (Tamil Nadu). There people now think that Gramasabha means women's sabha. Women are aware of their rights because of self help groups. Now they are active participants of all discussions. Once the President of the constituency Mrs. Saraswathi had a great task of convincing some women- they were given some land to construct houses three years ago, were prevented from cutting coconut trees on the land. Their problem is how to construct houses without cutting trees?
- ◆ Panchayath President Mrs. Shakthi a Dalit woman, narrates the story of caste discrimination. Mrs. Shaskthi is the president of Arasoor Panchayath, Thiruvainallur which is a dalit reserved constituency. She contested with the help of CPI(M) where AIADMK put a candidate against her. In their village tap water facility is given to every house hence water wastage was high. So

they decided to put taps in streets instead of houses. But opposition party member Paneer Selvam broke the taps and abused Mrs. Shaskthi badly. At the gramasabha also they abused dalits badly. They even brought goons. Police also didn't give protection to dalits.

- ◆ TN delegation narrated about the women panchayath president Mrs. Menaka a Dalit from Kanchipuram district. She was a capable President. Gramasabha is content with her many works. She even worked against encroachments. One among the encroachers Kumar, took revenge against her. Though the villagers supported her, her party didn't stand with her. She complained to police but they did not protect her. Menaka was murdered when she was working at the office.
- ◆ Mrs. Lalitha, Sarpanch, Gangadevapallehalli, Warangal district, A.P. It is an all women's panchayath. President of the panchayath was a non literate. She learned to read and write after she became sarpanch. She formed separate committees for education, water and electricity. Interested men and women are there in the committees. This is a model panchayath in Warangal district. She got re-elected as sarpanch along with her team in the recent election. They have collected cent percent tax. Every house in the village has toilets. Selling liquor is not seen in the village. They make arrangements to send children to school. There is no case of child labour in the village. Every house has water facility and there is not a single hut in the village. It is a model panchayath and panchayath officers of district level come to learn from this panchayath.
- ◆ Fathima B. Sarpanch, Kalwa village Kunrule district. Fathima got married at the age of 14 and confined her self to the house. At the age of 30 she became sarpanch of the village. In the beginning she did not know anything about governance and her husband governed the village on her behalf. Once she attended a three days camp at Hyderabad and realized her responsibilities. She has formed Self Help Groups in the village; now there are 430 groups which have collected more than Rs. 20 lakhs. Major works taken by panchayath include water supply to cultivate 500 acres of land, leased tanks to fish rearing, patta to landless people, the metalled road constructed by them got the govt. attention. Panchayath received the best panchayath award and race against poverty award by United Nations Development Programme.

Inaugural Address
Gender, Governance and Gram Sabha
by
Dr.K.S.Krishnaswamy

May I, at the outset, thank ISST for asking me to say a few words on this occasion .

Unlike the distinguished participants in this Seminar, I am afraid I have nothing very special to say about Karnataka or any other State. My observations will be on general issues which are the main concern of this Seminar viz. gender discrimination, decentralisation of government and the vital question of 'people's participation' in governance. I shall touch upon all these, but not necessarily in the same order.

Let me start with the question of governance and the role of the State in present circumstances. As you know, we have, after the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution, three distinct parts of our political structure – the Centre, the States and the Local Governments (or Panchayats). If one were to talk in terms of tiers of government, we have five tiers – since the Panchayats exist at the district, taluk and gram levels.

However, though Panchayats are intended to be "self-governing" bodies, they are not so in reality. State governments continue to be the determinants of what PRIs should do, as well as of what resources will be available to them. The Constitutional amendments have not spelled out clearly the division of powers between the State Governments and Panchayats, nor have State Governments implemented the recommendations of the Finance Commissions set up by them to segregate the resources which will belong to

Panchayats. Indeed, many States have not even set up such Finance Commissions to allocate resources to Panchayats.

In consequence, Panchayats are being treated virtually as agencies of the State Government to implement specified schemes. Though there are District Planning Boards in Karnataka and in some other States, they hardly have any say in budget-making at the Panchayat level. (I am told that the position is different in Kerala and I hope that my impression is right). Both at the district and taluk levels, it is the State Government officials rather than the elected representatives who exercise authority. Their accountability is to their official superiors rather than to the Panchayat concerned – except in so far as Legislative Members from that area throw their weight around.

All this is familiar and I do not wish to spend more time on this – except to draw this general conclusion viz. Panchayats are as yet no-where near being “governments” in the full sense of the term. They have to be empowered before we discuss what needs to be done in regard to elimination of gender discrimination and empowerment of Gram Sabhas.

What exactly do I mean by saying, empower the Panchayats? First and foremost, at the district level, the present system of dyarchy should go - that is to say, the revenue and other administrative functions which are now the responsibility of the District (or Deputy) Commissioner should all be transferred to the Zilla Panchayat and its Chief Executive. Second, as in the case of the Centre and the States, there should be a clear

separation of powers between the States and the Panchayats. That is to say besides a demarcation of authority in administrative matters, the specific responsibilities of the State Government and the Panchayats in such matters as taxation and borrowing, planning and development, settlement of civil disputes, environmental policies etc have to be spelt out through further amendment of the 73rd and 74th Amendments. In this matter, the essential Panchayat institutions to be empowered are those at the district and gram levels. Taluk Panchayats are, in fact, dispensable; they should be substituted by a Consultative Committee involving the Zilla Panchayats and the Gram Panchayats in the taluk. At the district level, the cadre of officers should be separated from the State cadres and made accountable to the Chief Executive of the district. Staff belonging to the district cadre should be seconded to Gram Panchayats for specific periods, during which they will be fully accountable to the Gram Panchayat and the Gram Sabha.

I am not saying that with these changes in inter-governmental relations, we will be able to secure proper governance at the local level. There is a third and very different kind of change which is required at all levels of government, including the Panchayats. And that is a change in their ethos. Governments in this country still act as if they are the rulers and people are their subjects. This is a hangover from colonial days; the bureaucratic arrangements and attitudes are still what they were before independence. Unfortunately, elected functionaries also have absorbed the same culture and behaviour patterns.

This is partly a reflection of the fact that the majority of elected representatives even in Gram Panchayats are from richer classes or upper castes, accustomed to hegemonistic roles. Partly also it is a reflection of the heavy dependence of elected representatives on the established bureaucracy, not just for policy implementation but for policy-making itself. A glaring example of this is the manner in which priorities in development outlays are determined. The bulk of PRIs resources consist of transfers from the Centre and the concerned State Government and very little of such transfers is in an “untied” form. They are all tied to particular schemes, or via departmental budgets. In this situation, there is hardly any scope for the common people to participate in governance – except through what I said earlier, viz. empowerment of Panchayats at both the district and gram levels, so that they effectively become decision-makers.

Focussing first on Gram Panchayats, when power is actually transferred to them, the question naturally arises: to whom will the GPs be accountable? It must be emphasised that what the Constitution has envisaged is a five (or four) tier “Government” structure – Centre, States, District, (taluk) and Gram. However, as in all federal structures, these tiers are not separate and independent from one another; only substantially autonomous and mutually dependent. This apparently contradictory relationship merely implies that there will be certain functions which will be ceded by the lower tiers to the upper tiers, on the basis of their district-wise, state-wise or nation-wise relevance or practicability. But in respect of the functions assigned to each tier, it is essential to identify the entity to which it is accountable as well as the manner of such accountability.

In any democratic system, the government's accountability is, in the final analysis, to the people who elect that government. This aspect gets blurred as the distance between the electorate and the government increases; the people's sovereignty then comes to be vested in their elected representatives, and it is to them that governments, in the sense of executive authorities, become accountable. Thus the Central Government consisting of the Prime Minister and his Cabinet is accountable to the Lok Sabha; State Governments and their Chief Ministers to the State Legislatures. As one goes down the tiers to the Panchayats, this distance gets reduced and at the Gram Panchayat level, this accountability becomes direct, with the Panchayat being accountable primarily to the Gram Sabha.

Though Gram Sabhas are under all of the State Acts required to be convened at least twice a year, and GPs required to report to them on a variety of matters, the experience in most states is that Gram Sabhas rarely meet; and even when they meet, they are more proforma than transaction – oriented. Gram Panchayats' Adhyakshas and Secretaries often speak of many problems in holding Gram Sabha meetings – e.g. too many villages under each GP, officers at the taluk level who are required to attend cannot do so because they are busy elsewhere, people are too busy with their own affairs to attend such meetings, factions in the village prevent the holding of a general assembly, meetings in the evenings are not safe for women and so forth. More importantly, we have often been told that Gram Sabhas are stage-managed by the Adhyakshas, by not giving sufficient notice and packing each meeting with his or her own faction.

All this is possible because most State Acts, like the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act 1993, make the Gram Sabha merely a recommendatory body (Ch.II of KPR Act 1993). Its functions are limited to mobilising local labour and other resources, identifying beneficiaries and assisting in the implementation of development schemes. A non-governmental committee presided over by Shri.D.M.Chandrashekar, former Chief Justice of Karnataka High Court has examined this question carefully and recommend to the Karnataka Government that "The relationship between the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat may be the same as that between the (State) Legislature and (State) Government. The Panchayat should be accountable to the Grama Sabha in unequivocal terms..." (para4-4-2). The Report goes on to say that priorities should be determined by the Gram Sabhas and programmes and budgets approved by it. This is clearly the direction in which the relationship should develop. But since each Gram Panchayat will have under its jurisdiction more than one village, and each village will have its own Gram Sabha, the one to one relationship mentioned above may not be workable, until the Gram Panchayats are better able to plan and budget for each village in a fully articulated form. This will be difficult for a variety of reasons, into which it is not necessary to dilate here. Suffice it to say that such elements as interdependence and lumpiness may limit the extent of accountability of the Panchayat to each Gram Sabha -- at least until the capabilities of both the elected members of the Panchayat as well as the knowledge level of the electorate in each village is much enhanced. This is a goal towards which we should move, if grassroot democracy is to work well and become sustainable.

I turn finally to the gender question. With the Constitutional Amendments, one third of the elected seats are reserved for women; in actuality, more than a third of the elected representatives in the last Panchayat elections in Karnataka were women – some, that is to say, from the general constituencies or instead of men from the SC/ST reservations. Numerically, therefore, elected women representatives have gained in Panchayats a position which they have yet to attain in State Assemblies or the Lok Sabha. Many of them are here amongst us and we shall soon hear from them what it actually means to be a member, or an Adhyaksha, of a Panchayat. But in general discussions about this position, questions often arise about the extent or change in gender relations and in governance really brought about by this factor.

Since this Seminar is looking at Gender in the context of governance and Gram Sabha, I shall confine myself to some observations in that context. When a woman is elected for instance, to a Gram Panchayat she gets a public presence which she did not have earlier. This involves two kinds of adjustments – first within her family and secondly in the rural society.

Within the family, there is initially the need for her to find time for Panchayat work and gain acceptance of the traditional “powers” in the household – viz. Husband, mother-in-law, or other elders in the household. Husbands, in particular, have to accept the fact that she, and not he, is a member of the Panchayat and refrain from accompanying her to the Panchayat meetings or acting on her behalf. This has in fact been happening in many Gram Panchayats – where the locally powerful families have had their women folk

elected to Panchayats. (Indeed, even in reserved constituencies of SC/STs, big landlords or political bosses in the locality have had their nominees elected). However, over the years, as more women gain experience of working as elected representatives, this tendency to allow some male member of the family to act on their behalf is bound to decline. What is not so clear is whether, as women become more active in public affairs, their household chores will get reduced considerably, if not in equal measure. Will the menfolk take on some of these tasks within the house, without protest or without fear of being termed effeminate?

Like the household, society also has traditionally restricted the space in which women are free to operate or have an equal status with men. Their vulnerability to male domination and violence makes it difficult for them to operate effectively in political institutions – unless they have strong collective or institutional backing. They cannot, for instance, function well as “adhyakshas” of Gram Panchayats without powerful legal powers being vested in them, along with institutional support for their execution; or without the backing of a strong social group or a political party. Their position today is different. They are subject to a variety of infirmities attributable to lack of education, poverty and ill health apart from all kinds of customary prohibitions. Women belonging to the higher castes or upper classes may be discriminated against to a less extent; even so, the extent of gender discrimination in Indian society is so widespread and deeply embedded in social practices and customs that a very large effort is necessary on all fronts to remedy it. In that context, the reservation of seats for women in the Panchayats, and the constitutional requirement of five year elections are a major step forward. If these are

coupled with an intensive programme of women's education, removal of legal infirmities, improvements in reproductive health facilities and in transport and communications, I have no doubt that both women and decentralised governance will benefit greatly.

What I have said so far is not new or unknown to this audience. We have women who can talk authoritatively about both gender issues and Panchayats – because these are part of their experience. There are others who have spent long years in the field studying them. To all of them I have only this to say before I close. Your experiences relate to the particular circumstances of your state and your special interests. In that context, there could be many other questions of governance and gender which may arise. However, back of all these, I believe the general issues to which I have referred arise one way or another. In their turn, they raise questions not only of democratic polity but of development priorities and social reformation. I am sure you will cover all these in your discussions, and I fervently hope your deliberations will be very fruitful and contribute to more rapid progress in democratic decentralisation and empowerment of women.

Thank you.

**Regional Seminar on "Gender, Governance and
Grama Sabha: Presentations from Karnataka,
Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and
Maharashtra"**

Venue: Indian Social Institute, Bangalore. Date : 13 – 14 December, 2001

*Submissions by Rani, the President of Vanduvancherry Panchayat,
Vedaranyam Union, Nagapattinam District, Tamil Nadu.*

I, Rani, the President of Vanduvancherry Panchayat, Vedaranyam Union, Nagapattinam District feel proud to say that I am elected for the second term amidst much opposition. I consider this as a credit to the hard struggle initiated and led by Vanduvancherry Grama Sabha under my leadership.

1. Vanduvancherry Panchayat and its Resources:

Vanduvancherry is a village panchayat in Vedaranyam Union of Nagapattinam District, with 1200 households consisting of a population of 5000. The total number of voters in this panchayat is 2907. The Panchayat owns 56 acres of plantations yielding various fruits, 187 acres of grazing lands and 877 acres of Revenue Lands, which are leased and cultivated by the members of Grama Sabha.

With this rich and potential land the panchayat was able to get a total revenue of Rs.3,65,693 /- (Rs. Three Lakhs Sixty five Thousand Six hundred and ninety three only) in the year 2000 – 2001, which was used for the development of the panchayat.

I was elected as Panchayat President in the year 1996. In this election I won with the difference of 126 votes, with the polling of 700 votes in my favour. There were 4 other candidates who contested against me. In October 2001 election, I was elected again as the president for the second term, winning over 5 other candidates, with the difference in vote of 11, with the polling of 696 votes in my favour. Three candidates who contested against me were deployed and supported by the Mining Industrial Owners, to split the vote and defeat me.

2. Achievements and Challenges:

From the date of taking charge, I have been toiling hard to fulfil the basic needs of the people, to develop the panchayat and to protect the common resources of our panchayat, which has been the source of livelihood for the entire village community. Solving the problem of drinking water formed the first priority among basic needs. Constructing two overhead tanks and linking the supply to the existing pump house solved the drinking water problem in three hamlets in the panchayat. The next priority was low voltage of electricity, which was addressed by installing 4 transformers. There are two bus services everyday for the use of the villagers especially school going children. The existing roads have been improved with the available revenue of the panchayat. Tanks were deepened and maintained for the

use of the villagers. Through the group-housing scheme the villagers were given 40 houses. Improvement of the school building was executed by availing funds from the M.L.A. fund. Also a bridge linking Annapettai and Vanduvancherry Panchayats was constructed during the last tenure of five years.

As a woman president, I feel proud to say that the people in my panchayat, especially women were satisfied as they could approach me for any issue. The women members of the Self Help Groups played a very supportive role. Most of the Grama Sabha Meetings were well attended, which formed the forum for discussion and planning the developmental activities.

In spite of all these achievements, there were also various challenges. The non-cooperation of the Village Administrative Officer was a great hindrance in executing my duties. Even after repeated requests and passing of resolutions in the panchayat meetings, the documents of the village are not made available for the panchayat. Continuous efforts to remove the encroachments in the panchayat lands failed due to the interference and support of the Village Administrative Officer. We have represented to the higher officers seeking immediate intervention.

Various actions have been initiated and taken towards protecting the common resources of the village panchayat. The casuarina plantations developed in the panchayat lands form hindrance to the existing fruit bearing trees like mangoes, cashew, coconut, etc.,. The villagers due to ignorance countered attempts taken to remove the casuarina trees in order to protect other vegetation. Extensive Silicon Sand Mining in our panchayat has devastated the green vegetation of our village, depleted the ground water resources and destroyed the cultivable lands. This issue was discussed in the panchayat and Grama Sabha meetings and various steps were initiated to fight against this issue.

3. Why we are opposed to the Mining Activities in our Panchayat:

- This village forms part of Thahattur revenue division, which is rich with vegetation. The villages namely Thulasiapattinam, Vanduvancherry, Vellikkidangu Pazhamuthir Cholai, Chettipulam, Chettiakadu, Vadamalai, Kariyapattinam, Thanikkottagam and Thahattor forms part of this revenue division. One can see rich plantations of coconut, mango, casuarina and cashew plantation everywhere. The village Vanduvancherry is the source of good ground water which is being pumped and supplied to the nearby villages for the past three years. There are about 1500 houses in this area with the population of 5000. Agriculture is the main source of the livelihood. This ecosystem is close to the Point Calimer wetland and wild life sanctuary.
- The Great Vedaranyam Swamps with its components the Point Calimer Sanctuary, Muthupet lagoon and Vedaranyam Swamps is one eco-system which are interdependent on one another, which is very fragile and sensitive. The impact on one these waterbodies or land eco-system adversely affect the other and totally damages the entire eco-system, thereby destroying the life and livelihood of lakhs of cultivators, agricultural labour, artisans, traders and fisher people who are dependent on this eco-system and the very fragile coastal eco-system.
- The fishery and forest resources of the Muthupet mangroves are utilised by the residents of a total number of 26 hamlets, belonging to 16 revenue

villages. Out of these, 20 are fishing hamlets and 6 are farming hamlets. The total number of households of all these hamlets is about 8216, of which 4334 are fisher families while the remaining 3882 are farming families and agricultural labourers. The total population of the fishing and farming communities living in the above hamlets is about 37255, who are solely dependent on these resources for their livelihood. Any tampering in the eco-system will result in the deprivation of the livelihood of these coastal communities.

- Kodyakara in Nagapattinam District is a very famous fish-landing centre, which harbours many fishing crafts. It serves as a shelter for most of the marine fishermen in Nagapattinam District. A population of 54,340 marine fishermen in Nagapattinam District alone depend on the marine resources for their livelihood. The marine resources in this district are very related to the eco-system of the Great Vedaranyam Swamp, as it forms a spawning ground for numerous marine species. Any threat to the fragile eco-system of Great Vedaranyam Swamp will result in the destruction of marine resources and thus the livelihood of 1.5 lakhs population which includes 54,340 marine fishermen, agriculture labourers, etc.
- The Directorate of Mines and Geology has granted licenses for silicon sand mining to Tvl. Ezhil Chemicals (Pvt Ltd) Uthamacholapuram, over an extent of 2.66 acres of patta land in S.No. 205/1C1 in Vanduvancherry Village, Vedaranyam Taluk, Nagapattinam District for a period of 20 years on 23.11.1992, to Tvl. Shakthi Mines and Minerals, Thiruthuraipoondi over an extent of 4 acres in S.No.2.5/1 in Vanduvancherry Village for a period of 10 years on 3.8.1992 and Tvl Sri Ram Mines and Minerals, Thiruthuraipoondi, over an extent of 0.92.5 hectares of patta land in S.F.No. 158/6B/1A, 158/6B/2A, 158/20, 158/10B and 158/14 A for a period of 20 years in September 2000. The Assistant Director (Mines & Geology) has estimated the resource as 47000 tons in the area of Ezhil Chemicals Private Limited and 57,000 mt, in the area of Shakthi Mines and Minerals as per the technical report. The technical report is not made public and debated in the Panchayat. We feel that the recommendation of the Collector and the Commissioner of Geology were not right in recommending in grant of license and the same has been done without regard to environmental consideration and availability of resources locally.
- The sand miners though have license to work in a small area of the land, is in fact mining over much a large tracts of land (patta, Panchayat, Government poramboke and temple lands) without any authority what so ever. These unauthorised illegal mining activities had resulted in flooding of nearby lands belonging to residents and panchayat coconut, cashew, mango and casuarina plantations (spread over 58 acres). Neighboring house (some of which has situated at the quarry site) had suffered physical damage including major cracks to the support walls. The Panchayat fencing has almost collapsed and roofs of panchayat are lying exposed and it is a matter of time before these trees are uprooted. Ground water resources and recharge is also being threatened because of the indiscriminate mining of the topsoil and consequent erosion. Heavy rains would result in massive uprooting of trees, collapse of houses and other structures and further erosion. The Ground water of the village that catered to the drinking water needs of surrounding villages has dwindled to such an extent that it is insufficient to support even the local residents. The ecosystem of

the area which is close to the Point Calimer wetland and wild life sanctuary in under threat.

- The firms are carrying on illicit and illegal mining operation in a manner disruptive of the environment and threatening mangroves, wet lands and precious ground water resources. Indiscriminate mining has resulted in complete denudation of the topsoil over 100 acres exposing clayey soil, which has no retentive capacity to recharge our ground water. There is grave danger of salinisation of the ground water due to the mining being carried on by the mining companies.
- It is highly condemnable and a disgrace for transparent governance that the District administration both the revenue and the mining departments did not give the people or Coastal Action Network copies of the details of the licenses given for silicon sand mining in Nagapattinam District, the information of the action taken against the illegal miners, the details of mining, the technical report, the mining map despite repeated requests.

4. Various actions of the Panchayat against Silicon Sand Mining:

- For the past 5 years the efforts to protect and safeguard the livelihood resources of the people in this panchayat are many folded. In the efforts to sustain and continue this spirit, the members of Grama Sabha have faced various threats and sufferings. It is a on going struggle and campaign, in which we have been successful to a certain extend. I am highlighting the various steps taken by the village panchayat in the following paragraphs.
- In the year 2000 the panchayat passed a resolution to ban the mining activities in the panchayat and was sent to the District Collector (The Inspector of Panchayats) and other revenue officials. From then onwards various resolutions were passed on various occasions.
 - ☞ Resolution dated 06.12.2000 in the Panchayat Meeting.
 - ☞ Resolution No. 137 in the Panchayat Meeting on 25.01.2001.
 - ☞ Resolution No. 152 in the Panchayat Meeting on 05.01.2001.
 - ☞ Resolution No. 153 in the Panchayat Meeting on 22.01.2001.All the resolutions were ignored by the officials and there is no response from them till today.
- Though the numerous dimensions of the struggle against silicon sand mining can be narrated in volumes, here I am trying to list out a few.
 - ☞ The entire village boycotted the Parliamentary Election in 1998.
 - ☞ Peace meeting was called for by the Thasildar, on 12th August 2000 on the announcement of Hunger Strike to be held on 14.08.2000.
 - ☞ Dharna before the Revenue Inspectors Office of Thahattur Division on 14.09.2000
 - ☞ The women from the panchayat picketed and stopped the trucks transporting silicon sand, which was released after getting the assurance of not mining in the peace meeting, called for by the Thasildar.
- Representatives of Vanduvancherry panchayat filled a Writ Petition in the High Court of Chennai, praying to take legal action against the illegal sand miners. (W.P.No. 12583 / 2000)

- To speed up and win the support of the entire village, a Public Protest Meeting was organised by the representatives of Vanduvancherry Panchayat on 15.12.2000, in which leaders of different political parties from the village came together to fight against the silicon sand mining. Also Thiru. S.K. Vedarethnam the M.L.A. of Vedaranyam Constituency participated in the meeting and promised to extend his support. Members from Coastal Action Network were also invited for this meeting. With the support of CAN, a Joint Action Committee Against Silicon Sand Mining was formed and this Committee is very active in campaigning against this issue under my leadership for the past one year with the following demands.
 - ☞ To ban the mining of silicon sand in the village of Thahattur revenue division
 - ☞ To Cancel the license of the contractors
 - ☞ To take legal action against the violators.
- There were various public actions by the Joint Action Committee against Silicon Sand Mining to pressurise the Government for immediate action. To quote a few
 - ☞ In the event of stopping the mining activities by the Grama Sabha members, Thasildar of Vedaranyam Taluk, called for a peace meeting on 22.01.2001.
 - ☞ On 09.02.2001 the members of Grama Sabha of Vanduvancherry Panchayat picketed before the lorries loading and transporting the silicon sand from their panchayat and stopped the same.
 - ☞ The same day 15 members of the Panchayat including the President were arrested and taken to the Police Station based on a false complaint preferred by the miners.
 - ☞ Nearly 300 men & women from the panchayat picketed the Voimedu main road demanding the release of the arrested persons.
 - ☞ Hunger Strike jointly organised with Coastal Action Network in front of Thasildar's Office at Vedaranyam, on 19.02.2001.
 - ☞ On the announcement of Road Rokko on 4th April 2001, a peace meeting was organised by the Thasildar of Vedaranyam. The peace meeting on 3rd April 2001 was attended by the Vedaranyam Panchayat Union Chairman P.V.Kuzhandaivelu, a few councilors of the Panchayat Union and representatives of Vanduvancherry panchayat. The meeting ended up with the assurance from the licensees of sand mining to stop mining till the lands are surveyed to find out the illegal mining activities.
- False complaints were preferred against me with allegation of involving in illegal mining activities. Placing evidence of resolutions passed in the panchayat meetings the allegation was disproved. Later the miners filed Writ Petitions in the High Court of Chennai praying the government officials to take legal action against me (W.P.No. 3100/2001 & 3101/2001)
- The panchayat has pressurised the Union Panchayat of Vedaranyam and made them pass a resolution banning the activities of Silicon Sand Mining in Thahattur Revenue Division (Date of resolution - 12.10.2000; Resolution No. 88/ 2000).

As all the efforts at the Panchayat level yielded only limited results, tried and linked with other forums.

- In the effort to strengthen the struggle and seek solidarity from various others forums, the Joint Action Committee Against Silicon Sand Mining became a member of Coastal Action Network, a State Level Network for Protection of coastal people's livelihood and coastal-ecology and promotion of human rights education and culture. Along with Coastal Action Network, we are building a statewide campaign against the mining activities.
 - Fact Finding Visits were jointly facilitated with Coastal Action Network and the findings were highlighted in the press.
 - Campaign Alerts were circulated seeking solidarity for the struggle.
- After a yearlong struggle, the Department of the Mines and Geology formed an Special Enquiry Committee to look into the matters. The committee conducted an enquiry at Nagapattinam District Collector's office on 3rd May 2001. Nearly 200 representatives from Vanduvancherry Panchayat gathered and placed their objections before the Committee. Representatives from various People's Organisations, Federation of Consumer Organisations of Tamil Nadu, Tamil Nadu Environment Council, Citizens Forum for the Protection of Environment and NGOs gathered in the hall and raised their objections to the Silicon Sand Mining.
- On 4th May 2001, the members of the committee inspected the area, surveyed the lands and the licensees were found to have encroached the puramboke lands and violated the conditions.
- We are planning to appear before the jury team in the Public Hearing in February 2002, organised by the Campaign for the Protection of Water Resources, to give evidence and bring this issue to the attention of the State.

5. Elected as the East Zone Convenor of Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Presidents of Panchayat Government, I was successful in getting the support of the Federation to the ongoing protest actions and struggles and I am also actively involved in the federation activities.

The Role of Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Presidents of Panchayat Government in the empowerment of Panchayat Government:

- ◆ The Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Presidents of Panchayat Government was formed in the first State - Level Convention of Women Panchayat Presidents on 18th October - 2000 at Chennai. 210 Women Panchayat Presidents from 20 Districts and two District Panchayat Women Chairpersons and more than 100 women leaders of voluntary organisations, political parties, trade unions, women and dalit organisations participated in this Convention. This was made possible by the efforts of District level Women Presidents Associations with the support of 29 Voluntary Organisations. A state committee to facilitate and strengthen the Federation of Women Presidents was formed.
- ◆ The first State Committee Meeting of the federation was held in Madurai on 17.02.2001, in which 36 women leaders participated from 20 districts and elected their office bearers.

- ◆ The Federation Committee consolidated the Federation representation in all the districts of Tamil Nadu, as per the resolution of the First State Committee Meeting. In Many districts members were identified and incorporated with the federation and also the district level committees were formed and strengthened.
- ◆ In most of the districts the district committees submitted a memorandum to the District Collector especially calling for annulment of Sec. 205 of Chapter X of the Tamil Nadu Panchayatraj Act which gives the Collector as Inspector enormous powers over the Panchayat Government. No where in the world where rule of law and democracy and the constitution is functioning can a public servant dismiss / remove a constitutionally elected representative of government also vested with powers of the executive.
- ◆ On 16.03.2001 a delegation of the Federation submitted a memorandum and discussed their manifesto with political parties in the light of the General Elections to the Legislative Assembly.
- ◆ Accepting one of the demands of the federation, after elections the Government of Tamil Nadu headed by AIDMK passed a Government Order stating that the reserve constituencies for women and dalits will continue for the next 10 years period.
- ◆ The Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Presidents of Panchayat Government expressed their solidarity to the murder of J.Menaka, the President of Urappakkam Panchayat and conducted an independent fact-finding into the cause of the murder and presented their findings and recommendations to the Government of Tamil Nadu, other political parties. This enquiry took place on 31.03.2001, 3.4.2001 and 5.4.2001. The team was lead by the State President, Ms.S.Pankajam.
- ◆ The Fact Finding team also addressed the press on 06.04.2001, which pressurised the Government to arrest the main accused in the murder.
- ◆ The Zonal Convenor (North Zone) of the federation L. Amutha, the president of Echempoodi Panchayat, participated and delivered a special address in the inaugural function of the First State Level Convention of the Dalit Panchayat Presidents at Chennai on 11th April 2001. Also she suggested many resolutions for the empowerment of Panchayat Government and Dalit Panchayat Presidents.
- ◆ The federation supported many of the struggles led by Panchayat Presidents against destruction of natural resources, gender injustice, untouchability, industrial pollution, land alienation and acquisition, irrigation tank encroachment etc. and send telegrams and petitions to the concerned officials.
- ◆ As a step to extend support to the struggles led by Rani, the President of Vanduvancherry Panchayat against the illegal silicon sand mining, the federation sent their objections to the concerned authorities. Also the issued supporting press releases.
- ◆ On 03.05.2001 Ponni Kailasam, the General Secretary of the federation submitting her objections, demanded immediate action to the Special Enquiry Committee to inquire into the issue of illegal silicon sand mining in Thahattor Revenue Division of Vedaranyam Taluk, Nagapattinam District.

- ◆ On 09.05.2001 Ponni Kailasam, the General Secretary of the federation participated in the seminar on "Financing for District Development" organised by Singamma Sreenivasan Foundation at Bangalore and shared her views.
- ◆ In the meeting on "Evolving Recommendations to the Government for Empowerment of Women and Eradication of Violence Against Women" organised by All India Democratic Women's Association at Chennai on 23rd June 2001, K. Mari, the President of Mampakkam Panchayat and member of the Executive Committee of the Federation presented the resolutions passed by the federation and advocated for including the same in the main agenda of Women's Movement.
- ◆ The Second State Committee Meeting of the Tamil Nadu Women Panchayat Presidents was convened on 28.06.2001, in which various resolutions were passed.
- ◆ Various members of the federation assisted and supported women candidates those who contested in the October 2001 elections.
- ◆ On 29.06.2001 a delegation of the Federation submitted a memorandum to Thiru. Govindan I.A.S., The Secretary, Rural Development and Thiru. S. Rada Krishnan I.A.S., the Member of the State Planning Commission and advocated for their resolutions. The same day they addressed the press, placed their demands and resolutions and explained their plan of action in the October 2001 election.
- ◆ Forming part of the delegation of representatives from Women's Movements, the advisor of the federation Kalpana on 17th March 2001 presented a memorandum emphasising various resolutions of the federation to the Chief Minister.
- ◆ On 27th August 2001 a team met the leaders of various political parties and presented their Memorandum for More Powers and Finance for the Empowerment of Panchayat Government and lobbied for raising the same in the Legislative Assembly.
- ◆ Pangajam, the president of the federation participated in the five Zonal Conventions of Dalit Panchayat Presidents (from August – September 2001) and highlighted the resolutions and demands of the federation.
- ◆ An Election Manifesto consisting of necessary policy reforms and changes for empowerment of Panchayat Government and the resolutions and demands of the federation was jointly released with the Tamil Nadu Federation of Dalit Presidents of Panchayat Government.
- ◆ A petition was sent to the State Election Commission and the District Collector on 5th October 2001, condemning the auctioning of the posts of panchayat presidents in various districts. The same day the statement was released to the press also.

Paper for Regional Seminar
On
GENDER, GOVERNANCE
&
GRAMA SABHA

Organised by:
Institute of Social Studies Trust,
Bangalore

Date: 13th & 14th December, 2001

Venue: Conference Hall, I - 59, Bangalore

Presentation by:
Sri Bhandari Ankaiah,
Secretary, Lok Satta,
Hyderabad – Andhra Pradesh

Gender, Governance in Panchayat Raj

The right of reservation to women has brought radical change in the society and a remarkable transformation in the lives of women after enactment of 73rd Amendment. They are able to capture more than 33% of the elected posts of power in the hierarchy of Panchayat Raj and thus take part in the administration right from grass root level. I.e. Gram Panchayat to Zilla Parishad at the District level. Ordinary women belonging to SC, ST and BC leading hand to mouth existence and who never dreamt of occupying seats of power began to feel a new experience and opportunity.

They are now asserting their power slowly, In fact, the awareness now being created among the elected representatives by few NGOs, yielding very good results. Many of them are of the view that no body could deny their due share in the administration, governance and politics.

Hence we should also discuss the guiding force to women community in the form of in Self Help Groups - 4 lakh groups with 60 lakh women actively participating in Self Help programmes in cities and rural Andhra Pradesh

They are taking part in creating awareness among people about sanitation, environment, literacy development of parks, Health, hygiene. In addition, these groups are also able to take up construction works, Road works, drains, Building under CDS Schemes of Central and State Govt. under SJR, RJ, NSDP., and they are also taking up works in Municipalities and corporations; What we are witnessing today is a social revolution / transformation. Women are able to play a crucial role in development of the society rising above the narrow consideration of caste, creed, religion and politics, that itself is a sign of enlightenment among women. Thus dreams turned to reality.

In Andhra Pradesh there are 6,846 women surpanches, 367 MPPS., 7 ZP Chairpersons, 38 Municipal Chairpersons and 2 Mayors of Corporations. More than 60,000 GP ward members, MPTC and ZPTC members sharing the responsibilities in the Panchayat Raj administration.

All these women elected leaders are eager to better the lot of the oppressed sections in society. They want to shape the destinies of the people who reposed confidence in them. No body can doubt their intention or integrity. However, there are many hurdles before them - like illiteracy, poverty, lack of experience non cooperation from family members on one side, and too much interference from their spouses / husbands in day to day administration or preventing them from effective discharge of their duties on the other side we have to discuss and debate at this seminar as to what should be done to help them in overcoming these hurdles and make their journey smooth.

But, before that, I wish to present a few success stories where in women leaders / surpanches have achieved remarkable results in our State of Andhra Pradesh. Annexure-I enclosed.

Here, we should also equally focus light on the failures on the part of elected women representatives. It is worth to mention two three cases for detailed indepth study of the situation after enforcement of 1/3 reservations to women in pursuance with 73rd Amendment Act. Case study details are enclosed in Annexure - II

The cursory analysis after interacting with women representatives during training / awareness programmes conducted in Warangal, Medak districts of AP, Lok Satta identified following areas, where women representatives are facing innumerable problems:

1. Domination of male members not allowing the women to act independently
2. Illiteracy and inexperience
3. Social and economical deficiencies, especially the poverty and ignorance in down trodden communities including ill treatment
4. Negative attitude / unwillingness of officials to provide information and to obey the instruction of the women representatives
5. Increasing work load by women representatives both in the family and to discharge duties as Panchayat Raj Representatives
6. Lack of motivation / orientation
7. Lack of thrust for elevation / knowledge as they feel power is just nominal and acquired because of male members only

The above points are not illustrated with a view to have detailed debate during this two days seminar. However some suggestions, I would like to place before the seminar for discussion.

1. Periodical training / orientation. Sensitization on capacity building by NGOs
2. Creation of independent counseling centres at district level to provide institution based legal support
3. Creation of Forum for Panchayat Raj women representatives at Mandal, District and State level
4. Institutional mechanism for monitoring the provisions of Panchayat Raj and to reorient the officials with reference to new Panchayat Raj Act
5. Awareness to create on the importance of functional literacy
6. Orientation to change the mindset of the male family members of the elected representatives
7. Providing channels to the family members of women public representatives to become selfsufficient

Grama Sabha

The concept of 'Grama Sabha' is not new to the Indian Administration. It found place during 'Veda Period'. All the decisions according to the history available used to be taken only in the Grama Sabha.

As far as Andhra Pradesh is concerned, there are ample evidences to prove that Grama Sabha played a vital role in the Village Administration, since ancient period. Particularly here it is to be mentioned about "Kakatiyas" who ruled this land of Telugu speaking people for over 3 centuries up to 1320 A.D. Grama Sabhas were constituted for every habitation / village.

1. Every village was having Grama Panchayat.
2. Professionals and expert employees used to give suggestions.
3. All-important decisions were to be approved in the Grama Sabha.
4. Grama Sabha was empowered to levy and collect the taxes from Land Lords and different traders.

Unfortunately Grama Panchayat and Grama Sabha seized their powers after the fall of 'Kakayatiya Kingdom'. The Moguls, subsequently British Rulers in Andhra Region and Nizams in Telangana part ruined the perfect democracy based on individual freedom, ignoring the local bodies. Only after independence Gram Panchayats come into existence. Elders formed as 'Panchayat' acceptable to the village and also to the representatives of the Rulers; were allowed to settle the issues in the villages. There was separate legislation in AP; since Andhra Region under British rule was in Madras state and Telangana was in Hyderabad State. Integrated Act has come in to force since 1964, though the state of AP was formed in November, 1956.

According to sec. 6 of the 1964 Panchayat Act, there shall come into existence a Grama Sabha for every village consists of persons included in the Electoral Role of the Grama Panchayat.

The Grama Sabha shall meet twice in a year under the chairman ship of Sarpanch of Grama Panchayat and discuss the matters relating to --

1. Annual statements of accounts audit reports.
2. Report on the administration of preceding year.
3. Programme of works for development.
4. Proposals for fresh taxation enhancement.

The same provisions are included in the Panchayat Raj Act, 1994, after 73rd amendment with only one more clause, of "selection of benefishiers for different welfare schemes in the G.S." and a suggestion to consider the views of the Grama Sabha by Grama Panchayat with due importance while adopting resolutions.

Thus it is crystal clear that the Grama Sabha is no more superior to Grama Panchayat. A perusal of Sec.6, which lists out the powers and functions of the Grama Sabha convey the impression that it was devised as a talking shop and not as the repository of the ultimate power of local self Government. As a matter of fact, the Sarpanch, Grama Panchayat, and also its officials, employees ought to have been made accountable to the Grama Sabha.

When 2500 years ago, both in India and Greece, the assemblies of the people yielded all power and were taking care of and promoting the rights and interests of the citizens, it is in-explicable as to why the authors of this legislation were hesitate to empower Grama Sabha as the ultimate authority in so far as the governance and development of a village concerned. The irresistible inference is that they are not ready to loosen their grip, if not stranglehold over the power mandatory transferable as enumerated in the XI Schedule of the constitution.

Let us remind the real meaning of the 'democracy' to the persons occupied the highest position in the Government, that the word 'democracy' itself has its genesis in the Greek word 'Demo' means people. While it reminds us of the historical part, it also warns us that people who swear by democracy, cannot go on avoiding or evading decentralization of power, and empowering people to directly exercise authority, at least in matters which are duly and properly with in their ken.

Under the circumstances, it is essential for the civil societies, NGOs to build pressure on the Government to allow powers to Grama Sabha, as we are aware that the elected Grama Panchayat ought to be under the restrict vigilance of the people; lest there is always the danger of power corrupting them.

1. Profile of Smt. Lalitha, Sarpanch, Ganga Deva Palle (V) in Warangal Dist.

In Warangal District there is one Hamlet village by name Gangadev pally, which was formed as panchayat in 1994 itself bifurcated from Machapur village in Geesugonda mandal. The first Elections were held during the year 1995. It was not reserved for women. However, a woman candidate from open category by name Kusum Lalitha, an illiterate contested and won along with her panel of all woman candidates.

The election of all woman candidates itself was a novel feature. During their tenure, the Sarpanch proved to be an able and imaginative leader. Her desire for Education virtually fulfilled only after being a sarpanch. She joined in the Literacy centre in the nights along with other illiterate women and could now become a functional literate. She took great initiation with the support and co-operation of her husband Sri Rajamouli in forming village level committees for Education, Water, Electricity et., These committees consisting of enthusiastic men and women who are really interested in the development of the village.

There cannot be any development without the participation of local people. This fact is clearly proved in this village, which is now a model one not only in Warangal District but in the entire State of Andhra Pradesh

To give concrete examples of the development activities in the village the following need to be mentioned:

1. In the recent elections to Gram Panchayat the same women sarpanch along with her panel got re-elected, with an impressive majority inspite of competition from some of the contesting male members.
2. 100% house tax could be collected in the village
3. All the families in the village enrolled themselves in the N.S.S.Scheme and savings recorded to a tune of Rs.6.00 lakhs, in addition to 6 SHG and 3 other groups.
4. Cent per Cent households were able to provide individual toilets. In fact this is the first village in the entire district.
5. A sort of self-imposed prohibition was implemented by not allowing any liquor sale in the village. All the people were so vigilant that they did not allow any browning of illicit liquor in the village.
6. In keeping with the modern forms of commination revolutions, the village was the first to be included in the Internet of the Warangal.
7. All the children below 14 years are not allowed to work in the fields or establishments else were. They are all enrolled in the schools, including one primary school of the village.
8. In this days when most of the villages are facing problems for non-availability of drinking water, this ideal Gram Panchayat was able to provide protected

water to each and every house hold with the help of a local voluntary organisation, "Balavikas".

9. The Gram-Panchyat also established the unique record in the field of housing by constructing all R.C.C. or tiled houses, by properly utilising different schemes of the Housing. If you visit the village now, you will not find even a single thatched house.
10. The unity, participation and collective effort of the entire village under leadership of sarpanch and others has resulted in shaping this villages as an ideal model for the entire state. In fact, the Commissioner of Panchayat Raj felt it advisable to show this village to all the District Panchyat officers and other top officials of the state and hence conducted a STATE LEVEL REVIEW MEETING in this small village.

2. Success Story of Sarpanch Fatima Bi in Kalva village, Kunrool Dist

Married at 14, Fatima Bi was confined to the four walls of her house at Kalva Village in Kurnool dist of AP. till she became sarpanch at the age of 30. Initially her husband Syed Modin Basha acted as defacto Sarpanch. But when she attended a three day camp at Hyderabad then onwards she had realzised her responsibilities fully. Not only she became fulfilled sarpanch but she formed "poddu", a village organisation and encouraged women to save money under thrift scheme called, "Podupu Lakshmi". Within a year, saving of thrift groups ballooned from zero to Rs 2 lakh. Impressed by the development, the UNDP granted 12 lakh as interest free loan to the "poddu". Presently "poddu" has 430 women committees of Self Help Groups with Rs. 20 lakhs at their disposal. She has further undertakes some of the exemplary works like, cleaning the village talk to irrigate 500 acres of land, beneficial lease of fish pond, Pattas to landless, constructed metal roads, which drew the attention of not only Govt. of AP which ofcourse has honored her with best panchayat award, but also the United National Development Programme which has conferred Race Against Poverty Award on Fatima Bi.

3. Leadership of Satyavathi Mahipal of Medak District

Smt. Satyavathi Mahipal got elected as Sarpanch of Velimela Gram Panchayat in Medak district. The development which could not take place in 25 years could occur in 5 years under her leadership. Though this panchayat got the population of 6000 and only one lakh yearly income, she has taken up development works costing about 80 lakhs rupees. It was difficult to reach this village earlier and now roads are constructed even connecting nearby hamlets. Totally 16 roads were constructed. Roads were widened in the village. The water problem is solved by laying pipelines. The under ground drainage system is established like in the well-developed village. Four youths were appointed as teachers by paying salaries collecting from the villagers. The school building with ten rooms was constructed by getting grants from various schemes of the Government. The villagers including Sarpanch did SRAMADHAN for construction of this school building. One

education center with an expenditure of 1.65 lakhs was constructed. Seeing this education center, Tata Consultancy computerized this education center.

Satyavathi is a computer teacher for village women. This village got selected twice as best village Panchayat. The funds got out of this selection were spent for the furniture in the school. Ryots clubs were established, fertilizers shops were opened under this clubs. This example of Satyavathi who was a DWACRA group leader and rose to the status of Sarpanch speaks of determination among the women to take leadership position in the society.

4. Rebaaka - a Symbol of Development

Gram Panchayat Rebaaka in Akkapalli mandal of Vizag district was under developed village before 1981. There were no leadership in the village. There were no employment opportunities to the people. As a result people used to migrate, after 1981 the Ex-service man namely G.Srihari Raju spread awareness among the villagers. He created employment opportunities by cultivating fallow lands.

The development path shown by this ex-service man was followed by women. In 1995 both sarpanch and Upa-sarpanch posts were occupied by women. The villagers elected women as the rulers. Under the women leadership the village totally changed. Roads, bridge, schools and community centers were constructed. Literacy increased. All the children go to schools in this village. Even aged people also became literates. This village stands as an example even for family planning. The village got selected twice as best panchayat. All the decisions are taken collectively. Even the Chief Minister got surprised seeing this village. All the posts of panchayat are elected unanimously from 1981 in this village.

1. A Beggar was a Sarpanch in Visakhapatnam Dist

The village Bayaram Gram panchayat in Kashimkota mandal of Vizag district has been reserved for SC women. This village is known for group rivalries for many days. The TDP and congress parties got ready for contest in the Panchayat Elections once the notification for elections in panchayats has been given. They started searching for SC woman candidate as per the reservation. Meanwhile village elders thought that if the SC woman who is educated and intelligent gets elected, it would be a problem for them. The village elders hence set aside their group rivalries and decided to make one beggar in the village namely Devudamma to contested for the post of Sarpanch in 1994 elections. The moment they decided to make her contest, they bought her two sarees. In addition two SC women also contested for Sarpanch post. The population of this village is 3500 and out of this 300 belong to SCs. All the groups in the village got together and elected Devudamma with highest majority. A man belonging to a rich class and ruling political party got elected as Upa-sarpanch.

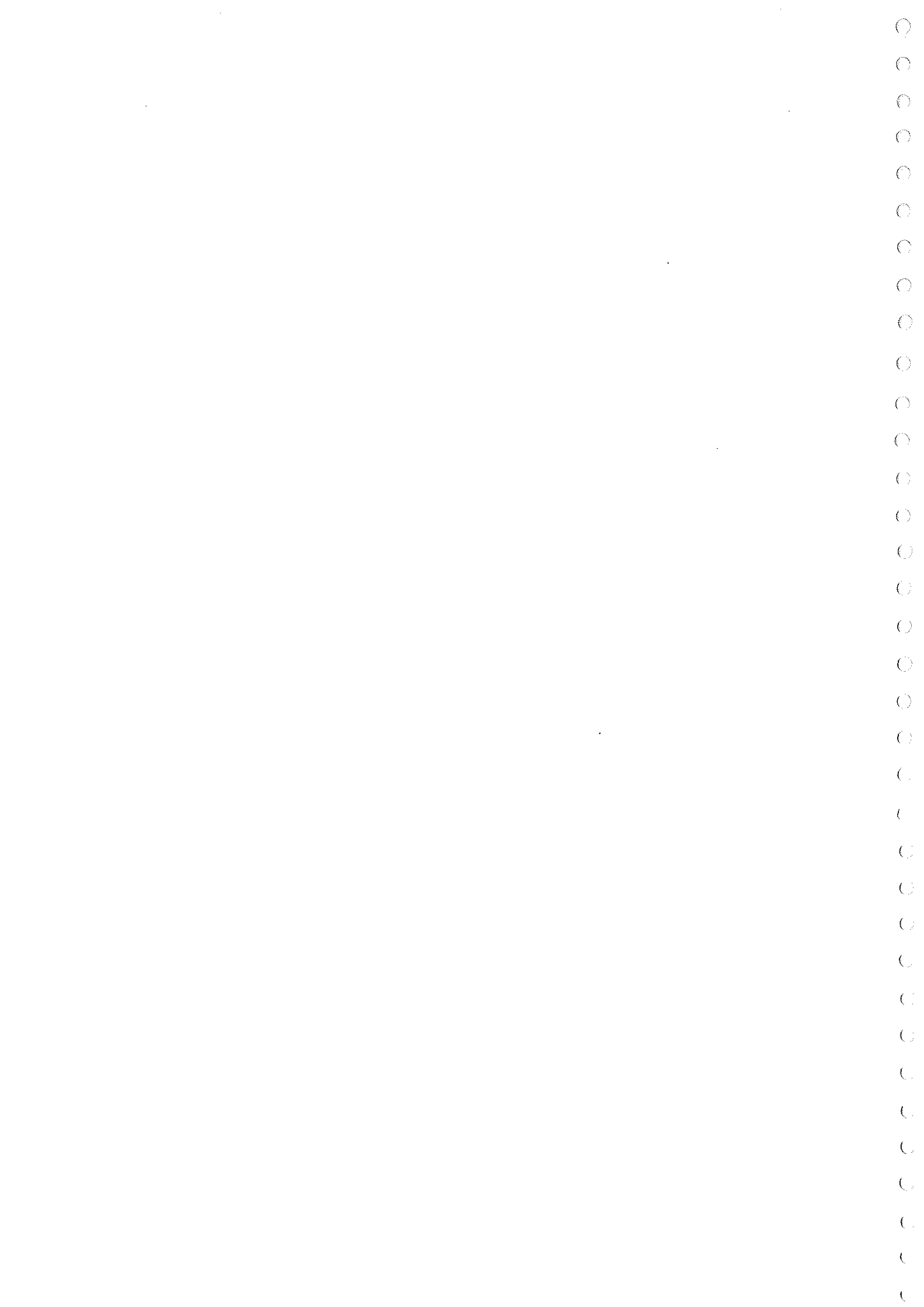
Devudamma sat in the chair of Sarpanch only on the day of her election as Sarpanch. She has not gone to the panchayat office after that day. The minutes books would be taken to her hut and thumb impressions of her are taken by the Upa-sarpanch. She has been given only 100/- as remuneration as against her entitlement of 300/- per month. She is also provided with 20 kgs of rice, 2 litres of kerosene, one-kg sugar per month free of cost. She still begs in the village. People in the village still treat her as beggar and mad women. This incident speaks about how reservations are manipulated by the power wielders in the village.

2. The Sarpanch Under Clutches of Land Lord in Anantapoor Dist

The sarpanch post of Basavannapally Gram Panchayat of Anathapur district got reserved for SC women. The Ex-sarpanch of the village got an illiterate servant maid of the village elected as sarpanch. This Ex-sarpanch runs entire affairs of gram panchayat. She does not know how to sign also. She puts thumb impressions wherever the ex-sarpanch asks her to do. As the funds were misused to an extent of 2 lakhs, the authorities cancelled the cheque power to her. Even now she ekes out her existence by working in the households as servant maid and also by looking after goats. This is how women's reservation is being manipulated in the village.

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The Status of Panchayat Government in Tamil Nadu with specific focus on Women in Governance and Gram Sabha.

A Note for Discussion

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1. Perspective

- The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments are an important cornerstone for empowerment of people and building grassroots democracy. For this, sustainable development and democracy are inseparable and indivisible. Strengthening democracy at the grassroots level and re-defining federalism in terms of empowerment of the poor and rejuvenating local self-government is an important constitutional goal when combined with the quest for sovereignty (self reliant governance) social justice and equality. Panchayats and Urban Local Institutions under the new scheme are one of the most crucial processes for people to assert their community identity, fulfill their basic needs, fight exploitation, and unequal and oppressive power relations, promote human rights and protect community assets for the goal of self-reliance and sovereignty.
- Political democracy can flourish best in conditions of freedom, economic and social equality and democracy; lakhs of new leadership among women and dalits that the present process has throw up have the potential to galvanise the movement for this real participatory democracy from below. This process must be sustained.
- Crucial to this process is a commitment to democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms which are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The right to sustainable development is a universal and inalienable right and an integral part of fundamental human rights. Women's rights and the rights of dalits are an integral part of human rights and democratic development. Popular participation, grassroots democracy and transparent governance are essential pillars of sustainable development.
- Women and Dalit leadership who have been discriminated in the matter of participation in public life and denied access to political power for centuries,

need the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively perform their role as elected members of local bodies. Real decentralised governance, grassroots democracy and power to the people can be achieved only when women, dalits and other disadvantaged sections who have been elected participate actively on an informed basis, enforce their rights and are free to perform their duties in an environment of dignity and security.

- The Union, Concurrent and State Lists in the Constitution details the distribution and delegation of powers between Central and State Governments for implementation. Despite this, after 51 years of Independent India there are several areas of shortcomings which include, more than 350 million people in chronic poverty, unemployment, malnutrition and hunger for half the population, custodial violence and caste oppression, violence against women, displacement and eviction of lakhs of rural and urban poor due to mega industrial and infrastructure projects, alienation of lands of the poor peasants, declining real wages due to spiralling inflation and non-payment of living wages, destruction of common peoples resources, water bodies, sea & environment, increasing numbers of illiterate and dropouts from school, growing numbers of child labourers and children forced to live on the street and facing abuse increasing corruption at the highest levels of governance etc.
- Macro economic policies pursued by State and Central Government continue to create very adverse conditions for the poor and marginalised while encouraging privatisation of the economy and global capital. Despite increases in growth indicators, GDP, etc., social development for the millions remains a far dream because various welfare and labour laws and basic needs programmes have hardly reached the needed persons and social development expenditure in the budget is rapidly decreasing.
- Panchayat Raj institutions have never had a serious opportunity to flourish in Tamil Nadu due to a series of political and administrative decisions adverse to the promotion of decentralised governance. Despite planning from above and numerous peoples struggles from below, till today the policies and schemes implemented by State and Central Government have not even reduced poverty or bridged the gap of inequalities. This is because the path of development pursued is based on centralised planning, concentration of power and wealth favouring the top 10% of the population.

2. Functioning of Gram Sabha

- In Tamil Nadu, Gram Sabha meetings remain mostly a formality called by the Village President on the instruction of the district administration authorities. They are convened 4 times a year on four government holidays namely, Republic Day, May Day, Gandhi Jayanthi and Independence Day. The Agenda for these Gram Sabha meetings are defined in a Government Order No.245 dated 19.11.98. Despite Government of Tamil Nadu reducing the quorum to 1/10, people's participation remains negligible. It appears that the leadership in the panchayats which is charged with the responsibility of convening the gram sabhas has little incentive to make

them work meaningfully. Further, people's interest in Gram Sabhas cannot be at a high level if only the functions of the Village Panchayat are to be discussed in these assemblies. The meetings are organised in such a manner that the members of the Gram Sabha find no opportunity for approving or dissenting regarding the plans and proposals put before them. Caste and class and patriarchal discrimination and oppression are another impeding factor for the disadvantaged and women to participate. Because of this, generally Gram Sabha meetings are thinly attended. Many important matters concerning the primary health centre, lives of people in the villages like the administration and control of the school or anganwadi, protection and restoration of natural resources, pomboko land & minor irrigation, land conservation & waste land regeneration or the maintenance of water supply schemes or roads, forestry, village industries etc., are often outside the purview of the agenda and discussions of the Gram Sabha.

- Thus we can say that the Gram Sabha in Tamil Nadu has become almost a manipulative extension of the local bureaucracy despite village panchayats. This was not the intention of the Constitutional scheme. Merely announcing 4 government holidays on which the government will conduct meetings reduces this process to a bureaucratic exercise. The Gram Sabha is supreme and the Government of Tamil Nadu should take steps to ensure that amendments are proposed to ensure that the Gram Sabha functions as the most important forum of people's power and opinion. The Amendments by the Government of Tamil Nadu to bureaucratize this process and stratify this process with a 10% quorum is an exercise in defeating grassroots democracy.

Despite several limitations in the powers and functioning of Gram Sabha, many panchayat presidents especially women presidents used this forum to support and strengthening the struggles of people's life and livelihood issues. We could also evidence atrocities against women and dalit presidents in the Gram Sabha meetings.

2.1. Some Experiences of Gram Sabha headed by Women Panchayat Presidents

Women's Participation in a Gram Sabha Meeting Called by Ms. Saraswathi of Vayalur Panchayat.

It was an all – women show at the Grama Sabha meetings held in scores of villages in the Manikandam Panchayat Unions. Over 95 per cent of the participants were women. There was also a refreshing change in the attitude of women participants as they handled many issues in a more matured and critical manner. One reason for the overwhelming turnout of women at the meetings was the awareness of the right of women through the self-help groups of women.

The participants were firm and critical when different subjects were taken up for discussions. Mrs. Saraswathi, President of the Vayalur Panchayat, had a great difficulty in pacifying women residents of Sidhathur who had been allotted group houses three years ago, but could not take up construction since the land

they owned by them had many coconut trees and officials insisted that they should construct houses without cutting the trees.

Ms. R. Sakthi, a dalit women Panchayat President sharing her experience of caste oppression.

I am R.Sakthi President of Arasur Village Panchayat, Thiruvannainallur Union, and Villupuram District. Arasur Village Panchayat is a reserved constituency. I contested the election with the help of the C.P.I (M.) party and won the election by a margin of 27 votes. The ex - M.L.A. Thiru. Paneerselvam belonging to A.I.A.D.M.K. party supported another scheduled caste woman candidate Ms.Puvazaghi Rajaram who contested against me. 3 other members also contested the election with me.

In our village panchayat some members were procuring more water due to house connections. It was decided in the Panchayat Council to cut off the house connections and instead street taps were installed to supply the water equally for all. The Ex.M.L.A. Paneerselvam with the help of his goondas unlawfully cut the street pipelines and connected it to his house. I noticed this and enquired with those who operate the water supply about his misdeeds. He abused me in the most foul language stating that because I was born in a dalit community he would not obey my directions as Village President.

The Gram Sabha meeting could not be conducted on October 2nd 1999 also. But as per the district administration order I convened the meeting on October 15th with the help of the V.A.O., Thasildhar, R.I. and B.D.O. at the Government Inspection Bungalow of Arasur. The Ex.M.L.A. Paneerselvam was sitting there under the neem tree and preventing Gram Sabha members who came to attend the meeting. Till 3 P.M. the quorum was not present and when we were about to windup the meeting 20 goondas of Panneerselvam came and attended the meeting. When the B.D.O. asked the Vice President why he was not co-operating with the President to pass resolutions during the meetings, he said that the "colony" people are fighting among themselves and therefore he could not co-operate. Due to my request the police inspector of Thiruvannainallur Mr.Loganathan and other police provided me protection. Yet when I was abused with the name of my caste the Inspector was also present there. Even if they had decided to murder me the police would have been a silent spectator only.

Struggle of Grama Sabha Members headed by Ms. Sulochana, President of Pudupakkam Panchayat against a Polluting Industry

The voice of Gram Sabha members for the closure of polluting industry called White House Process Pvt. Ltd., was curtailed by the police excesses at Pudhupakkam village Panchayat headed by Ms. Sulochana, at Kancheepuram District. Since 1997 the resolution for the closure of an industry was passed in all the Gram Sabha meeting. Despite the opposition and resolutions by the Gram Sabha and Panchayat Council the State Government and Pollution Control Board allowed the Industry to function.

On 23.04.01 the Gram Sabha members staged a Dharna headed by Ms. Sulochana, President of the Panchayat and Police Excesses inflicted upon the

people of Pudupakkam following this several women and men were arrested and by the consistent protest actions the industry was closed by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board.

Murder of a Dalit Women Panchayat President Ms. Menaka, who served the Gram Sabha Members at Kancheepuram District.

Ms. Menaka was an efficient and just Panchayat President. She has developed the Panchayat and executed most of the welfare schemes to the satisfaction of the Gram Sabha Members. The cement roads running across streets, the sodium vapour lamps installed, the construction of 7 overhead tanks and supply of drinking water to the villagers, the group housing scheme implemented are all very much appreciated by the village people and ward members. She is respected for her bold efforts in taking action against unlawful encroachments of grazing (poromboke) lands burial grounds lands. These lands were encroached by Mr. Kumar of Kilampakkam village for converting them into housing plots. She together with other ward member was instrumental in stopping the sale of illicit arrack in their panchayat area.

Ms. Menaka was threatened by Kumar of Kilambakkam with 50 henchmen publicly in a Grama Sabha meeting called by Ms. Menaka, Urappakkam Panchayat, held on 26.01.2000, that she will be murdered if she takes action against his encroachment of lands for real estate business. Her action against preventing encroachments in support of the village common lands irrespective of her own party created opposition in the DMK circle. The support from all sections gained by Menaka from the villagers also became a point of enmity among the DMK members. Despite Menaka's petition filed in local police station (FIR on 26.10.00) the police denied protection and she was murdered by a gang by Kumar at her Panchayat Office while she was redressing the grievances of the Gram Sabha Members on 29th March 2001 at 11:30 a.m.

Gram Sabha Members Oppose Silicon Sand Mining under the leadership of Ms. Rani, Vanduvancherry Village Panchayat President.

The Panchayat Gram Sabha of Vanduvancherry Village Panchayat has been passing resolutions calling for cessation of mining activities in the area from 1998. Peaceful and democratic agitation had been launched at regular intervals since the state Government authorities have not taken any steps to protect the resources and Environment. Many false allegations have been made against the peaceful protestors and criminal complaints have been filed against them.

Gram Sabha Resolution Stated that the sand mining though having a lease to work in a small area of the land, is in fact mining over much a large traces of land (Patta, Panchayat, Government Poromboke and temple lands) without any authority what so ever. These unauthorised illegal mining activities had resulted in flooding of nearby lands belonging to residents and panchayat coconut, cashew, mango and casuarina plantations (spread over 58 acres). Neighboring house (some of which has situated at the quarry site) had suffered physical damage including major cracks to the support walls. The Panchayat fencing has almost collapsed and roofs of panchayat are lying exposed and it is a matter of time before these trees are uprooted. Ground water resources and

recharge is also being threatened because of the indiscriminate mining of the top side and consequent erosion. Heavy rains would result in massive uprooting of trees. Collapse of houses and other structures and further erosion. The Ground water of the village which catered to the drinking water needs of surrounding villages has dwindled to such an extent that it is insufficient to support even the local residents. The ecosystem of the area which is close to the Point Calimer wetland and wild life sanctuary is under threat.

Gram Sabha called by Ms. Eswari, Panchayat President of Appipalayam, resolves to protect livelihood resources.

The Gram Sabha of Appipalayam Panchayat headed by Ms. Eswari was consistently passing resolutions to close down the polluting dyeing and bleaching units along the Amaravathy river belt within the Panchayat area. Despite several petition and resolutions of panchayat council and gram sabha members sent to the District Collector and Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board no action was taken. The Gram Sabha members held a protest action against the polluting units at Appipalayam in the month of February 1999. After this the Pollution Control Board sent notices of the dyeing & bleaching units. Till today the struggles of the Gram Sabha member continues under the leadership of Ms. Eswari, Panchayat President as no effort was taken by the state government to close down the polluting industries.

Elected Women Panchayat Presidents in Tamil Nadu have mobilised Gram Sabha Members for the following issues:

- ♦ Struggle against illicit liquor (many village panchayats eradicated distilling of illicit liquor in their panchayat limit)
- ♦ Eviction of encroachments in common lands and vested porombokes of Panchayats.
- ♦ Awareness among parents on 100% Enrollment of Children in schools and Eradication of Child Labour.
- ♦ Providing sanitation and health care facilities and organising health camps.
- ♦ Eradication of untouchability, promoting Inter-Caste, Inter - Religions Marriages.
- ♦ Distribution of Common lands for homeless poor, organising "Free Patta" for poor.
- ♦ Monitoring schools and Health care centres, (PHCs/ICDS programme) sending of petitions to the concerned departments / District collector.
- ♦ Monitoring Fair Price Shops (Ration Shops) under PDS
- ♦ Struggle for protection of livelihood of the people by resisting polluting industries, shrimp industries, mega projects illegal sand mining, mining of minerals, Ground water extraction, encroachment of village common lands etc.,

- ◆ Organising struggles and public actions for demanding transport , road, water supply projects connecting more than two panchayats etc., while the departments and the collectorate refused to hear their demands.

3. Factors of disempowerment faced by Women Panchayat Leaders just because they are women.

- Despite 5 years of Local government and women elected, with atleast 30% of those women elected, men in the family make decisions. Till today, at the BDO office, the bureaucracy prefers to relate to the men (husband / brother etc) of the elected women and treat them as the elected leader relegating women to a situation of powerlessness.
- Women are not allowed to freely discharge their duties as elected representatives. In several cases the male relatives of women members function and discharge the official duties in their place.
- In the case of scheduled caste Women Panchayat Presidents who are not formally educated, interference and control by dominant caste is the reality. In the case of village panchayat ward members generally they are treated as non-entities.
- Any bold decision regarding the panchayat especially in terms of corruption, accountability and transparency in functioning is met by very hostile males / dominant caste, landlord and trade interests including threats to life and family.
- Domination and control by panchayat clerks is a major obstacle. Panchayat clerks are invariably male and they continuously withhold information or provide misguiding advice. Schedule caste and scheduled tribe women are often at the mercy of panchayat clerks.
- Constant male / dominant caste corrupting influence is a major obstacle. Entrenched male / dominant caste channels of bribe and looting of common village resources and earmarked finances, encroachment of lands and waterbodies vested in Panchayats force women into helplessness or acceptance.
- When the President is male and the Vice President is female she is forced to sign the cheque even for purposes she does not agree (In Tamil Nadu, the village panchayat account is operated jointly).
- Cultural attitude of the males and male elected representatives that women cannot be leaders, women cannot be in a management position, women are not good administrators, public work will neglect the family, women are only good within the house and for rearing and bearing a family etc are all very disempowering factors.

- Lack of sufficient formal schooling to manage panchayat administration, records, finances etc. In several cases women have even after three years not given access to the panchayat office keys & registers. In a few cases Women Presidents because of their lack literacy have signed cheques made out by the clerks without knowing procedures. After this petitions are filed before the collector accusing women of fraud.
- Regular threat by local politicians especially in matters of implementing developmental works, licensing and managing panchayat properties.
- Lack of support structures – Very limited support from the women's movement or other social movements especially in times of threat or crisis.
- Historical oppression which has pushed women into a culture of silence – women in panchayats lack the confidence to speak up in front of males or challenge undemocratic / corrupt practices - constant use of discriminatory words by males. Even a Women Panchayat President not standing up when a dominant caste member enters the office is construed as arrogance and met with severe hostility and abusive language.
- Public administration / finance management skills, insufficient skills, communication opportunities and knowledge for running a public institution and no access to training on complicated administrative and financial matters.
- The double role of managing a public institution and upbringing of the family.

4. Obstacles faced by Women and Dalit and Tribal Village Panchayats Presidents in the past five years of Panchayat Administration :

- ◆ The women and dalit presidents continuously face obstacles from the bureaucracy and higher panchayat union representatives despite their honest, non-corrupt functioning.
- ◆ The non co-operation of the bureaucrats to the initiatives of the Women Panchayat Presidents to address basic needs of the people; specifically due to the opposition for demand of bribe by the Union Engineers and Block Development Officers for providing technical assistance.
- ◆ The presidents when taking action against the issue of encroachments of common panchayat land and water bodies in the panchayat face various forms of threats from the local dominant caste group. In such occasions the police also refuse to register the complaint and take actions against the culprits.

- ◆ The officials from revenue, public works and other departments do not support and co-operate in actions related to the protection of common resources, land use management, etc. Hence the women panchayat presidents are unable to act against illegal exploitation of village resources (sand, water, mineral, resources etc.,). Even if they take actions against the violations they face threats. Despite resolutions by the village panchayat council against the same the Collector has vetoing power and hence no resolution are taken seriously.
- ◆ The resolutions passed in the gram sabha meetings based on the needs of the people becomes mostly unachievable as they are often under the jurisdiction of the other Government Departments. Even if these are referred to the concerned departments seeking immediate actions, they are always ignored. Hence the Panchayat Presidents are forced to face the anger of the people. Taking advantage of such situations the dominant class / caste groups create problems.
- ◆ The male members heading the rural or urban local bodies do not respect councillors and women ward members. Even if women join the discussion, they are unable to express their views due to the offensive discriminatory language used by the other male members.
- ◆ Information regarding the allocation of funds at the Union and District level does not reach women presidents. Also panchayat presidents are not consulted with regard to the implementation of any schemes within the limit of the village panchayat.
- ◆ Most of women and Dalit panchayat presidents live below poverty line. Even the traveling allowance given to the Panchayat Presidents is very meager as they have to perform their duties both as presidents and executive officers in village panchayats. Also, women panchayat presidents are mostly economically dependent on the their family members. Hence village panchayat presidents should be paid monthly remuneration to perform their duties as president as well as executive officers.

5. The Ugly Face of Panchayat Government in Tamil Nadu-Continued Discrimination and Oppression of Dalits.

- ◆ Another major achievement of panchayat government is the election of Dalit Presidents women and men to positions of leaders in Constitutional Government. By this process, their very election has encouraged several dalits to make political decisions for the welfare of the whole village. Numerous cases exist of honest and efficient governance by dalit elected leaders, serving the cause of the whole panchayat. However a continuing ugly face of our panchayat government is discrimination against dalit elected representatives. Despite five years, this domination and ridicule of elected dalit leaders continue. *This has been proved in the October 2001*

Elections. Nearly 120 posts of Panchayat Raj Institutions were auctioned by Dominant Caste and Election for 4 village panchayats not held due to the reservation to Dalits and the SEC and State Government failed to take action despite several complaints. Some of the elected presidents continue to work in the farms or as coolies in business of the dominant caste hindu families. Till today in several panchayats the cheque book and pass book of the dalit presidents are taken and kept in the possession of dominant caste members or the Vice President forcing the dalit Presidents to sign on the cheques according to the direction of the dominant castes. Dalit presidents are also compelled to divert all development schemes and public works to the villages of the dominant castes. Further, dalit Panchayat Presidents constantly face threat of dismissals and obstacles to their functioning from government officials. Several false complaints are filed against the dalit presidents before the collector accusing them of malpractices.

5.1. Some cases of dalit people prevented from participation in the Local Government Election held in October 2001.

Auctioning of Panchayat Chief Posts in Madurai and Sivagangi Districts.

The practice of 'auctioning' panchayat president posts in several villages in Madurai and southern districts has placed the State in a fix. Before a ballot is cast in local bodies elections, village panchayats have 'selected' their presidents and ward members for hefty sums. "Our voice has been muffled. The decision to sell the president posts is taken by the local village committee", says a Dalit in a village near Usilampatti, which has selected its president after an open auction for Rs.5.43 lakhs. After collecting the money, ostensibly for development works, the village committees, dominated by Thevars and other caste Hindus, will invite the top bidder and declare him 'selected'. He alone will be allowed to file nomination papers.

Most of the panchayat chief posts in the Usilampatti and Peraiyur blocks in Madurai and in the Manamadurai block in Sivagangai district are being 'sold'. The mode of selection differs from panchayat to panchayat. While in a few villages such as Ayyanarpalayam in the Usilampatti taluk, the post is openly auctioned, at places such as Vagurani, applications are invited on paying a sum of Rs.1 lakh each. The bidders names are put in a pot and a little girl is asked to pick one, which, according to the villagers, is an ancient practice 'kudavolai' (name slips in a pot). Many panchayats have collected entry deposits also. The auctions are conducted either in village temples or at 'manthais'(common place).

"These panchayats rarely carry out development works", says a social worker of the area. Most of the funds are spent on festivities during village functions. the hamlets falling under village panchayats will remain without basic amenities. Aspiring and committed candidates are not allowed to file nominations as they fear violent backlash from the village mafia. Most of the 'consensus' village presidents are either habitual offenders or money -lenders. Others are contractors and hence they are rich. Near Peraiyur, Madurai District,

who submitted their nomination for the stand in the Thottiyampatti Panchayat Election was rejected.

15 Village Panchayat Presidents Elected Unopposed in Kancheepuram District.

As many as 15 village panchayats presidents in the district have been declared elected unopposed. Official sources here said the 15 were out of 648 village panchayats in Kancheepuram District. Most of this unanimous selection are illegal as it involved auctioning, lottery system.

Panchayat Presidents Election - Dalit Woman Prevented from filing nomination papers.

A Dalit Woman, who attempted to file nomination papers for the Nattarmangalam panchayat president post in the district, is alleged to have been "detained illegally" by an unruly mob and leaving many youths "injured". According to one of the victims, Mr. Karuppasamy, a strong mob, comprising members mostly from a dominant caste group, stormed the Dalit habitat and resorted to stone – pelting. They chided Ms. C. Saraswathiammal (50) for having violated the "village discipline" and attempting to file papers.

"They took her to an undisclosed destination before chasing away the inmates of the huts," and added that "all the Dalits fled the village." The interview given by Ms. Saraswathiammal, who spoke about her inability to file nominations, telecast by a popular Tamil channel, is said to have provoked the attack. It is also alleged that the Dalits planning to file papers in Keeripatti, Nattarmangalam and Papapatti reserved constituencies were threatened with dire consequences by the upper caste people.

Family members ostracised from the village, due to filing nomination papers.

Near Peraiyur of Madurai District, a dalit, who file his nomination to stand in the Thottiyampatti Panchayat Election was kept separate from their village due to caste domination. In Thottiyampatti Panchayat, which belongs to D. Kalluppatti Union comprised of nearly 2000 population. Eventhough the population of this village is mixed with all caste groups, we could find mostly the upper caste population is very high when compared with other community. In Every Panchayat Election only the upper caste community person is elected unanimously.

In the last Panchayat Election one Mr. Vijayan said that he is going to stand in the election. At that time the village leaders asked him to withdraw from the election because they have chosen another person unanimously. So he also accepted to withdraw. In this Election Mr.Vijayan asked the village leaders of the dominant caste to select him as a Panchayat President unanimously. But in Village Meeting Mr. Chokkalingam was selected as a Panchayat President. Hence Mr.Vijayan filed his nomination for contesting in election on the last date. Due to this action of Vijayan the village committee members got angry and informed the village that no one should have any communication with Vijayan's family. And they should be kept separate from the village.

Dalit Women Unanimously Elected as President

At a time when rights of the oppressed are denied in a constituency that has been earmarked for them, an obscure village in the district has shown the way by unanimously electing a Dalit Woman as president of the village panchayat that has been reserved for women (General). Pullalur village, located in Wallajahbad Block, has elected its president and all its nine ward members unanimously, a practice it has been following for decades, especially after the Panchayat Council was formed.

People cutting across caste lines live in this village, with a population of a little over 5,000. Though caste Hindus, including Mudaliars and Vanniyars among others, live in the main village and the Dalits occupy the colony, there are no strict codes to follow and no differences made. When the dates for elections to the local bodies were announced, Pullalur surely must have been among the first to convene a meeting of elders in the village to elect their president, the residents claim. It was unanimously decided during the course of the meeting that Ms. Panjavarnam would be the next president of the panchayat.

Upper Castes decide not to Contest Ward Elections because of Dalit Panchayat Presidents Reservation.

The upper caste people in Allappanur village in Tiruvannamalai district have decided not to enter the poll fray, opposing the allocation of panchayat president post to a Dalits. In the last election, the panchayat president post for Allappanur village under Thandrampattu union was allocated for a Dalit Woman. This panchayat has three wards and two members would be selected for each ward. For the third ward, Dalits alone can contest. The second ward consisting of all castes, besides Dalits, has got one ward member. However, upper caste people oppose this and they have not allowed their men to contest for second and third ward.

Even after elections were announced, nobody came forward to contest. At this juncture, the government announced that the second ward post would come under general category. The upper caste people demanded that they would contest in the civic poll if the panchayat president post was earmarked for general category. Four Ward Members posts in second and third ward had remained vacant for the past five years. Meanwhile, nobody came forward to contest in the coming civic poll for these wards. Only three Dalit women, including Muniammal Viswanathan, who won the panchayat president post in the last poll, are contesting now. Krishnamurthy, belonging to Vanniyar community, says they oppose the allocation of panchayat chief post to a Dalit.

Arasur Village, A Nightmare for Dalits.

The Arasur Panchayat, 140 km south of Chennai off GST Road, looks picturesque. But inside, it is a different tale. The Panchayat in Ulundurpet taluk in Villupuram district is a nightmare for villagers. Dalit activists and leaders are fleeing the village. Even a hint of their return to the village can incite a caste conflagration. The 5 – year tale of caste oppression since its presidentship was reserved for 'Dalit Women', sound like a film script.

Ms. Sakthi Anandan, the outgoing panchayat president, says anyone who dares to oppose a ruling party big-wig or his family will have to face vicious attacks. The politics of the caste Hindus has nothing to do, but it's all about age-old hatred towards Dalits. Today, Ms. Sakthi Anandan, Mr. Ramalingam (the CPI(M) district Secretary) and others have been thrown out of Arasur. She says "the higher caste people cannot stand a Dalit, that too a woman heading the panchayat. She fought for three years. But in 1999, after a stand-off during a 'gram sabha' meet, she was hounded. A mob threatened to wipe out her family, the family home was torched and property pillaged. Mr. Ramalingam's family faced a similar fate. "Even today we cannot return to my home. Once I tried but just barely managed to escape a murderous group. All our complaints to the police and the Collector have not helped". A CPI (M) activist, Mr. Ganapathy, who helped Dalits against the wishes of caste Hindus died last week after being taken away by police. An inquiry is on.

Dalits Contesting Non-Reserved Seats in Cuddalore District.

If Melavalavu in Madurai district stands as a notorious symbol of caste oppression, visit the Melkavarapattu hamlet near Panrutti for an insight into the growing might of Dalits. The hamlet, which has over 500 Dalits, has always elected either a Muslim or a Vanniar as its panchayat president so far. And, Dalits here never dared to fight the election, though they were in a majority. For, it was not reserved for the SCs.

But this time round, Dalit youths in the village refused to be cowed down by either the Muslims or Vanniars. And the SCs asked the two Muslims who had filed nominations, to withdraw from the contest. The two contestants pulled out and so did eight other Dalits too, unanimously electing 47 year – old Mrs. T. Muthulakshmi, the first Dalit Panchayat President of the village.

Muthulakshmi knows only to sign and does not know to read or write. But, she is determined to ensure that Dalit colonies, in the village get proper roads and regular water supply. "Why should we allow ourselves to be treated like bonded labourers. This time, we were determined to elect only a Dalit. And, we will not allow any one else to become a panchayat president in the future too" says 31 – year – old Dharna, a mason. And, Muthulakshmi lugging her grandchild, gives a confident grin. Dalit from the village are contesting for the panchayat union ward councillor too.

The story of Dalit assertion does not end in the tiny village of Melkavarapattu. In several villages in Cuddalore, a stronghold of the DPI, Dalits are in a belligerent mood. In Sundaravandi village near Nellikuppam, three Dalit women have filed nominations for the panchayat union councillor post, which is not reserved for Dalits. The Vanniars and Dalits are almost in equal numbers in the village. Says 25 years – old R.Varalakshmi, one of the Dalit candidates: "The upper caste people are mounting indirect pressure on us to withdraw. A few candidates are trying to woo the Dalit voters by promising to build a temple in the village. But whether I win or lose, I am determined to contest." For about four hours in the evenings, she campaigns along with her husband and local women, but keeps off the "upper caste colonies".

wanted compensation for the property damaged. Stating that they wanted to live peacefully away from the perpetrators of atrocities, they demanded proper protection and allocation of 400 acres of land. The collector and the police authorities arrived in the village only when a State Human Rights Commission team paid a visit.

About 140 Dalit houses were damaged, Some of the properties said to have been damaged were displayed to press persons. Besides going for legal remedy, the Dalits would take out a procession in the city soon, the office-bearers said.

Violence against Marukalampatti Dalits during Panchayat Poll.

The Dalits of Marukalampatti village of Dharmapuri district are paying a heavy price. Nominating a candidate for the panchayat, elections breaking the 'elders' wishes has cost them Rs.1.5 crore in damages, they claim. Dalits rights activists claimed that caste Hindus went on a rampage on October 16, the poll date, and vandalised nearly 120 houses in the village. The Dalits in that village were not allowed to vote and a pregnant woman was kicked in her stomach and she aborted shortly. And she succumbed to the trauma when the village health nurse of the local Primary Health Centre refused to admit her. Those who had protested against the lack of medical facility to the woman were lathicharged without provocation and false cases filed against them. When the Dalits tried to complain to the police under the SC / ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, the officers instead turned on them.

The trouble started when the dominant community had decided to auction off the post for Rs.4.5 lakh. The booty was to have been divided between three villages in the area. However, when the Dalits fielded their candidate, P.Thangathurai, the dominant community people had resisted the step, he charged. In this vitiated atmosphere, the local body polls took place despite the Dalits petitioning the State Election Commission and the Government agencies seeking protection.

All party meet to encourage Dalits

Spurred by the SC/ST Commission directive, the State Government is contemplating convening an all-party meeting at four "notorious" village panchayats in the southern districts where Dalits, out of fear, declined to participate in the panchayat elections. The Adi Dravidar Welfare department has suggested that a meeting be held in the presence of a Minister hailing from the districts, to encourage the Dalits to file nominations and enable conduct of the elections at the earliest in the four villages.

But the SC / ST Commission asked the State Government to take appropriate steps to ensure that they participated in the elections there. Meanwhile, the Rural Development department has posted special officers for the four village panchayats, besides Melsathambur in the Paramathi Panchayat union in Namakkal district, where all contestants withdrew from the elections protesting the rejection of the nomination of two Dalits.

Elections conducted at Melavalavu, amid bitter memories of the gruesome murder of Murugesan, Panchayat President.

The election to the reserved Melavalavu panchayat, near Melur in this district, went off peacefully, in contrast to its past history of caste-related violence. Though the poll revived the bitter memories of the slain Dalit president, Murugesan and six others, sources in the district administration claimed that 55 to 60 per cent polling was registered in the village, which had to elect a president and members from four wards.

Six members from the first three wards were already declared elected 'unopposed'. The competition was intense in ward 4, which had to choose three members, two of them Dalits. The total number of the electorate for the panchayat is 4,800 including 2,000 – odd Dalits. A senior election official, who visited the village, claimed that a few stray incidents of bogus voting were reported. Gandhi Nagar, Adi Dravidar colony from where Murugesan hailed, however, witnessed peaceful polling. But none of his relatives contested the president election.

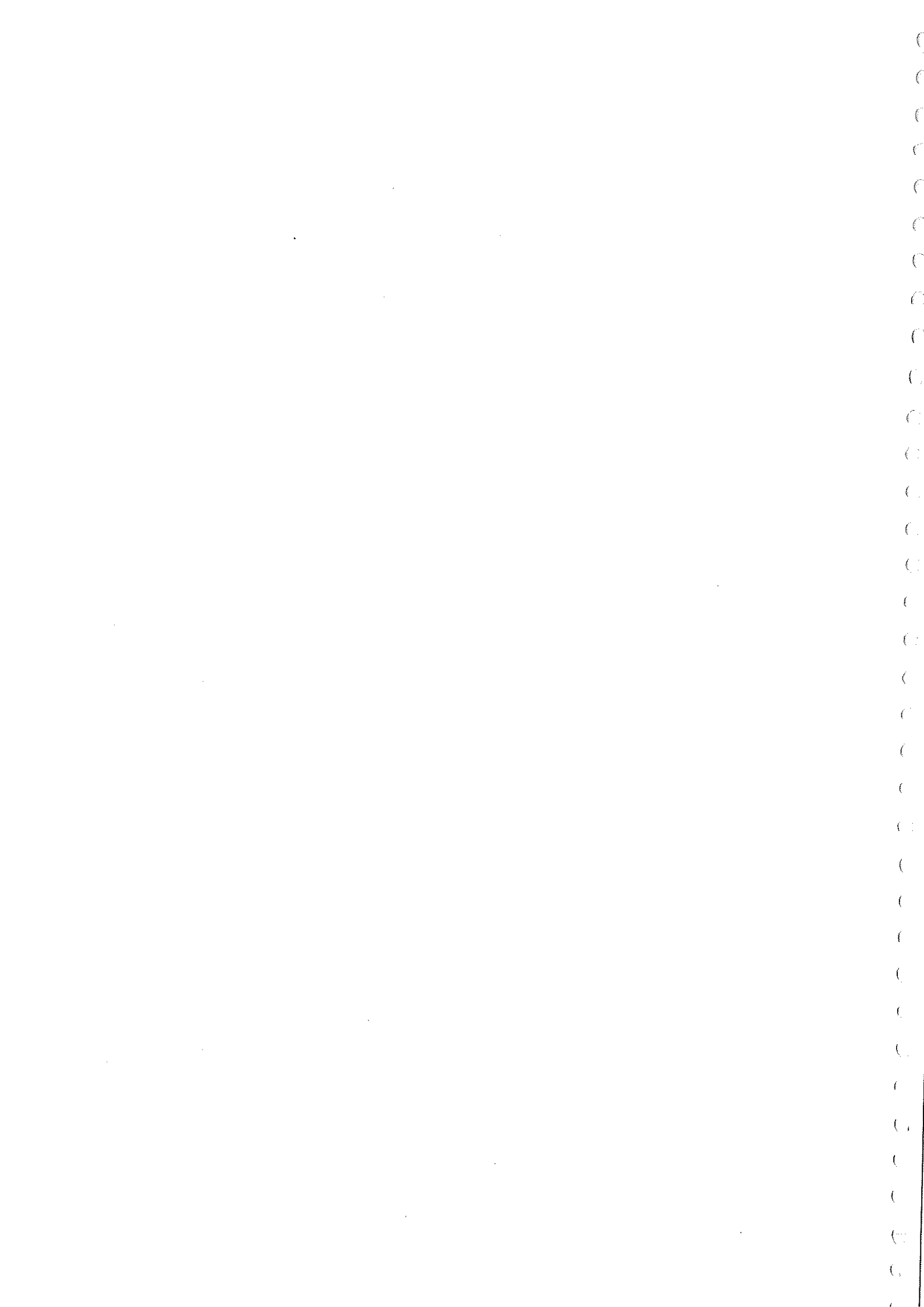
Non conduct of Elections in reserved constituencies: HC issues notice to Election Commission

A two-member High Court Bench, comprising Chief Justice Subash an Reddi and Justice Chockalingam, has issued notice to the State Election Commission, Secretary, Adi Dravida Welfare and the District Collector on a public interest writ petition filed by the Centre Dalit Solidarity, Madurai, Seeking a direction to conduct elections for the Keeripatti, Pappapatti, Nattamangalam and Karayanpatti village panchayats in Usilampatti panchayat union. The notices are returnable within eight weeks. In her affidavit, A Rajani, Director of the Centre for Dalit Solidarity, has averred that no election took place in these reserved village panchayats because the dominant castes had prevented the Dalits from filing nominations. Saraswathi of Nattamangalam, who went to file her nomination, was prevented. Though this was brought to the notice of the authorities, no action was taken.

She had pointed out that under Article 22 of the Constitution of India, the respondents were obliged to the effect that the aim of the policy of reservation to empower oppressed sections of the society was enforced in letter and spirit and that the respondents should ensure elections in these panchayats. Rajani had prayed that the Court issue a writ of mandamus or any other order or direction to the respondents to hold fresh elections for the post of panchayat president in Nattamangalam, Keeripatti, Pappapatti and Karayanpatti in Madurai District and also direct the District Collector to provide adequate police protection for proper conduct of the elections. The writ plea was taken up by the Bench on October 29 and passed orders that notices be issued to the respondents returnable within eight weeks.

Dalits seek action against perpetrators of atrocities in Aalapuram Panchayat.

The Dalits of Aalapuram panchayat in Dharmapuri District sought action against those, who attacked them during the recent local bodies elections, and also



6. Policy and Legal issues that constrains Decentralised Democracy in Tamil Nadu.

6.1. *Only Non-Gazetted Government orders determine Distribution, Devolution and Entrustment of Powers.*

- ◆ The Non – Gazetted Government orders for the 29 items claiming the government has entrusted powers to panchayat bodies are dismal and only limited to assisting the State Government bureaucracy. No independent management and controlling powers have been devolved on Panchayat Government. District Panchayats continue to be treated as an appendage of the District authorities and is not empowered to act as the highest decision and monitoring bodies for Panchayat Raj. The constitution of a High-Powered Committee to recommend devolution of powers and two separate Councils which was introduced by the DMK Government in 1999 becomes irrelevant and a bureaucratic exercise. Relevant Recommendations have already been given. After four years of Submission of State Planning Committee's Report on Devolution of Powers by L.C. Jain Committee, the state government now says, devolution of powers to various tiers are under study and appropriate decisions will be arrived at by the Government. The present AIADMK led Government also stated that the performance of the rural local bodies is closely monitored by the State Government and this Government will delegate powers to the Local Bodies to make them functionally effective and financially sound. The task is for the State to decide to decentralise, devolve and distribute power and authority. The State Government needs political commitment to disempower itself and empower panchayats. A separate Local Government List on going beyond the 29 items mentioned in IXth Schedule of the Constitution needed as a Constitutional Amendment known as the IV List in the VII schedule and called as Panchayat Government List. Parallely financial resources and functions (government staff) should be transferred to panchayats.

6.2. *Powerless District Panchayats and District Planning Committee.*

- ◆ In Tamil Nadu eventhough the State Government has made the District Panchayat Chairpersons as the Chairpersons of District Planning Committees, the functions of the District Planning Committee are yet not defined and no financial allocation was made to these committees for functioning. There are few examples anywhere in the country of this "constitutional" planning body coming to terms with its functions. The preponderant presence of the 'invitees' in the composition casts an adverse influence on the committee's ability to resist pressures on sharing of allocations between different constituencies of legislators and members of parliament in a manner which may undermine the process of planning within the Panchayats and Urban local bodies. Tamil Nadu had launched a decentralised District Planning Scheme in 1993-94, and it is said to be continuing. Only small development works, each costing not more than Rs.10.00 lakhs are taken up. The districts Collectors are authorised to entrust the works to the implementing agencies. An outlay of Rs.275 crores

has been made for District Decentralised Planning Schemes in the 1999 – 2000 budget. No allocation for this planning was made in 2001-2002 in the May 2001 Budget Session by the new Government. It must be said that Government of Tamil Nadu has taken all efforts to ensure that this Constitutional body remains disfunctional.

- ◆ Currently some of the political parties in Tamil Nadu including the ruling AIADMK are not in favour of devolving powers to District Panchayats as they apprehend it will create a shift in power relations and give real power to panchayats. Accordingly District Panchayats have been kept powerless. State Government (DMK of AIADMK) have always proposed the two tier system of Panchayat Government as a policy decision. The reason for proposing two tier system by the AIADMK is ridiculous. Prior to the 73rd constitutional amendment, Tamil Nadu had a very strong two tier system with elected local bodies at the village and block level i.e. Village Panchayats and Panchayat Unions. It claimed that the three tier system has totally prevented an organic linkage from one level to the other and it is not conducive for implementing various schemes.

6.3. Failure of Panchayat Finance Devolution

- ◆ For the past five years the state's share of its total tax revenue for rural and urban local bodies is only 8% (in this 8% the panchayats get 55%). This contradicts the Government's assurance about the implementation of the State Finance Commission's Recommendation made during 1997-98 Budget Speech by the Chief Minister. (1997-98 – 8%, 1998-99 – 9%, 1999 – 2000 - 10%, 2000-2001 – 11%).
- ◆ Under Pool – A, assigned revenue, local cess, surcharge on stamp duty, charges on minor minerals are assigned to the Village Panchayats. Local cess surcharge is assigned to the Panchayat Union. 90% of the Entertainment tax is shared between Village Panchayat and Panchayat Union in the ratio of 70:30. The State Government allocated 8% of the Pool-B revenue which has resulted in the devolution of Rs. 453.73 crore during 1998-99, Rs.455.06 crore during 1999-2000 and Rs. 577.80 crores during 2000-2001. This is inclusive of Rs. 73.25 crore during 1998-99, Rs. 73.46 crore during 1999-2000 and Rs. 93.28 crore in 2000-2001 as released Equalisation and Incentive Fund. Allocation to the rural local bodies was shared between Village Panchayats, Panchayat Unions and District Panchayats at the ratio of 47:45:8 from 1998-99. During 2001-2002 devolution of Rs.517.32 crore is devolved to rural local bodies.
- ◆ Under Eleventh Finance Commission grant a sum of Rs.186.44 crore has been allotted to Rural Local Bodies during 2001-2002 which includes Rs. 93.22 Crore for 2000-2001. Out of this Rs. 155.30 crore is provided to Village Panchayats and Panchayat Unions for maintenance of Civic Services and 31.14 crore for maintenance of accounts and audit and for development of data base.

- ◆ The Second State Finance Commission has submitted its report recommending series of measures to improve the revenue of the Local Government Bodies. The State Government is yet to announce its acceptance on the Recommendations of the Commission. It has to be recognised that the centralised planning with its sectoral earmarking and the various centrally sponsored schemes with national guidelines have created formidable hurdles to decentralised planning through autonomous electoral institutions. The ever increasing central schemes and centrally sponsored schemes, which many a time are used to distribute political patronage especially during an election years will run into difficulties with decentralised planning. The MPs Local Area Development Scheme adds another distortion. Similarly MLAs also have their version of schemes at their level (82 lakhs for each constituency). For implementing this Scheme the concerned MLA need not consult the Local Panchayat Council. Hence the elected leaders dissatisfied and raising doubts about the transparency and accountability of spending the public money.

Some of the finance related problems faced by panchayats are:

- 80% of the Panchayats revenue in Tamil Nadu are State / Union government grants, The Central / State Governments grants are given with specific conditions, in which the kind of works to be taken are listed by government orders / circulars.
- No proper allocation of funds as promised in the Assembly Budget Demand by the state government. Even after 3 months of the constitution of newly elected Panchayats till today no devolution of funds under State Finance Commission Grants was made.
- Inability to collect taxes from industries and other commercial ventures resulting in large amounts of arrears. This effect development works in the village.
- The bills from the Electricity Board are very huge creating a great burden on Panchayats to repay. This is especially so in the case of panchayats with weak resources. This is expected to be paid as a priority from the State grant for maintenance. In several panchayats the payment of electricity bills results in no money for other maintenance works.
- There is no contingency fund for panchayat similar to the State Government contingency fund. This results in Panchayat Government being unable to take necessary action in times of flood, drought, special compensation, rehabilitation in times of riots or human rights violation etc.
- The equalisation grant meant for strengthening panchayats with weak financial resources is insufficient. The criteria for deciding on the panchayat needs to be scientifically graded and not necessarily on a population criteria. This would help weaker panchayats to take more measures for income generation, asset maintenance, regeneration of natural resources, implementation of development works etc.
- The salaries for maintenance staff are woefully inadequate and inhuman. This must be improved by atleast 300%.

- The power to tax and sharing of tax revenue is inadequate and in favour of the State Government. This results in very meager resources for the panchayats. The answer is more fiscal autonomy for raising financial resources.
- The allocation of 8% tax revenue for local government bodies, 55% of which goes to panchayat government is inadequate to empower local government institutions. This needs to be increased to 50% of tax revenue in light of the recommendations for devolution and transfer of powers, administration and personnel to panchayat bodies.

6.4. Bureaucratic Authoritarianism of Monitoring and Controlling Authorities

- ◆ Chapter X of the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act 1994 must be repealed as it violates the essence of the Constitutional mandate and the rationale of decentralised governance. During the last five year term among the elected panchayat presidents who have been removed by the District Collector, majority are women and dalit presidents. The provisions in this chapter also allows the bureaucracy to threaten the elected representatives and several leaders are victimised with these provisions. Hence one of the main demand of the elected representatives is that repeal Chapter X, especially Sec. 205 of the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act 1994 dealing with the removal of Panchayat President by the District Collector.

6.5. No Devolution of Administrative Mechanisms & Staffing.

- ◆ An analysis of the existing establishment pattern for rural development works at the district and the sub-district level indicates that Panchayat Union level has been well equipped with adequate technical skilled and administrative personnel whereas Village Panchayat and District Panchayat do not have adequate staff (both technical and non-technical). In Tamil Nadu only one Panchayat Assistant is the available staff for village panchayats. The above pattern very clearly brings out that there is a urgent need for the re-organisation of the structure of these Rural Local Bodies. The District Panchayat also does not have any infrastructure facility for executing its planning and monitoring decisions.
- ◆ According to the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, (Section 108 & 109) school teachers and health workers have been declared as government servants and their services protected. Hence the Panchayat Coucill or the elected representatives have no control over the functioning of teachers and doctor who are erring in their duties, which affects the local population. While their status as government servants and terms of service may be maintained they should be placed on deputation with the Panchayats under the panchayat control to ensure effective functioning of the schools and health centres.

6.6. Absence of Powers to Protect Common Village Resources / Porombokes, Land, Properties.

- ◆ Due to macro economic policies of the State Government and Union Government there is an unprecedented and unregulated entry of mega industrial and infrastructure projects, shrimp industries, prohibited polluting industries in cities, villages and all along the coast including hotel and tourism resorts and entertainment parks. Most have been guaranteed by the Government use of common lands, unlimited water resources, drainage channels into water bodies and the sea, infrastructure like roads, transport, subsidised electricity etc. Further many of them enjoy tax holidays and large volume of loans from Public Finance Institutions. Most often the Panchayat Institutions is not even consulted before the State and Central Government take decisions to locate a particular project in a particular village, next to water body, city area or coastal area. This has resulted in enormous hardship, loss of livelihood and destruction of life sustaining eco-systems and environment.
- ◆ The village panchayats on Tamil Nadu have no access to village maps, details of the village common resources, etc., and record related to reclassification of village maps and land use management and changes in uses of common property resources natural resources etc., Hence the village panchayat and the gram sabha could not influence the decisions regarding acquisitions or sale of lands for public and private industrial projects, infrastructure projects etc. This is very significant as several of these projects totally uproot thousands of people within the panchayat having little or no powers.
- ◆ The enforcement of land reforms is very weak in Tamil Nadu, thousands of acres has been encroached by dominant people including panchami lands temple lands and lands of irrigation tanks and ponds. Panchayats should ensure land rights for common people by being entrusted with powers for distribution of lands through panchayats. Similarly, panchama lands should also be taken possession of and transferred to Dalits. For this panchayats should have power to identify the lands encroached, take possession and restore to the dalits.
- ◆ The Amendment to Sec. 159 introduced in 1999 is a positive step to empower village panchayats. However Government of Tamil Nadu have not yet framed the rules regarding Sec.159 and detail the purposes for which no place within its limits shall be used without a licence including the above mentioned projects. Further the amendment to Sec 159 says that the village panchayat may do so with the previous approval of the prescribed authority. Since the prescribed authority (often the District Collector) has the veto power over the resolutions of panchayat and gram sabha, panchayats are unable to protect its resources.
- ◆ All common water resources at the village panchayat level like water courses, springs, reservoirs, tanks, fountains, wells, stand pipes etc., should

be vested and maintained by the panchayats. The section dealing with this which as in the earlier 1958 Act is omitted in the 1994 Act. Hence the Government should insert section 84 of 1958 Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act in to this new Act.

6.7. Planning and Participation in Implementation of Programmes / Schemes - A Myth.

In Tamil Nadu the planning process from below is far from reality. Till today the state government makes decisions on welfare schemes at its whims and fancies. Even the recent hikes in milk, electricity, transport fares it is presumed the Panchayat Government irrelevant. Even simple matter like whether to give an egg or potato in the noon-meal or decisions on what should be sold in the ration shops at what prices for whom, even District Panchayat Presidents are not consulted. So what is the relevance of Panchayat Government if they continue to remain as mere agents of the State Government. Panchayats are not even consulted before introducing any new scheme. This has been reflected in the introduction of Cheap liquor in the state to combat illicit liquor. This recent decision of the Government has been widely opposed by women panchayat presidents. The women presidents argued that opening of toddy shops or supply of cheap liquor is not a solution to overcome the illicit arrack problem. The Federation of Women Panchayat Presidents in a press statement questioned the intention of the Government in introducing cheap liquor when it is not bothered about bringing down the prices of essential commodities which has been hiked recently. They also expressed that without chalking out a plan to eradicate poverty, the Government is trying to add to the woes of the poor. In the place of individuals getting killed with the consumption of hooch, the State would witness suicides of families, they said.

Adequate recommendations were made for involving Panchayat Government in five year planning process. The Village Panchayat should prepare a Village Panchayat Plan and the Panchayat Union Council should prepare the plan for Panchayat Union linking with the village plans. The district panchayat should consolidate and prepare the plan for the district. The district planning committee will finalise plans of rural and urban local bodies and of various other sectors by integrating them. Detailed rules need to be evolved by the District Planning Committee together with experts. State Government bureaucrats should be kept out of this process.

Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Presidents of Panchayat Government [TNFWPPG]

- ◆ There are 38,540 elected women representatives in three tier panchayats of Tamil Nadu. Among them 4264 are women panchayat presidents. For the past 5 years, our assessment is that the governance of women panchayat presidents have achieved more than male presidents with regard to fulfillment of basic needs of people. With this 5 years of experience, the Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Presidents of Panchayat Government has proposed several recommendations to the Government of Tamil Nadu (resolutions enclosed) for making decentralised governance a reality and guaranteeing conditions for Women Panchayat Presidents to administer their duties in an atmosphere of dignity and freedom. Hundreds of women have opposed male domination and are doing excellent work as local – government authority.

Recommendations with regard to Empowerment of Elected Women Representatives of Panchayat Government.

- ◆ Resolution of the difficulties faced by women and dalits in the panchayat institution requires government's urgent attention. Government of Tamil Nadu must take urgent steps to guarantee an environment in which women and dalits are able to function in an atmosphere of dignity and freedom. Further, Government should concentrate on supporting capacity building programmes especially for women and dalits & take extra efforts to ensure that all information from Government actually reaches panchayats headed by women and dalits.
- ◆ Complaints filed by such victimised Presidents to District Authorities & Government of Tamil Nadu regarding matters where they are being obstructed by government functionaries and local dominant political / caste – class groups from functioning, threats to their lives, corruption, encroachment etc., must be dealt with on a priority basis by district authorities to stop the torture and threats.
- ◆ The Village President for instance is an executive authority and is a government functionary in the sense of a Public Servant. Any person obstructing the functioning of a public servant in the panchayat government should be proceeded against legally.
- ◆ In order to evolve a participatory democratic process through panchayat raj, legal action should be taken against complaints of harassment, violence, false cases, using caste discriminatory language made on elected representatives, specifically from among women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes. There needs to be enabling provisions in the Panchayat Act for taking such actions. There should be provisions similar to the contempt proceedings in the Legislature and Parliament against persons

violating the law. This possibility must be examined. Merely stating that the offended elected representatives can approach the courts is insufficient.

- ◆ The important Government Orders passed by the government should reach all village panchayat within 10 days. Interference and control by State Government through G.O's and circulars in the daily panchayat administration should be stopped. The District Panchayat should be empowered to create an District Information Centre and the responsibility of collection and dissemination of information must be vested with this body.
- ◆ The District Panchayat administration must have a special investigative cell and recommend prosecution of persons against whom elected representatives lodge a complaint in relation to crimes against the body and caste discrimination.
- ◆ The exercise of control by the authorities over the elected representatives continues till today. Hence many honest panchayat presidents are affected to a great extent. Specifically we demand that the State Government issue orders to make the government officials like the Union Engineer, Block Development Officer, Assistant Director, etc., bound by the resolutions of the panchayats and communicate to them in specified duration of time.
- ◆ Numerous panchayat presidents, nearly 50% of us are earning less than minimum wages and living in poverty conditions. Especially elected women leaders are economically dependent on their family. Irrespective of the source and extent of assets and wealth, every elected Panchayat Presidents, Chairperson and Councilors of the Panchayat Union and District Panchayats should be remunerated with a monthly salary considerate with their powers and duties.
- ◆ All the departments of state government should be bound to reply immediately any communication from the president with regard to the panchayat resolutions. The State Government should issue orders to all the departments instructing them strictly not to make the panchayat presidents wait and linger in all the departments for state action.
- ◆ All Government Departments should produce an Action Taken Report to the resolutions of Gram Sabha Meetings at least by the next Gram Sabha meeting. The fixed days for Gram Sabha meetings viz., Gandhi Jayanthi, Republic Day, Independence Day and May day by the State Government should be abandoned. The village panchayats should have the power to decide the dates and timing for calling gram sabha meetings.
- ◆ With regard to disadvantaged groups and women, despite constitutional empowering provisions and election of representatives, the Government of Tamil Nadu must take special efforts to create forums for them to express their opinions and evolve programmes which will be wholly managed by the Panchayats for the economic empowerment of these communities. Further, there are several false complaints and threats and violence against such sections. Government must immediately take measures to ensure that any

such offence committed against the disadvantaged and women is dealt with punitively.

Recommendations for Policy and Legal Reforms to Strengthen the Panchayat Government in Tamil Nadu.

- The Government of Tamil Nadu should devolve the powers under XIth schedule of the Indian Constitution in toto to three tier panchayat and recommend that a separate List IV for Local Government be incorporated in the Constitution.
- All related government departments now overseeing activities contained in the 29 powers meant to be entrusted to panchayats must be decentralised and state government officials should be made to work as public servants of the Panchayat government. They should be treated as 'staff' of the Local-government and not as state government staff. They should be accountable to the Panchayat Government.
- As a first phase of management and controlling powers over Health, Education, PDS, Social Welfare which is under the State Government Departments must be entrusted to three tier panchayats. All the government staffs like teachers, doctors etc., should come under the control of panchayats.
- Section 205, of Tamil Nadu, Panchayat Act dealing with removal of panchayat president by the District Collector should be repealed. Permitting the Collector to remove the President of panchayats is an aberration of the tenets of self reliant local – governance. Parallely Chapter X of Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act should be repealed as these provisions are being used by bureaucracy to control and victimize the elected representatives of Panchayat Government.
- There should be no rotation for Reserved Constituencies of Women Panchayat Presidents for the Next Election. In several village panchayats women have gained an opportunity for entering into public life through this reservation and efficiently managing the Panchayat Administration. Hence the present reserved constituencies for women should be retained for next election.
- The allocation of 8% of state's revenue tax to local government bodies is insufficient. Within the 8% our three tier panchayat are receiving only 55%. Panchayat Government bodies are unable to manage local needs within this meager financial assistance. The State Government should devolve 50% of its total revenue expenditure to Local Government Bodies.
- The Electricity charge for Village Panchayats is very heavy and it creates a great burden to repay. This is especially so in the case of panchayats with weak resources. In several village panchayat the payment of electricity bills results in no money for other maintenance works. Hence the State

Women and Grama Sabha

Experiences from Kerala

The 73rd and 74th Amendments of the constitution paved the way for decentralisation of power and setting up of Grama Sabhas. Grama Sabha envisages direct participation of people in the administration and development activities of a village.

All the voters in a village are members of grama sabha. Grama Sabha is the lowest body which has direct representation of the people. No other body in the democratic set up has direct representation.

In Kerala

Women constitute 50 % of the population. The setting up of Grama Sabha helped rural women to express their views and ideas without fear. Since grama Sabha meetings are held in the ward itself women can attend the meeting without difficulty. They can explain their problems in their own language.

The average attendance of women in Grama Sabha is 25 to 30% out of this only 10 to 15% actually participate in discussion and raising of problem. The women participants come from BPL families. Women from APL families normally do not attend grama sabha.

There is one grama sabha each for each ward. 10% of the total voters is the quorum. During a year grama sabha must meet 4 times. The grama sabha meetings are connected with the plan process. In the 1st meeting discussion on the annual plan is being done. In the 2nd meeting discussion on annual project prepared by the grama panchayat is being done. Recommendations and approval is given by the grama sabha. The third and fourth meetings of the grama sabha is in connection with selection of beneficiaries and implementation.

Since 1/3 of the panchayat members are women they can play a vital role in the developmental activities. Women members in majority of panchayat encourage women's to participation in grama sabha. When supported by women panchayat members the rural women raise their problems in the grama sabha without fear.

In Kerala as a result of the planning process women self help groups have emerged. Self Help Groups are non formal groups with women from BPL families as members. These groups promote saving habits and thrift programmes. They

participate in grama sabha and actively participate in discussion. These groups have also started implementing projects under productivities sector.

The participation of women in grama sabha is high when benefits of any kind is being distributed. When beneficiaries are selected through grama sabha also the number of women participants increase. When women panchayat members personally contact rural women the participation is on the high. The style of conducting grama sabha also differs. Women panchayat members show more care in the case of rural women as a result of which the number of participants increase.

10 % of the plan fund is being allocated for projects which directly improve the conditions of women. During 1997-98 there was a request to the grama panchayats to earmark 10 % of the plan fund for women development. But majority of the panchayats did not allocate 10 %. During 1998-99 it was made mandatory to prepare projects for 10 % of the plan for women development. During 1999-2000 women component plan scheme was introduced. The plan document must have to contain projects for 10 % which aimed at women development.

Grama panchayats started releasing financial aid to Self Help Groups by giving working capital. NABARD and other Banks also came forward to help the SHGs which performed better. SHGs in turn started cultivating paddy, vegetables, tapioca etc. in agricultural lands which were kept uncultivated. Self Help Groups also started income generating programmes, small scale industries such as food processing, garment making etc. also have been started by these SHGs. In those panchayats where SHGs function properly the participation of women in grama sabha is high.

After 3 years of "JANAKEYYASOOTHANAM" there is a steady increase in the participation of women in grama sabha. The members of SHGs have become aware of grama sabha participation. Members of SHGs participate in grama sabha as groups and actively engage in discussion. They also came forward to be represented in development seminar of grama panchayats. Grama Panchayats have found that rural women have their own abilities. If they are given a chance to lead any responsibility they will do it in full spirit. Therefore the panchayats have started identifying and evaluating SHGs for extending support for implementing developmental projects.

Empowerment of panchayats smithy, especially the women panchayat members is the need of the hour. The members who came from rural areas do not have any experience. Hence they must be empowered through awareness programmes and skill development programmes.

Gender Governance and Grama Sabha

In Kerala grama panchayats headed by women, function more effectively. Women elected members have another important role also. They can work for the upliftment of the entire women folk in the panchayat. Women participate actively even in election campaign.

During the early years of Panchayat Raj (1996) political parties found it difficult to get women candidates to contest election. But at the close of the first term 1996-2000 women voluntarily came forward to contest. Women have themselves proved to be capable of election campaign, governance and to discharge their official duties. Women are now actively working in political parties.

Major Lessons Learnt

1. The percentage of reservation for women must be increased from 33% to 50%. Since the population constitute more than 50%.
2. The entire women folk must be induced to participate in the grama sabha.
3. Awareness programmes must be conducted to empower women about Panchayat Raj. This can effectively be done through self help groups and neighbourhood groups.
4. All out efforts must be made to release the plan fund in full in time to the grama panchayats, implementation of the projects must also be transparent.
5. Grama sabha now listen to the words of women.
6. Women members in grama sabha has succeeded in cultivating transparency in the selection of beneficiaries.
7. Women have succeeded in solving the problem issued in grama sabha.
8. Women representatives have also succeeded in tackling the bureaucracy.

Efforts, Experiences in strengthening in grama sabha in your state

1. The "Dalits" usually keep aloof from the grama sabha. Efforts must be made to increase their participation.

2. The participation of upper middle class in grama sabha is also poor. This must be tackled.
3. The "Panchayat Samithy" must be strengthened first. The elected body must be given more power and resource.
4. Neighbourhood group and self help groups are to be linked with the grama sabha.
5. Elected members must be given continuous training in various subjects.
6. Non governmental organisation must be brought to the developmental activities.
7. The political parties also must extend necessary help to the elected members.

M. Anithamol

Vice-President

Kallara Grama Panchayat

Kottayam Dist. Kerala

I am a native of Kallara grama panchayat in Kottayam district of Kerala state. I had my school days at LPS Kallara and St. Thomas High School Kallara. After passing the X th class I joined for Pre-degree. After passing pre-degree I joined for typewriting and shorthand course and then joined as a teacher in a commercial institute.

I have two brothers and 4 sisters. I am the youngest in my family.

I have never been a political worker. But as my father and brothers used to work in politics I had a chance to cultivate some interest in politics.

On becoming an elected representative I had no clear idea about the functioning of a grama panchayat.

After becoming a elected representative I was able to undergo a series of training in different subjects. These training programme, together with one year experience in the panchayat has helped me a lot in discharging my duties. During the one year period as an elected member I could cultivate a cordial relation with many people in all works of life.

I have not come through any serious difficult problems till now. The officials in panchayat as well as other often are helpful and cooperative. My social status has since been improved. I also do believe that I could do many things to the poor people. As a woman I have many limitation. From the general public I receive the best cooperation. Therefore, I am more interested in political/ social field.

Even after becoming an EWR I had participated in 'grama Sabha'. I had also participated actively in group discussion. This experiences helped me to conduct the grama sabha of my ward. Now I am confident to successfully handle the any problems raised in grama sabha.

It has since been proved that grama sabha is a must in planning and implementation. In our state grama sabha is the most effecting body at the lower level in which the needs and problems of the poor people as well as the village as a whole is being discussed. The procedure for selecting the beneficiaries is so transparent that there is no chance for any complaint. At present women attend. the grama sabha with more enthusiasm and interest.

In Kerala 10 % of the plan fund is year marked for women development (women component plan) programmes. Promotion of Self Help Groups (SHG) Neighbourhood Groups (NHG) and affiliation of SHGs to the Kudumbasree project (A mission to eradicate poverty) has helped the empowerment of women in rural Kerala.

Ward wise details of Grama Sabha Participation in Kallara Grama Panchayat

Ward No.	Date	Male	Female	Total
I	22/5/1997	44	16	60
	20/8/1997	80	21	101
	24/11/1997	81	26	107
	31/7/1998	135	106	241
	6/12/1998	77	82	159
	1/5/1999	40	70	110
	27/10/1997	97	46	143
	2/3/2000	84	62	146
	8/7/2000	97	54	151
	10/10/2000	92	64	156
	22/7/2001	89	34	123
	2/11/2001	75	38	113
	11/12/2000	96	84	160
	II	24/5/1997	67	47
6/9/1997		82	43	125
21/11/1997		59	46	105
28/7/1998		88	44	132
18/12/1998		81	39	120
6/5/1999		39	26	65
25/10/1999		78	39	117
6/3/2000		37	15	52
13/3/2000		40	20	60
20/7/2000		65	41	106
17/7/2001		70	34	104
3/11/2001		63	46	109
III		25/7/1997	80	54
	8/8/1997	58	52	110
	17/11/1997	49	64	113
	30/7/1998	68	75	143
	14/12/1998	78	66	144
	5/5/1999	54	22	76
	29/10/1999	85	70	155
	12/3/2000	70	75	145
	17/7/2000	72	46	118
	11/10/2000	85	45	130
	14/7/2001	89	26	115
	5/11/2001	71	37	108
IV	28/5/1997	81	62	143
	9/8/1997	148	167	315
	18/11/1997	62	49	111
	30/7/1998	168	200	368
	15/12/1998	87	67	154
	4/5/1999	35	66	101
	28/10/1999	105	97	202
	9/3/2000	70	96	166
	17/7/2000	72	77	149

Ward No.	Date	Male	Female	Total
	14/7/2001	63	57	120
	5/11/2001	51	68	119
V	27/5/1997	35	25	60
	21/8/1999	57	78	135
	15/11/1997	45	44	89
	1/8/1998	126	87	213
	7/12/1998	54	41	95
	3/5/1999	51	45	96
	22/10/1999	59	75	134
	10/3/2000	73	69	142
	12/7/2000	64	73	137
	15/7/2001	69	77	146
	3/11/2001	43	70	113
VI	31/5/1997	69	1	70
	30/8/1997	93	10	103
	19/11/1997	73	31	104
	24/7/1998	95	23	118
	12/12/1998	77	24	101
	3/5/1999	60	23	83
	23/10/1999	74	68	142
	11/3/2000	86	48	134
	21/7/2000	96	50	146
	15/7/2001	64	60	124
	11/11/2001	41	82	123
VII	29/5/1997	81	26	107
	24/8/1997	21	80	101
	20/11/1997	70	40	110
	26/7/1998	46	97	143
	3/12/1998	77	82	159
	5/5/1999	28	76	104
	20/10/1999	70	48	118
	4/3/2000	52	45	97
	15/7/2000	64	48	112
	16/7/2001	57	45	102
	12/11/2001	47	43	102
VIII	30/5/1997	40	14	54
	25/8/1997	85	120	205
	22/11/1997	51	52	103
	25/7/1998	98	51	149
	19/12/1998	52	42	94
	5/5/1999	41	35	76
	20/10/1999	39	79	118
	5/3/2000	36	22	58
	11/3/2000	47	29	76
	15/7/2000	45	47	92
	21/7/2001	82	61	143
	10/11/2001	55	85	140

Ward No.	Date	Male	Female	Total
IX	21/7/1997	70	55	125
	10/11/2001	64	49	113
X	20/7/2001	139	86	225
	12/7/2001	64	39	103