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Changing Social and Political Relations in the Kaveri Delta

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1. Introduction

One of the most significant political changes over the past 25 years in Tamil Nadu, as elsewhere in India, is the implementation of a statutory status for local elected governments in rural and urban areas in accordance with the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution passed by the Indian Parliament in 1993. These amendments also make mandatory the entry of women into the local political bodies of Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samithi through a 33 per cent reservation system. In this chapter we describe how these changes have been implemented and experienced and acted upon in the villages that we have resurveyed.

The social and political dynamic that we have witnessed is closely linked up with other factors, which affect the outcome in various ways. As we have seen above, the gradual economic transformation into a diversified rural-urban economy is one important background. The social policy interventions of successive state governments in Tamil Nadu since the time of our first survey in 1979/80 constitute another significant set of factors. These interventions have been brought about mainly through the work and mobilisations by political parties and social movements all over Tamil Nadu. The more important among these interventions include the following:

- The system of distribution, at subsidised prices, of some essential commodities-mainly rice, sugar and kerosene - through retail outlets
- Expansion of school and higher education, both through government run institutions and through the promotion of private educational institutions, including so called self-financing colleges
- Provision of midday meals in schools and pre-school centres, gradually extended to all preschool/school going children up to class 10 for 300 days in a year
- Improved infrastructure and service delivery in respect of provision of maternal and infant and child care and significant increase in the number of primary health centres (PHCs), health sub centres (HSCs) and hospitals in the government sector¹
- Promotion of self-help groups (SHGs) of women and provision of small amounts of credit ('micro credit') to SHGs through NGO intermediation as well as directly through the banking system.

An important question to discuss is how these interventions have fared during the era of neo-liberal policies in India after 1991, which at least in theory have aimed at the reduction of state interventions and leaving more room for the market and so called civil society to deal with economic and social issues and problems. What is the situation in Tamil Nadu?

¹ PHCs cater, as per norm, to a rural population of 30,000 in the plains and 20,000 in hilly areas. The norm for HSCs is one per 5000 population.

There have also been some social and political changes when it comes to caste relations. In the villages that we have re-surveyed, there is some evidence that among some of the castes traditional caste loyalties have gradually been replaced by caste mobilisations based on social welfare and economic interests. This has implications for local, state and national politics. However, more traditional mobilisations can still be found as is clear from the next section.

Study Frame

Tamil Nadu belongs to that part of India that has experienced fairly stable economic growth and social development in the past 25 years. In our panel study of six villages in Karur and Tiruchirappalli districts, we have documented this development in various ways. The most important findings relate to a doubling of average real incomes, rapid growth of non-farm activities and a reduction of inequality in terms of operated area and income among the land operating agrarian households in our sample (Djurfeldt et al 2008a). We have identified the two most important driving forces in this transformation as industrialisation with its side effects and state social policy interventions.

Being close both to the Tiruppur-Karur textile industry belt and the growing city of Tiruchirappalli, many of the households we studied have been able to diversify their economic activities into a number of non-agricultural activities. The actual number of factory jobs is still small, but the number of workers now engaged in shops, various services and modern professional occupations, building industry, etc., is quite significant. Almost 70% of the studied agrarian households have one or more members so engaged. Our statistics on income shows that it has increased faster than farm income over the past two and a half decades. Today 64% of household income derives from the non-farm sector, that is, the secondary and tertiary sector of the economy. In 1980, this proportion was only 34%.

The development of a rudimentary welfare state is also part of the story. Despite the neoliberal policies at the centre and the pressure on the Tamil Nadu state government to lower spending on social welfare, we still find functioning state run low price shops in all the villages which supply basic provisions of rice, kerosene, and sugar to more than three-fourths of the population. There are more and better government schools than earlier in all the villages and in all of them there are also crèches and centres for the care of pregnant mothers and infants (*anganwadis*). All schools and nurseries serve a midday meal to all the children, which help in improving nutritional standards. Thus working parents are freer to work full time than earlier. This now also provides a larger number of jobs for people in the villages, not just as teachers but also as auxiliary nurses, pre-school assistants, literacy workers, etc., than was the case in 1979-80. However, recruitment to regular public service employment has been at a standstill through more than a decade and a half. Recently, there has been some recruitment of teachers.

It is this development coupled with a somewhat slower but still steady growth of agricultural production that makes up the basis for the material improvements that we have observed.

Studied Villages and Methods

The economy and social structure in rural India and Tamil Nadu vary a lot depending on the kind of ecological setting in which it is embedded. In three of the studied villages – Rajendram,

Poyyamani and Nangavaram North canal-irrigated agriculture dominates. These are “wet villages”, in which traditionally the Brahmins owned the lands farmed by the scheduled caste tenants. Over the decades, a substantial portion of the lands have been taken over by the former overseers belonging to the intermediate caste Muthuraja, and by the scheduled castes. Some other peasant castes also own some land in these villages. Caste discrimination has declined to some extent with this development.

The other three studied villages – Naganoor, Kalladai and K Periapatti – rely on tanks and wells for irrigation, and have a sizeable proportion of lands under rainfed cultivation. These are the “dry villages”. In these villages, members of the intermediate Udaiyar, Gounder and Muthuraja castes still own almost all the land, and which is farmed by agricultural wage labourers, of whom a large proportion are dalits. Here discrimination against dalits is still practised in several ways.

In 1979-80, we interviewed 238 households, which constituted the main sample. In 2005-06, we have again interviewed the same sample households, except for five which we could not trace. Thirty-one of these households had out-migrated and have been replaced by 31 in-migrants. Of the 233 main sample households, 20 have left agriculture since 1979-80. The remaining 213 make up our sample of resident agricultural households in the study and constitute the main source of statistical analysis. This sample we call the agrarian population. Our data reflect their situation in 2004-05.

Our observations of the changes and the character of these transformations build on several methods. The most important is a household socio-economic survey with substantially the same questions asked in 1979-80 and in 2005-06 (Athreya, Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1990).

In 2005-06, we interviewed only the main sample of 233 households with a less elaborate questionnaire, which gave us more time for additional qualitative studies of various kinds. We have made several case studies of women representatives in the gram panchayats and of women members in SHGs. We have also used participatory observation and interviews with local informants to document and understand various aspect of social transformation.

Below follow sections on demography, family and kinship and caste relations before going into various aspects of the local political system, since this background plays an important role in the dynamic of local politics.

Migration

Of our original main sample respondents of 238, 31 had out-migrated for various reasons, that is, 12 %. In the wet area as many as 15 % had out-migrated, while this movement was much less in the dry area or just 6 %. The mobility was much higher among landless households, or 17 %, compared to landowning ones, only 4 %. Of out-migrants, ca 50 per cent had moved to nearby towns or cities, Karur topping the list with 4 migrant households. Most of the remaining migrants had gone to rural areas not very far from their native place. Among reasons given for leaving we find that unemployment and the opportunity to work elsewhere was one prominent cause, but so were also family matters (like old parents moving to offspring's village).

Immigration has been lower than out migration, or about 6 %, which means that there has been a net out migration at the rate of 6 %. However, the net out migration is much greater in the wet area or 9 %, compared to only 1 % in the dry area. To compensate for out-migration, we have taken an additional sample of 31 households among immigrant households, five in five of the

villages and 6 in one of them. It is a diverse group belonging to 18 different castes, among them 8 Dalit households, which may explain some of the small changes in the caste composition of our sample population in 2005, especially in the wet villages.

Family and kinship

Family and kinship relations also appear to be very stable in the midst of ongoing urbanisation and work outside agriculture. This can be seen from our data on family formations.

Table 1 Changes in family structure, per cent

Family type	1979/80	2005
Incomplete nuclear	13.0	12.6
Nuclear family	41.0	43.6
Extended family	31.0	25.0
Joint family	14.5	18.8
Total	99.4	100.0

But, the overall figures actually hide an underlying diversity. In the wet villages families tend to become more and more nuclear reflecting an ongoing urbanisation in settlement pattern. There is an opposite tendency in the dry area, which moves in the direction of more extended and joint families as is evident in the table below. Maybe this goes hand in hand with tendency to the strengthening of family farming.

Table 2 Changes in family structure wet and dry, per cent

Family type	1979/80	2005	1979/80	2005
	Wet	Wet	Dry	Dry
Incomplete nuclear	12.7	14.6	13.5	9.7
Nuclear family	42.7	50.8	38.4	33.3
Extended family	32.4	21.5	28.7	30.1
Joint family	11.4	13.1	19.4	27.0
Total	99.4	100.0	100.0	100.0

A parallel development may well have taken place in regard of the prevalence of female headed households. We don't have the comparative figures for 1979/80, but in 2004 we got the following distribution.

Table 3 Sex of head of household, per cent

	Wet villages	Dry villages	Total
Male	86.1	90.6	88.0
Female	13.9	9.4	12.0
Total	100	100	100

12 % of households are female headed. There are more female headed households in the wet area (14 %) than in the dry area (9 %). We do not really know if this is an increase from 1979/80. We have 9 such households in a case study, eight of whom belong to the wet villages.² It is interesting to see how these women make ends meet. When they are too old to go for regular work, they are helped most often it seems by neighbours rather than kin living at a distance. The practice of seclusion and avoidance of functions is also not followed by the younger of these women who keep regular contact with their larger kinship group.

Alongside these changes in family structures in the wet and dry areas there has been a reduction in household size, but more significantly so in the wet area.

Table 4 Mean size of households

Ecotype	1979-80	2005
Wet area	5.05	4.63
Dry area	5.70	5.48
Total	5.30	4.98

2. Caste

Made to fall at village elders' feet

In late 2005, some *dhobis* (whose traditional occupation was washing and cleaning of clothes) of Mathagiri Athupatti village in Kulithalai Taluk petitioned the Revenue Divisional Officer (RDO) to get free house site pattas in their village. This was a breach of the traditional code in which *dhobis* lived on land assigned to them by the dominant caste that they serve.

This innocent act, common in India today, angered the dominant caste in the village so much that they held a so called *katta Panchayat*.³ At the Panchayat, many but not all of the dominant caste members participated. The panchayatdars decided that two young *dhobis'* families should be ostracised and fined Rs. 50 000. The *dhobis* pleaded that they had no way of paying this big fine. The *katta Panchayat* then decided that the *dhobis* could propitiate the elders more times. For every act of propitiation,⁴ the fine would be reduced by a hundred rupees. Unable to do anything else, the two *dhobis* carried out the order till they fell down exhausted. They were made to pay Rs. 101.25. Afterwards, they were taken to the Kulithalai Government Hospital for recuperation. Here is a report from a widely respected English language daily, *The Hindu*, of what transpired afterwards:

² From the Revenue Department in Kulithalai we got the information that there were about 700 women in the Taluk who had been abandoned by their husbands and were entitled to a Rs. 200 pension per month. We were told, that the number had increased so much in recent years and that the scheme with pensions for them had now been stopped.

³ This story is based on two reports in the Hindu, January 21 and 22, 2006

⁴ A propitiation means sitting down in front of the elders with hands crossed, holding the ears' nibs and then raising up full length.

‘At a peace committee meeting held on Friday (20 January 2006, our remark) at the office of the Kulithalai Revenue Divisional Officer . . . , the dominant caste representatives admitted that they had held a kangaroo court⁵ that punished the *dhobis*. As the villagers emerged from the meeting, the police arrested them. State Human Rights Commission Member . . . , on a visit to Karur, said the Commission would act if it received any complaint.’ (*The Hindu*, 22 January 2006)

The incident narrated above about the *dhobis*’ bid for ‘emancipation from virtual slavery and desire for a piece of land,’ (*The Hindu*, 21 January 2006), and the response of the dominant caste illustrates the tenacious persistence of caste oppression and the struggle against it. The roles played by the State government, especially its police, and Tamil Nadu State Human Rights Commission also illustrate the changing times.

There are two important conclusions to be drawn from this incident: On the one hand, it is evident that caste oppression is still strong in this part of South India. On the other, it is also clear that there are struggles to overcome this oppression, and that the State’s role itself reflects the changing balance of forces on the ground.

Caste structures and Scheduled Caste struggles

Contemporary studies of social stratification point to an on-going and significant change of the rural caste structure from a hierarchic and segmented system to an order, where castes, though still bound together by endogamous practices, are more autonomous in relation to each other and in which the meanings of caste have changed (see, for example, Srinivas 2003 and Gupta 2005). Social mechanisms behind this change include the changing division of labour and democratic politics, and these are significantly influenced by rural economic transformation. Can these changes also be traced in our study villages?

The first impression on our return in 2005 was that the traditional social structure of caste, family and kinship had not changed much in the past 25 years. The continuity and stability is true for the households and their habitats.

With the relative stability of the households, it follows that the same castes are there in 2005 as in 1979-80 and live in the same localities, making the villages appear as stable and socially segmented as ever. There are a few examples of inter-caste marriages in our interview material but the main impression is that caste endogamy is strongly entrenched.

In Table 5 below we present the caste structure by ecotype in 1979 and 2004.

In the wet area, the intermediate Muthuraja caste seems to have strengthened its position, and today appears as a politically dominant caste although this position is often challenged by the equally big Pallar community, a Scheduled Caste now owning sizeable chunks of land and the status that follows with this.⁶ Together, these two communities make up 2/3 of the population.

⁵ The expression ‘kangaroo court’ conveys the meaning, that is, a court without any legal status.

⁶ It is the control of land that is the most important criteria of defining a dominant caste in a village, that is, a group which controls the “traditional village” also in social and political terms (cf. Srinivas 1987). With the linking of the rural economy to the urban-industrial one, landownership of course becomes relatively less important as a power base though still powerful.

As for the Vanniyar community, the third biggest caste grouping, the name Vanniyar was not used in 1979-80, instead Padayachi was used by most of these households. This change of name probably comes as a result of their political mobilisation in the political party called *Pattali Makkal Katchi*, PMK, which has a strong Vanniyar identity.⁷

Some castes have dwindled in size, like the once powerful Brahmin community, earlier controlling most of the land, which today has just about one per cent of the population, marking their exit to alternative, and often more lucrative, occupations in urban areas. Other, once-influential castes, which have dwindled, include the Soliya Vellala.

Table 5 Caste Structure by Ecotype, per cent

Caste	1979-80	2004
Wet villages		
<i>Traditional Upper Castes</i>		
Brahmin	3	1
Soliya Vellala	8	5
<i>Intermediate Castes</i>		
Muthuraja	29	34
Vanniyar (Padayachi, Kandar)	6	10
<i>Scheduled Castes (Dalits)</i>		
Pallar Moopan	30	33
Paraiyar	2	3
Paraiyan Valluva	5	-
<i>Other castes</i>	15	14
Total	100	100
Dry villages		
<i>Traditional Upper Castes</i>		
Soliya Vellala	3	2
<i>Intermediate Castes</i>		
Udaiyar	16	19
Gounder	35	40
Muthuraja	12	11
<i>Scheduled Castes (Dalits)</i>		
Pallar Moopan	8	6
Paraiyar	8	12
Paraiyan Valluva	5	-
Chakkiliyan	3	2
<i>Other castes</i>	10	8
Total	100	100

⁷ 'In Tamil Nadu, Vanniyars use various titles i.e. Padayachi, Gounder, Naicker/Nayagar, Vannia Reddiar, Kander/Kandar, Rayar (Mazhavarayar, Kalingarayar) and in some cases Pillai as a suffix to their names.' (Wikipedia)

Another interesting change is within the Pallar Moopan caste. Very few of them called themselves Devendra Pallar twenty-five years ago but in 2005 as many as one third gave this caste name when interviewed (actually, Devendra Kula Vellala).⁸ This change of name from the traditional Pallan Moopan may be connected to a social and political mobilisation that has taken place among them during the past two decades. The name indicates a history of higher caste background (researchers trace the name Pallar to a tribal past, see Wikipedia: Pallar Caste).

The mobilisation was in the beginning part of a larger surge to mobilise Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu exclusively as Scheduled Castes, without any reference to their class identity, initiated within the Paraiyar community and leading to the founding of Ambedkar Societies in SC settlements. But an alternative mobilization, primarily of people belonging to the Pallar caste, was initiated and led by Dr. Krishnasamy, who formed a political party called *Puthiya Thamizhagam*. When we discussed this matter with some young leaders in Poyyamani and asked how they could hope for political influence by organising along caste lines and with the Pallar community being less than 10 per cent of the population in Tamil Nadu, they answered that this was a matter of honour and for the sake of being recognised by others (cf. Racine and Racine 1998, and Ramaiah undated).⁹

However, as far as we could understand, the organisation was not very active in the three wet villages in our sample, except for giving schoolbooks to young students and organising sport activities at Pongal.¹⁰

Among the other castes in the wet area, there is rather little of caste organisation today. There seems to be little connection with modern urban caste associations trying to promote their caste socially and educationally. Traditional caste Panchayats are not overtly active in trying to control their caste and relations to other castes – their remaining function being more social such as organising sports during the Pongal festival.

But this is not the whole story about caste and power as we saw in the case of the two unfortunate barbers told above. Caste Panchayats among the middle and higher castes are activated at disputes or challenges, especially from the SC communities demanding their constitutional rights.

The most significant change is that in the wet villages land reforms (direct and indirect) have led to Brahmins selling out most of their land to intermediate and lower castes. The process started more than 40 years ago with the mobilisation of tenants in the Cauvery delta. Thus, even many of the SC now own land and have acquired the status of farmers/landowners. They dress up when

⁸ Devendra Kula Vellala is the gazetted name for SC Pallars in the Schedule, but most in the community use either Pallar Moopan or Devendra Pallan interchangeably (information from R. Vidyasagar).

⁹ The rift between the two ex-untouchable castes, viz. Pallar and Paraiyar, is a long story as reported by, for example, Thurston, describing various reports about it in the 19th century (Thurston 1909: 473-475). The segmented character of Dalit politics in north India is discussed, for example, by Wankhede 2008. While discussing Scheduled Caste mobilization in Tamil Nadu, it must not be forgotten that the pioneering efforts to mobilize SCs on issues of both caste oppression and economic demands were made by the Communist Party, starting in East Thanjavur in the early 1940s. In the more recent past, the CPI(M) has made major efforts to mobilize the most downtrodden SC section, the *arundathiyars*, besides initiating and providing leadership to the struggle against untouchability through the platform of the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF).

¹⁰ *Pongal* is a festival of considerable cultural significance in rural Tamil Nadu. It is a celebration of the harvest and thanksgiving, and occurs in the middle of January, coinciding with the beginning of the Tamil month of *Thai*.

entering the agra-harams (Brahmin residential quarters in the villages) and they freely walk into any restaurant along the Cauvery River. Thus, we see less of caste oppression and abuse of low caste women in this area than earlier. All the same, there is as we mentioned above, no break up of caste endogamy. Segmentation along caste lines persists and the ex-untouchable SCs are rarely, if at all, invited into the houses of the other castes. Even today, discrimination continues in many forms, including in serving of tea in separate glasses for SCs and in conditions of temple entry, festival participation, access to burning ghats and so on in the State. Some of these forms are also present in the villages we have surveyed.

In the dry villages, there has been much less of a social transformation in caste relations. The vast majority of the population belongs to the three dominant landowning Intermediate castes of Udaiyar (19 %), Gounder (40 %), and Muthuraja (11 %), which have increased their share of the population over the past 25 years. Among the SC castes, Paraiyar is the biggest group with 12% of the population, followed by Pallar (6 %), and a smaller community of Chakkiliyar (2 %, traditionally workers of animal hides and skins, who used to make leather buckets and ropes for lift irrigation and footwear). There are very few other castes in the dry area, making the caste structure fairly simple, transparent and stable.

The intermediate peasant castes still own most of the land and also form the majority of the population, while SCs everywhere make up a 20 % minority with little or no land. As landless or near landless, the latter work as day labourers on the lands owned by the caste Hindu landowners. Moreover, the three different SC castes are not united in trying to fight for their rights, but are instead dominated and divided by patron-client type relations to farmers belonging to the dominant communities.

SCs are still discriminated against. The most glaring practice is the 'two glass system' at some tea stalls: SCs no longer get tea through a hole in the backside, but they are served in separate glasses marked at the bottom with a cross. The SCs have responded to this by going to the Police and courts have banned the practice, but the practice is still there in at least one of our three sample villages. A similar pattern of discrimination was found in a study of some villages around Tiruppur (Carswell and De Neve 2014:108-109).

There is also rather strong bitterness among the SCs about 'the other communities' in the villages. Some SC colonies do not have piped drinking water, others suffer inconvenience by being forced to live in a low-lying and often flooded area, or for example, near the village burial ground with constant smoke hanging around, as in Naganur.

In the dry villages, mobilisation among SCs has come later than in the wet villages, primarily in the form of *Ambedkar Mandrams* (societies) among the Paraiyar community in which local funds for support to school children have been created. As with their Pallar parallel organisation, among Paraiyar there is also a political party connected to the movement called the Dalit Panthers of India. There were no signs of that party in our area, but in at least one of the Paraiyar colonies, there had been a very active mobilisation within the Ambedkar Mandram,¹¹ which has resulted in a higher level of education among especially the young men. It all started with Mr. Karuppiyah Bharathi, once secretary to the Railways Minister, Ram Vilas Paswan, who originates from here. He was the first one in the community, it seems, to get higher education and he has made a brilliant career, from being MD of a bank to becoming a politician in Delhi. He still holds a protective hand over his native place. He encourages people to study and encourages those who

¹¹ *Ambedkar Makkal Iekkam*, according to a local leader in Kalladai.

have done so to help others to follow in their footsteps by offering economic assistance. Those who are unemployed and remain in the village contribute by giving tuition to the kids.

If we compare SCs with the other castes in terms of wealth, we find a remarkable change in the relation which had started already in 1970s. SCs had about the same mean income per capita in 1979/80 as other castes and this situation continues in 2004/05. This is not say that SCs are at par in terms of wealth. Other castes have more pucca houses, electricity connections, motorcycles, TVs and phones, but the difference is not as glaring as it once was.

Among the dominant caste people in the dry villages, who are grounded in agriculture, quite a few resent the educational achievements of many SC boys and the way some of them return from towns on their shining motor-cycles to take up various government or NGO jobs. This atmosphere of tension and rivalry is exacerbated by the continued presence of caste Panchayats, especially among the dominant middle and landholding castes in the villages, which still control village affairs and relations between communities to a certain extent. In our interviews, we can see that the traditional caste Panchayat is still active (especially the Gounder caste) and interferes in village affairs in various ways, particularly if the established order is challenged by the SC communities.

Thus, what has been reported from all over India in the last decades is true also in the villages we have studied: there is on-going process of changing relations, a situation of flux, in which old caste hierarchy and oppression is intermingled with new and less inegalitarian relations. Change in the control over land among the castes is the most visible factor behind the changes that we can see. Another is the entry of SCs into non-farm occupations, in which the traditional division of labour between castes does not hold any more. A third factor is democratic politics as we have seen above and shall see more of below.

3. Democratic decentralisation

The constitutional amendment on local self-government adopted by the Indian Parliament in 1993 is one of the most significant political changes in the country since Independence. While there are important inter-state variations, it can generally be said that a more active local government is emerging with a limited but uneven devolution of finance and decision making power to the elected local bodies, both rural and urban.

The intent of the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts passed in this regard is to:

- devolve administrative functions to elected local bodies
- transfer functionaries to local bodies
- transfer substantial funds to the local levels and provide local bodies with the right to tax

Equally important, the Acts cited provide a statutory constitutional status for elected local bodies and require regular elections to be held. They provide for reservation of one-third of the seats to women and reservation of seats for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes to the extent of their shares in the population (cf. Mathew and Mathew 2003 and Athreya and Rajeswari 1998).¹²

¹² See also Manor 1999:5-8; and 2003.

The implementation of the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act of 1994 provides for a limited devolution of funds and decision making to the elected local bodies at the District, Block and Village levels. The Act follows the reservation stipulations provided for in the Central Act. Candidates for election to the Village Panchayats are not permitted to use political party symbols or contest on party tickets.

However, at the outset, it should be understood that the Act has several aspects not conducive to genuine devolution of power and strengthening of grassroots democracy. There is first of all, the question of powers vested with the bureaucracy to override the decisions of Panchayats or even to dissolve them.¹³ Second, the procedural bottlenecks and the need for clearances to be obtained from the line departments or the district / block administration hamper the implementation of resolutions passed and the works decided upon by Panchayats at various levels. Third, the lack of organic links between the three tiers of the Panchayat system – village, block and district – causes considerable difficulties of coordination, and weakens the representative character of local government. Fourth, the limited devolution of powers to local levels of government up to now is hampering their effectiveness in real terms.¹⁴

Elections

The seemingly perpetual competition and change of State government between the two ‘Dravidian’ parties, viz. DMK and AIADMK,¹⁵ has attracted a good deal of scholarly attention. Due to the kind of promises made during election times and the frequent inability to deliver, the system and process have been labelled in a somewhat derogatory sense as “competitive populism”, involving a system of great political personalities, clientelism and patronage (*Tamilnadu Economy. Performance and Issues* 1988).¹⁶

However, our field experience gives us reason to characterise the system as not so unresponsive to popular demands. There are functioning mass party organisations at the local levels,¹⁷ which have a significant bearing on welfare administration. In our survey in 2005, we found that about half of the households interviewed had membership in a political party, mainly DMK and ADMK.

At the state level, political parties based on caste and class alliances and patron-client ties increasingly seem to rely on issue- and need-based mobilisations in relation to the electorate, which has often translated into welfare measures of various kinds. (cf. Mehta 2004:4408; Swamy 1998; Subramanian 1999; Mehrotra 2006). The rudimentary welfare state that we have observed,

¹³ This power of the state government has been instituted with the motivation to ‘combat clientelism, corruption and mismanagement’ (Mathew and Mathew 2003: 24), but can of course be misused in various way by the ruling party and its administration.

¹⁴ See V.B. Athreya and K. S. Rajeswari (1998) for a more elaborate discussion of the rather limited nature of devolution of power to elected local bodies in Tamil Nadu. For a general discussion, see Aiyar 2002. Also relevant here is the Central government’s tendency to usurp the powers of State governments. On this, see Isaac and Franke 2002.

¹⁵ DMK stands for Dravida Munetra Kahzagam and AIADMK stand for All India Anna Dravida Munetra Kahzagam.

¹⁶ For a more general analysis of populism and clientelism in developing countries, see Mouzelius 1986:88-89, and for India, see Mathew and Mathew 2003:22-23; Widlund 2000: 33-47; and Alm 2006.

¹⁷ According to a study based on interviews with party leaders, DMK has about 75 lakh members, and ADMK has 100 lakh members (Suri 2006: 24).

with functioning low price shops, schools, nurseries, preventive health schemes, etc., has come about as a result of various popular mobilisations by the different political parties.

The increasing importance of welfare issues was witnessed in the elections to the Legislative Assembly in Tamil Nadu in May 2006. Here the DMK-led alliance campaigned successfully against the ruling AIADMK:

ELECTION manifestoes are usually derided as ritual documents full of promises that are not fulfilled. However, if the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) is in the saddle in Tamil Nadu today, a large part of the credit should go to its manifesto. The DMK's promises of subsidised rice through ration shops, free television sets, waiver of farmers' cooperative loans, free electricity to weavers and two acres of land for every landless peasant family struck the right chord with the masses. At least, that is what the results suggest, as the DMK-led Democratic Progressive Alliance (DPA) recorded a huge win - 163 of the 234 seats - in the May 8 (2006-Our insertion) Assembly elections. The rival front headed by the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) stood humbled with 69 seats (Subramanian 2006).

From what we have seen subsequently, while not all promises were being honoured, several of them are being implemented, although with varying intensity and sense of urgency. The supply of rice through the public distribution system at two rupees per kilogram to all households is an example of serious implementation, while the promise of 2 acres of land for every landless family ran into serious problems of both implementation and political will.¹⁸

Local elections

Promises made during campaigns for election to the legislative assembly naturally reflect issues of concern to the state electorate. Local body elections are based more on local issues that can be settled only at the village level. In the local body elections in October 2006 that we observed¹⁹ most of the candidates were requesting voters to elect them so that they could immediately respond to all their problems.

Most candidates built their following on their local influence, with backing from a political party indirectly in some cases. There are considerable stakes involved in local body elections. Being a ward member or President of the Village Panchayat offers the opportunity to access and control village funds and contracts for construction works, etc., and the 'extras' that can be made out of these transactions. Sometimes, presidents and ward members themselves take on contracts.

In some parts of Tamil Nadu in the 2006 local elections, the post of Panchayat President was up for auction, in which the candidates offered a sum (in one case as much as Rs. 6 lakh) to be spent on a temple fund or village welfare fund, and were then unanimously elected by the villages (Indian Express 26 September 2006). This may be a spectacular aspect of the local elections, but the fact is that in a contest situation, a successful candidate will have to spend considerable amounts for his campaign to get elected. We could observe this in our sample villages. We heard from some informants that to become a Panchayat President may cost anything up to a lakh, and

¹⁸ The state government now provides rice to the extent of 12 to 20 kilograms per family per month at one rupee per kilogram.

¹⁹ These observations were made by R. Vidyasagar and D. Kathirvel who followed some of the elections campaigns and their outcome in five of our sample villages.

becoming a ward member between Rs. 10,000 and 30 000. Our interviews with women ward members revealed that some of them did not want to stand for a second term because of the costs involved.

Summarising our case studies, we can say that candidates in local elections emphasize their personal image to convince the electorate that they should get the vote and solve the problems facing the village. Sometimes, more specific promises are made, such as construction of a road or provision of drinking water, etc., tasks which fall within the ambit of the Village Panchayat. However, as we have also seen, most candidates build their following on their local influence and in some cases indirect support from a political party.

Local Village Panchayat elections follow a different logic than state elections. The main determining factors are caste (and family-lineage), class and the alliances between these that various candidates can form in order to win a majority in their ward or village constituency.²⁰ There is often an element of co-optation in these electoral alliances. The power of the dominant sections of the dominant castes in the villages is such that they are even able in many cases to strongly influence, through various means including finance, the selection of SC candidates in multi-caste constituencies reserved for SCs. In return, they expect to be able to have strong influence on the decisions that the new village Panchayat will take. Thus, there is a perpetuation of dependency relations, which has been observed more generally in local elections and functioning of the emerging Panchayati Raj system:

“... if participation leads to reproduction of power relationship, identical or similar, or perpetuates the dependency relationships between have and have-nots, it cannot be construed as real participation.” (Narayanan 2003:2484)

In some instances, women's SHGs in the villages participate in local body elections, when one of their members is in the fray, by campaigning for that person. On their own, however, they are not able to win these battles since caste and class influence weigh so decisively in the final outcome.

Money plays a role in all contests to provide food and drinks, pamphlets, travel, remuneration of the candidate's followers, etc. Money is also used for buying out potentially powerful opponents, that is, to make them withdraw from the contest. In cases where there is only one powerful candidate for the ward or president position, money naturally plays less of a role: Prospective candidates realise that they are up against a powerful and wealthy candidate and become reluctant to contest, not least in view of the considerable sums of money they would have to spend at low odds of winning.

Candidates are not permitted to contest on party symbols in the elections to the village Panchayat. However, party loyalties do play a role, since many of the candidates are members or sympathisers of political parties and get unofficial backing from them. Parties thus seek to build

²⁰ A dramatic background to the local elections in 2006 was the decision of the DMK State Government to carry out fair elections in some Panchayats of Madurai and Virudhunagar districts, where caste Hindus had for a decade managed to stall the election of Panchayat presidents from constituencies reserved for Scheduled Castes (for a concrete example see Sumathi and Sudarsen 2005). With special efforts from the TN Government, under pressure from SC organizations and the CPI(M), this time the elections for the post of Panchayat president in these constituencies were carried out in October 2006. While this may be regarded as an advance in the fight against caste discrimination, the situation on the ground was rather more ambiguous, since these presidents were not allowed to function by the caste Hindus and the Government had not come to their rescue. There have also been instances of Panchayat presidents being murdered after being elected. However, SC presidents have been elected and are functioning in some of these villages.

their support at the village Panchayat level so as to use it later in decisions that Panchayats have to take on many issues which are effectively settled at the higher (Block and District) levels, where party politics play a much greater role.

In the case of Town Panchayats and Block Panchayats, political parties are allowed to contest, which they do. However, as we could see in one of our study villages, Nangavaram North, a Town Panchayat, their influence is not all pervasive. Out of eight seats, the political parties only managed to win 5 seats in October 2006, three seats going to independent candidates, illustrating how other factors and considerations than party politics can affect the outcome. Interestingly, SHGs were quite active in supporting women candidates during their campaigns in Nangavaram.

The bar on candidates contesting on party symbols in village elections is often rationalised in terms of 'local development' having to be 'above' politics. This is thought to help fight local corruption. Implicit here is the notion that 'party politics' is 'bad' in itself. But since, especially in Tamil politics, parties have shown themselves as not being driven solely by caste and patronage, it may well be that such political parties represent the main avenue to cater to the needs and interests of poorer people.²¹ The discourse of many non-government organizations (NGOs) and, ironically of many international organizations including the World Bank and some UN agencies about participation and decentralisation through civil society organisations is far removed from the reality of the villages that we have studied, where besides the state-promoted SHGs, there are hardly any such organisations present.²²

4. Women in the Gram Panchayat²³

The 93rd and 94th constitutional amendments providing for reservations to women in elected rural and urban local bodies have led to a massive entry of women into these bodies, starting in the mid-1990s. The Acts also prescribe reservation of constituencies for persons belonging to Scheduled Castes and Tribes in proportion to their share in the population.

There are by now quite a few empirical studies of the effects of the reservation system in India and elsewhere.²⁴ There is, for example, an early positive report from Tamil Nadu (Athreya and Rajeswari 1998). A study of the progress made in Orissa shows how reservation has meant an

²¹ Caste, of course, continues to play an important role in electoral politics, but then caste often changes character to mean larger groupings, like Dalit or backward caste confederations (cf. Shah 2004:300).

²² According to Harriss, political parties, with all their shortcomings, represent the most important voice of the poor (cf. Harris 2006). Manor observes that political parties make local politics more transparent when it comes to accountability compared to the 'a jumble of sometimes shifting factions and alignments without labels' Party politics help integrate local councils with representative structures higher up and help manage conflicts between these. Moreover, local councils serve as training grounds for ambitious local politicians before they enter higher levels. They also offer opportunities for opposition parties to win and govern some parts of the political system (1999: 74-76).

²³ This section has earlier been published in the article: Lindberg, Staffan, Venkatesh B. Athreya, R. Vidyasagar, Göran Djurfeldt, and A. Rajagopal (2011) 'A Silent "Revolution"? Women's Empowerment through Micro-Credit and Reserved Seats in Local Government in Rural Tamil Nadu, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(13): 111-120.

²⁴ Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2005) has written about the worldwide trend of introducing gender quotas in political elections which is an interesting change from an incremental track practiced for example in the Scandinavian countries. India seems to be one of the successful examples increasing women's local political representation in a fast way, the reasons being its legal backing in an amendment to the constitution in 1993 and a strict implementation. In sharp contrast is the failure in India to pass legislation providing reservations for women at the level of the State assemblies and the Parliament. For an international comparative study of quota systems, see Dahlerup 2006.

important beginning for the entry of women on the political scene but also reminds us that the process has just about begun and will take its time to develop (Hust 2004).

Rai et al (2006) has made a comparison of the introduction of reserved seats in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh:

‘Our conclusion is that gender and class regimes mediate political participation in all the three countries. State provision, formal and informal networks and customary laws prevent women from fully participating in local government. There is also a lack of education, training and resources for women representatives. Finally, their dependency on male members of the household and inability to access economic resources (there are no salaries for local government representatives) are also inhibiting their performance. At the same time it seems like the new system of reserved seats have created a social mobilization of rural women and changed their status both in the family as well as in the society, and have empowered them.’ (Rai et al 2006: 234)

Several issues debated among scholars are involved in this process of change. A major issue is of course how this “jump-start” to representation affects women and the political process. Dahlerup (2006: 4) expresses the issue in this way:

‘The use of electoral gender quotas challenges our ideas and theories about the relationship between women’s political representation and their socio-economic position, since quotas may lead to unprecedented historical leaps in women’s representation without simultaneous changes in women’s socio-economic position.’

Is it true that women’s socio-economic positions remain unchanged when reservations are implemented or are there other important changes taking place simultaneously that make a difference to the outcome? If so, what is the interrelation between these changes? For example, does promotion of women’s self-help groups (SHGs) and availability of so-called ‘micro credit’ serve as an important instrument for women’s political empowerment?

Another issue concerns the numerical representation of women and the question of a critical mass effect, that is, a proportion of representation that makes a qualitative difference in terms of women’s empowerment in the political bodies.²⁵ A third very important issue is the character of women’s political representation: If gender relations within the family remain unchanged and the prior dominance of men in politics, at least initially, implies that women candidates are simply ‘put up’, as ‘proxies’, by male relatives or patrons who hope to control them once they are elected, do reservations mean much in terms of women’s empowerment?

The main questions that arise, but not all of which we manage to answer in this Chapter, are: Under what forms and conditions do women enter into local politics under the 33 % reservation system? What are the socioeconomic characteristics of the women who enter the fray and/or get elected? What is the actual nature of their representation? What difference does it make that women enter politics in a massive way? Is there more concern for what are often seen as “women’s and children’s issues”? Is there more transparency and less corruption?²⁶

²⁵ See the discussion in *Politics & Gender* 2006, No. 2, pp 491-530.

²⁶ A recent study of women in local politics in Karnataka claims that at least the last two questions can be answered in a positive way (Kudva 2003).

We have observed some Panchayat meetings, interviewed 10 women about their participation in the Panchayat bodies, and observed the local election to the Village Panchayats in October 2006.²⁷ Two of the women interviewed are Panchayat Presidents, one is a Vice-President, and the rest are ward members. Three of the ten women came from the SC castes. These interviews show that there is a process of increased participation and influence on the part of these women but also that there is still a considerable way to go before women can fully utilize the political space opened up by the provision of one-third reservation for women in elected local bodies.

In 2004-05, the president-ships in five of our six villages were reserved for women. We have the strong impression that in three of these reserved villages, the women presidents were mere figureheads and that the affairs of the Panchayat were managed by their husbands (the so called “proxy” syndrome). One exception to this is the meetings at the Panchayat Union, when these women are obliged to attend rather than their husbands.

We interviewed the two women presidents who seemed to be most active - one in a wet and one in a dry village. The female vice-president also interviewed by us belongs to the same wet village as the president we interviewed. What we found was a kind of collaboration between husband and wife in running the Panchayat. The husband would typically represent the Panchayat to outsiders and the outside world, such as arranging a contract for some construction undertaken by the Panchayat. Wife and husband would conduct the board meetings jointly and share the responsibility to represent the Panchayat when dealing with the people of the village.

Case studies

Padma, who is 29 and belongs to an intermediate caste, had lost her mother at an early age. She grew up with her mother’s sister, since her father ‘never bothered or supported her’. She studied up to twelfth class. At school, she fell in love with a SC boy and got married to him. Her husband had received a B.A. degree at a university. Initially, her relatives objected to the marriage, but later on submitted to the charm of her husband. Her husband is now a farmer on their own land.

Padma’s husband encouraged her to stand for the Panchayat elections, since this was a reserved constituency for SC women to be elected as president. The first time, in 1996, she was not able to make it, but in 2001, they spent about one hundred thousand rupees and she was elected.

Her husband has a very good rapport with local people and she shares the Panchayat work with him. One source of inspiration is the previous woman President, who is said to have been very active and now often pays a visit to the Panchayat office to see how things are working out.

Padma’s husband is a member of the political party called Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). According to Padma, he does not involve the party in his local political work. Sometimes, he takes on a contract from the Panchayat, which, she claims, helps the Panchayat, presumably because he charges less than others would.

Padma claims to have been very active in getting funds for the construction of a cement road to one of the hamlets in the village. Recently, she took active part in petitioning for flood relief, only to find that some of those who did not get any relief put the blame for this on her. By her

²⁷ It may be noted here that one of the authors (Venkatesh Athreya) had earlier been involved in a larger study of women’s participation in Panchayat politics in Tamil Nadu, see Athreya and Rajeswari 1998.

account, she has been able to get government houses for SCs and has helped between 30 and 40 people to get old age pension from the Revenue Department. She is very active in the local Education Committee and supervised the competition in essay writing on Gandhi Jayanthi in 2005. At the *Pongal* celebration that year, she had organised a campaign to promote health and hygiene in the village.

When we interviewed ward members and other women in the village, we found that opinion was divided about Padma's work as President. Some said she was very active and efficient while others said that she was too much dependent on her husband and that he was actually running the show.

Satiya, 38, grew up in a major town about 250 km north of the dry village in which she is now the Panchayat President. At the age of 9 she was sent to work in a textile factory as a child labourer. At the age of 13 she was the sole breadwinner of the family and already a very independent woman. She was, for all practical purposes, the head of the household. With only 3 years of education, she was at that time declared as illiterate, but now knows very well how to read and write.

After marrying off her sister and brother, she herself married the son of one of the richest and most influential families in one of our sample dry villages. Her husband is a graduate in agriculture and an active farmer. They moved to their land outside the residential village and constructed a new house there, in order to live independently. Her father-in-law had already served as Panchayat President in the village, so when her husband suggested that she should stand for election to that post, she became interested. Satiya's brother-in-law is the village administrative officer (VAO) with a good reputation, but his wife was not ready to contest for the post.

Satiya regularly attends at the Panchayat office and conducts the board meetings there. She is also active in various schemes, and chairs one of the two watershed committees in the village. However, it is her husband who takes care of the development work and takes on the contracts. Satiya says that she is unable to prevent his taking over her functions.

Thus, it can be seen that both these women presidents had an extraordinary background, which might have helped them to become more independent than most other women Panchayat presidents. Yet, in both cases, the husbands played an important part in the functioning of the Panchayat concerned.

Women ward members, whom we have interviewed, take care to attend the Panchayat board meetings twice a month. They get Rs. 25 for attending the meeting. A few go there with their husbands but most of them attend alone. Some are active in the meetings; others do not say anything at all. Many of them complain that Rs. 25 for each meeting plus the Rs. 1000 they get at Deepavali (the festival of lights) is not enough as compensation for the time spent in politics.

The Presidents and some of the ward members have been given training by the government at camps in Chennai and Kanyakumari, and in some cases by local NGOs at Gandigram near Madurai. But most of them complain that they have not been given enough training to understand the workings of the Panchayat and the government system. Other ward members, without any training, also had practically no knowledge about the Panchayat system and what they were supposed to do as ward members. Quite clearly, this leaves much to be desired in the way these women are prepared for their task as Panchayat ward members. A regular training programme

would be necessary to enhance the quality of their participation (Cf. Manavalan 2000 and Narayana 2005).

One important support for women's political representation is the widespread presence of female SHGs in the villages. Since men are not present at SHG meetings, the women can discuss local village matters with some freedom and quite often do so. With a SHG member representative in the Panchayat board, this type of articulation becomes more effective. It is sometimes the case that an SHG suggests to one of its members to stand for the elections and then backs up the campaign. Interestingly enough, it is also the SHG members who attend with regularity the general meetings (called Gram Sabha) open for all villagers on the electoral rolls, which the Panchayat has to organise four times a year. However, as we have seen above in Chapter 5, the presence of functioning SHGs varies from one village to another and so does their capacity to back women's participation in Panchayat bodies.

An important background to the increased participation of women in Panchayat affairs is their experience of working outside agriculture. In 22 % of our households, at least one woman now works outside agriculture. Twenty five years ago some women worked in gem-cutting and as house maids, especially in the dry area. Now, SC and intermediate caste women also go for factory work (mainly in textile mills), stone quarrying, construction work (in Tiruchy town and other nearby urban areas) and work in the lower rungs of the local public welfare system (as nursery teachers and assistants, *anganwadi* workers, assistant nurses, etc.).²⁸ In the process, women get wider exposure and some learn the discipline of the factories. They learn to work in teams with other women and that they move freely in public on their way to and from the work place. They appear more confident, take care in grooming themselves and communicate comfortably with strangers. This was not the case in these villages 25 years ago. However, factory or other non-farm work does not give them more, but rather less time to participate, for example, in Panchayat meetings (cf. Hust 2004: 267-268). So it is more on the social and psychological levels that these experiences may have an effect on women's political representation: Women now occupy many more roles in the public sphere - economic, social and political - compared to earlier. Media, too, especially television, plays a role in this process.

Local elections

The motives for standing for elections to the Panchayat are mixed. Some of the women in the Panchayat board that we interviewed said that they themselves wanted to work for improvements in the village. Some referred to the wish of their husband or the political parties of which they were members. Others referred to the status of their family in the village and the wish of the family to be represented in the Panchayat. Similar patterns have been noted in other studies. (Nolle 2007, Athreya and Rajeswari 1998).

When doing our case studies of the local elections in our sample villages in 2006, we were particularly interested in the functioning of the reservation system for women: Who were the candidates? How did they contest and with what leverage? What role did the numerous women's SHGs play in these elections? What we found, was that the entry of women as well as SCs was constrained and determined by gender, caste and class relations as analysed in Section 7.3 above.

²⁸ *Anganwadis* are centres functioning under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) where child care and preschool education are provided.

As we have seen above, in some instances, women's SHGs in the villages participate in local body elections, when one of their members is in the fray, by campaigning for that person. On their own, however, they are rarely able to win these battles since caste and class influence weigh so decisively in the final outcome.

Our interviews with women ward members revealed that they had had to spend considerable sums for their election, which make it almost impossible for poorer households to field a candidate and win. It was also clear that some of them did not want to stand for a second term because of the costs involved.

Being a woman in the Panchayat board

All presidents and ward members we interviewed complained about the paucity of funds available with the Panchayat. Most of the budget is used for running expenses, most of all the electricity bill and wages to the clerk and sweepers. The rest is spent on repair and maintenance of street lights, drinking water facilities and maintenance of streets. Any additional funding provided by the Panchayat Union and the District Collector is used for construction of public buildings and roads. Our estimate is that, of the many schemes for rural development financed by the State and Union Governments, the Panchayat has control over only about 1/3 to 1/2 of the schemes.

Some of the frustration expressed by elected Panchayat leaders may be on account of not being able to finance all the needed things in the villages. The public is complaining about this and thinks that presidents and ward members have the power to influence the higher levels of the Panchayat system and the bureaucracy to allocate more money to their village. For example, in the floods in November 2005, many people also assumed that the Village Panchayat was responsible for selecting those who were to get flood relief, which was not at all the case. In fact, what presidents and ward members did was to petition to the Revenue Authority on behalf of all the flood-affected people in their village.

All the women we interviewed complained about the burden of their political participation in addition to being a wife, running the household, and working full time to support the family. They also claimed that, since men did not do any work in the household, the men had much more time for politics. When encouraging women to enter the political system, one must also make provision for the time they need to participate. This means that other members of their households, including husbands and other males need to take more responsibility for the household chores including cooking and looking after the small children. We have noted some cases of men actually doing this in connection with their wives going for meetings of the village Panchayat board.

Overall, we found that women could participate in local political bodies only if their husbands agreed to cooperate with them in this. The agreement included a division of labour, which could entail anything from the man actually representing and carrying out more or less all the various responsibilities to the active participation of the woman in some of the activities, especially the various board meetings. In no case did we find that a woman could carry out all the functions without the husband playing any role. (Similar results and views were reported for urban councils by John 2007, by Nolle from a study in Karnataka 2007 and by Hust in Orissa 2004.) The term

“proxy”, which is common in the Indian debate about women’s political representation is, however, too much of a simplification of these quite varied relationships (cf. John 2007: 3989).²⁹

Of eight women asked if they wanted to stand for elections again, only one said yes. The latter had the ambition of becoming a Panchayat President. This reluctance may at least partly be related to the fact that their particular seat may not be reserved for woman in the next election, since reservation is made by rotation every second time. The fact that they cannot be re-elected after ten years means that new women have to learn and be trained for the job later on.

Given the rather massive entry and presence of women in the local bodies, we may now ask what change there are in the working of Panchayat and the local Government, if any? It is, however, very difficult to measure the influence of women’s entry, especially since we do not have any base-line study 25 years ago to compare with. Moreover, the reservation policy has been in force for only about ten years, so it is too early to expect more than a good beginning.

We think women have contributed to more active Panchayats. Their attendance at Panchayat board meetings is better than that of men. The kind of activities discussed at the board meetings seem to be more geared to the welfare of children and women than earlier, like the local schools and nurseries, drinking water facilities, street conditions and street lights, etc. Similar assessments have been made in some other studies (see Rai et al 2006, Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004a and b, and Beasley et al 2005). In this way one could say that they have attained ‘critical mass’ and are able to influence the agenda of the board.

However, this does not mean that women consciously act as a united group in the interest of all women. John (2007: 3991-3992) reports from her study that there was very little of “we-feeling” among women councillors in Delhi and Bangalore: ‘In fact, when the question of acting as a group was posed to the councillors, many of them did not even understand what we meant.’ This is hardly surprising. Even in the democratically “advanced” Scandinavian countries with a high proportion of women in legislative assemblies, political and other differences among these women representatives often prevent them to act jointly to further women’s collective interest. But it is important to recognize that there may not always be an identifiable “women’s collective interest”.

Our interaction with women political representatives also taught us that at least on the personal level they had experienced a positive change. They had learnt how to sit among men in Panchayat meetings, to speak in such formal meetings and at Gram Sabha gatherings. Some of them had also learnt how to approach and deal with government officials. Kudva, studying Karnataka, has made similar observations (2003:459).

5. Local government and administration at work

The Panchayat boards that we have observed closely, most intensively the Poyyamani board, hold meetings twice in a month to discuss urgent issues and allot funds according to priorities set and availability of funds. Members come regularly to the meetings and participate more or less actively in the discussions. As mentioned above, each ward member gets Rs. 1000 at *Deepavali*

²⁹ The Tamilnadu State Government seems to be quite aware of the proxy problem and tries to stop the worst forms of it, like the husband chairing the village Panchayat meetings or going for meetings at Bloc level (Cf. The Hindu 20 January 2010: ‘Proxy village Panchayat presidents warned.’).

(a Hindu festival of lights that usually occurs between mid-October and mid-November) and Rs. 25 per meeting to compensate for loss of a working day's wage.

The deliberations of the village Panchayat are very often dominated by the Panchayat president, directly elected by all adult voters. However, we also observed how ward members are active both in Panchayat discussions and in organising various activities in their wards. This goes also for women and SC members, who as we have seen above, gradually seem to conquer a position in village politics; even though they are hampered by the way they have been made to compromise to win the support of the upper castes and their lack of experience and training (cf. also Athreya and Rajeswari 1998).

The banning of candidates from contesting on Party election symbols in the elections to the village Panchayat does not prevent parties from playing a more or less active role in village politics. As soon as there is an issue of allotment of funds for various activities, there are choices to be made in terms of location and social groups to benefit from it. For example, if the village Panchayat president and the block Panchayat president belong to rival parties, it may be difficult for the village Panchayat to get access to certain schemes and funding. There is also a strong local and regional class-caste nexus, especially in the dry villages: in view of the nature of local distribution of economic and political power, persons from landed/ rich peasant families can influence party politics and what the Panchayats at village and block levels do and do not do.

Panchayat Budgets and Functions

The budget controlled by the village Panchayat is somewhat larger than earlier but the staffing is about the same as before with overhead tank operators, sweepers and a clerk.

Among the routine tasks managed by the local Panchayat, are:

- drinking water supply in the form of pipelines, mini-pumps and overhead tanks
- street and road construction
- street lights (so important for children's education and women's safety), and
- sanitation, cleaning of streets, etc.

The Cauvery Drinking Water scheme that we have found in operation in some of our villages is extremely important for a reliable water supply. There has been some collective action to bring this about. Some years ago, 12 Panchayat representatives in Kulithalai and Thogamalai Village Panchayats went to the then local MLA, Mr. Papa Sundaram, who then moved the matter in Chennai so that the Tamilnadu Water and Drainage (TWAD) Board took up this work. Today, almost all villages benefit from this scheme.

The running of motor pumps for water and street lights implies that the Panchayat pays for the electricity used and this cost is often the highest single item in the routine expenditure of this body, accounting for between 1/3 and 1/2 of the budget, and often leaving the Panchayat with huge arrears in terms of a debt to the Electricity Department. Under-funding is also seen in the fact that in many of officially approved staff positions in Panchayats are vacant due to lack of funds. Thus, most of the budget is used for running expenses, most of all the electricity bill and wages to the clerk and sweepers. The rest is spent on repair and maintenance of street lights, drinking water facilities and maintenance of streets.

We have found that the village Panchayats in the wet villages are better off, with good buildings, phones and cell phones, etc., while those in the dry villages gave the impression of less funding and less activities. This difference may be due to the smaller size and revenue potential of the dry villages.

In the year of our study, the Panchayats were getting about half of the funds from the *Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana* (SGRY), an employment scheme funded by the Central Government. This is used for street formation, repair of bridges, construction of culverts, etc. Panchayat involvement in special development schemes undertaken from outside varies, but in the dry villages they are at least supposed to be involved in the watershed management committees that have recently been set up.

After our study was carried out, in July 2007, the new DMK state government decided to increase the funding of local Panchayats with over 50 % increase over earlier funding. At the same time, it announced a waiver of all outstanding dues on power and a reduction in power charges (The Hindu, 28 July, 2007). Thus the financial situation of most Panchayats, including the ones we have studied, should be somewhat better by now.³⁰

The Panchayats are not directly involved in many welfare schemes (pensions etc.). These are handled by the Revenue Department via the Taluk office and the village administrative officer (VAO).

Women's SHGs are also outside the control of Panchayats, as are irrigation management schemes in the wet villages. We had some indications that the Panchayat members feel strongly about not being involved in health, SHG, Public Distribution System (PDS), etc., but further probing into this did not reveal a widespread grievance. SHGs are, for example, appreciated by many in the villages, since they bring cash and employment to some women at least (for an analysis of the effects of the SHGs programme, see Chapter 5 above).

The Block Panchayats are also more active than 25 years ago. Since then, their responsibilities have been redefined, with Agricultural Extension and Animal Husbandry forming separate units under the concerned line departments at the district level. So the regular staff is smaller than earlier. On the other hand, there has recently been an expansion of temporary staff in the form of two adult education workers in each Panchayat.

There are also some new features in this state intervention, at least on paper, which are noteworthy. These include participation of stakeholders in terms of funding of development schemes and the engagement of NGOs as facilitators in the SHG programme and other schemes.

The Block Panchayats are involved in quite a few schemes, like road formation, house constructions for SCs, and sanitation projects, etc. Let us look at some of these schemes.

³⁰ This is not to say that the situation is satisfactory. It is sometimes argued that one of the most pressing needs is to implement an effective local tax collection system on property, cf. Rao and Rao 2008 and Dhar 2006. However, this is also problematic, since the revenue potential of such efforts would be rather modest. There is a strong case for much greater devolution of finances, both from the Central government to the States, and from the latter to local bodies. A more general discussion of rural fiscal decentralisation is found in Jha 2002.

Welfare Schemes for Women

At the Block Panchayat (BP), the person in charge is the *Mukkya Sevika*, also called extension officer for Social Welfare for women (EO-SW). Under her, there are two rural women welfare officers (RWWOs). They have no fieldworkers, so they themselves go the field. The EO-SW is responsible directly to the Commissioner and to the District Social Welfare Officer. Their most important scheme is the Self Help Group programme, in which a local 'professional' NGO (in the sense of being a paid business outfit) is contracted to start and sustain micro finance groups who can access institutional funding from banks and cooperative institutions. The declared aim is to empower poor women through entrepreneurship and help alleviate their poverty. As seen in chapter 5 above, the programme has been successful in so far as it reaches about half of all households in our study villages, of which about half again have borrowed various sums of money at about double the bank interest rate, which is still somewhat lower than the usurious interest rates in the informal credit market. However, it is also found that only a smaller group of women belonging to the upper middle economic strata has access to larger loans for business purposes.

Other schemes relate to female infants and children, inter-caste marriages, widow's remarriage, widow's daughter's remarriage, orphan girls, free sewing machines and free notebooks. The number of beneficiaries in the Kulithalai Block, to which five of our six villages belong, is rather small at 133 in 2004-05. Of these, 56 were under the girl child protection scheme in which a couple accepting female sterilisation after the birth of two female children, and without a male issue, are given money as a long term deposit in the name of the children. The payment is handled by the Collectorate at the district headquarters.

The Social Welfare Unit (SWU) at the block level is also supposed to hold meetings in the villages to create awareness about welfare schemes and sanitation. Recently, efforts have been made in our study villages to solve the problem of sanitation caused by open defecation. A survey has shown that only 14 % of rural households have access to toilets in rural Tamil Nadu (cf. Fisher 2007).

There were two recent schemes in 2003-05, one aimed at public provisioning of toilet and bathing complexes, and the other at subsidized provision of individual toilets.

At least one sanitation complex has been built by the Block Panchayat in each village. The building consists of toilets and bathrooms for women and children. In Poyyamani, the complex is managed by a SHG, which gets Rs. 1000 per month for its maintenance (including electricity bill). It is said to be used regularly. We saw one other such complex and found it to be used and managed well. However, it is important to note that in both these cases, the facilities were used only by the members of the particular caste living in and around the location of the complex.

The building of individual toilets has been entrusted to a leading NGO in each Block. There is a subsidy of Rs. 500 for each toilet constructed while the beneficiary household will have to contribute Rs. 125. Both the Block Panchayat and the NGOs claim that there are hundreds if not thousands of toilets constructed in the villages. But, from what we have observed, very few of the projects have resulted in useable and used toilets. Rs. 625 is far too little to build a functioning toilet. Thus, not many functioning toilets are achieved in this superficial attempt to solve the 'toilet problem.' However, in the longer run, it may have a propaganda impact: New concrete houses very often have a toilet room built into the house, a feature that may become regular as households upgrade or build new houses with increasing household incomes.

6. Case study of popular participation

The State Government has mandated that there should be a meeting of the Gram Sabha, that is, a general meeting for adult village inhabitants, four times a year. Government officers are instructed to attend. In Naganoor, the Panchayat president said that people were not coming to the Gram Sabha. In Kalladai, on the other hand, the meetings seem to be well attended.

We participated in one of these meetings in Poyyamani village on 26 January 2006.³¹ The field notes of this meeting, in Annexure 1 to this chapter, provide a narration of this attempt at “direct democracy”.

From our observation of this meeting and other observations of Gram Sabhas (cf. Mathew and Mathew 2003: 27; Vaddiraju and Mehrotra 2004)), we conclude that there is a rather feeble beginning of mobilising people to take interest in the running of the local Village Panchayat. If and when more funds and thus decision- and implementation power is given to the local Panchayat, there may also be greater motivation for people to attend these meetings. But people are busy working during day time and have many other businesses to attend to. However, as the active participation of SHG-members show, there is also a chance of a more substantial attendance in this experiment in local “direct democracy”.

7. Line administration and social welfare

Besides the fairly recent attempt at democratic decentralisation, which we have described above, there is the continued presence of the traditional line administration which is part of a state and central government controlled bureaucracy. Here we will discuss progress in welfare provisions mainly supplied by the State as it operates at the district level, that is, from the district level administration and downward via the block administration, and the parallel local revenue administration at the Taluk and village levels.

We clearly see the contours of what we like to call a skeletal *Tamil Nadu welfare state*. Its numerous activities, both of a developmental nature and of the welfare type, seem to have made a difference to people’s well-being in our studied villages.

Going to school

There are more schools than ever before, public and private, available to the village children today. Several of our six villages have middle schools inside the village or nearby. In two of our villages, there are high schools within the village itself. Increasingly, village children are sent to private schools from early on, like the 20 children we witnessed in Kalladai who commuted every day to private schools in Manaparai.

Another important change, compared to 25 years ago, is the presence of pre-schools called *anganwadi* in all the villages. Here, pre-school children can spend the whole day, while parents are working.³²

³¹ Report from the meeting written by R. Vidyasagar, R. Gopinath and S. Mariasusai.

Noon-meals are served in all schools, which have improved the nutritional status of a vast number of children and also helped families put their children to school rather than going for work outside the farm (cf. Harriss-White 2004a: 392-393). An important finding of our study is that there are now practically no child labourers in our villages.

A third change is the presence of a Parent-teachers' Association (PTA) in each village school, which is expected to oversee the workings of the schools and also aid in bringing new resources. While we made no study of any of these, we heard fewer complaints about teachers not coming to school or appearing very late in the day, complaints which used to be common earlier. This suggests that perhaps the PTAs may have helped improve school functioning, although it is also true that the PTAs are often floated to mobilise local resources for schools, thus relieving government of some of its financial commitments.

When we discussed the matter, we found that today most parents want their children to get education. But how is this reflected in survey data? Below, we have compared the education of the head of household in 1979/80 with that of 2005.

Table 6 Education of male members in 1979/80 and in 2005, per cent

Education Level	Number of Heads of Household in 1979-80	Number of Heads of Household in 2005 (Mean years in school = 4.6)*	Number of households with the specified level of education for the highest educated male member of HH in 2005 (Mean years in school = 8.2)*
No school or just 2 years in Primary School	54	38	9
Primary school 3 -5	26	20	15
Middle school 6 - 8	10	16	28
High School 9 - 11	5	12	19
SSLC passed	2	10	11
PUC and above	2	3	17
Literate with no form school	1	1	-
Total	100	102	99

* Corresponding data for 1979-80 not available

Source: Sample Data

As can be seen from the table, the progress in education has been rather moderate in terms of the education of male heads of households. Nearly half had no schooling in 1979/80, while 1/3 still

³² The pre-schools form a component of the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS) which has several other components including antenatal care for pregnant women, nutritional supplementation, nutrition education and adolescent girl welfare.

are without schooling today. On the other hand, 40 % of today's heads have studied beyond primary school compared to 19 % twenty five years ago.

Progress is more impressive if we compare distribution by level of education of the heads of households today with the same distribution for the highest educated male member of each household. In the latter case, only 7 % have not studied at all, while 75 % have studied beyond primary school. It is striking that 17 % of households have persons who have studied beyond SSLC in 2004-05 as against just 3% in the case of heads of household. The mean number of years in school for the highest educated person in a household at 8.3 years is about 75 % higher than that for the head of household at 4.6 years.

An impressive increase is found if we compare the education of the spouses (mostly female) of household heads with that of the highest educated female member of households in 2005.

Table 7 Distribution of Households by Level of Education of Spouses of Heads and of the highest educated female member in 2005, per cent

Education Level	Number of households where the spouse of the head of household has the specified level of education in 2005 Mean years in school = 3.1*	Number of households where the highest educated female member of HH has the specified level of education in 2005 Mean years in school = 6.8*
No school or just 2 years in Primary School	54	18
Primary school 3 -5	18	14
Middle school 6 - 8	10	33
High School 9 - 11	9	10
SSLC passed	5	21
PUC and above	4	5
Total	100	101

* Corresponding data not available for 1979-80

Source: Sample data

While more than half of all current spouses have no or very little schooling at all, the corresponding proportion of households where highest educated female member has had no or very little schooling is only 18 %. In as many as 68 % of sample households, the highest educated female member has studied beyond primary school, compared to only 28 % in the case of the spouses of household heads. The corresponding percentages for those with education levels of SSLC or higher are 26 % and 9 % respectively.

There has clearly been a spurt in educational achievements in the study villages over the last twenty five years. Education has come on the agenda in most families in the last two decades and the State has played a very important role in this process.

There may be many reasons behind this development. There are more schools available and children do go to school. The new scheme since 2000-*Sarva Siksha Abiyan* – Education for all – has been implemented all over the state to bring all children to school and to have gender parity in enrolment. This has provided additional resources to the state government to bring all school age children to school.³³ Also, unlike during 1979, nowadays children get free uniforms, free books (1-8th Standards),³⁴ free bus pass and a hot cooked midday meal in government run and government-aided schools. Thus, state initiative has reduced the cost of education to parents.

The other important set of factors behind the progress of education may be changing value systems and the almost complete decline of child labour in our villages. There are also fewer children per household. The cost of educating children in the government and aided schools up to the high school level has come down. The fact that government initiatives enjoying broad support among all political formations has also played a role.

The decline in child labour and the increasing commitment of parents to educating children may be linked to the increasing importance of non-farm employment and the modernisation of agriculture itself. Besides, the exposure to modern media and consumption goods may also have played an important role in this respect. However, we have no data on this. .

The mass literacy campaigns of the 1990s, which at the national and State levels were initiated by peoples' science movements with a progressive Left perspective, and were then actively supported at least for a while by the governments, may also have played a role in increasing parental commitment to education of girl children in particular (Athreya and Chunkath 1996).

This is not to claim that all is well with basic education in rural Tamil Nadu, far from it. In a recent article, Gold and Harriss-White find that socio-economic background including caste still plays a major role in affecting the children's attendance and completion of primary education (2004: 411-428). They state that 'If the quality of schooling were improved – for instance by more motivated teachers, more class room materials, a content for literacy and numeracy that is relevant to social contexts and the appropriate timing of classes – then education would become accessible in ways other than purely geographical and its benefits become more obvious' (2004: 425).

General Welfare Schemes run by the Revenue Administration

The revenue administration has offices in each of our Panchayats headed by a Village Administrative Officer (in charge of more than one revenue village).

The most important of all social policy interventions is the public distribution system (PDS), with shops in all our villages. A vast majority of the households have ration cards and are entitled to buy rice, oil, sugar, and kerosene at low prices. In 2005, rice was sold at Rs. 3.50 per kg. in these shops, which was below the market rate by one rupee. After the elections in April 2006, when the DMK party formed the new state government, the price was lowered to Rs. 2 per kg! We heard

³³ For the year 2004, the official figures for net school enrolment in primary schools in Kulithalai and Thogamalai Block (in which five of our six villages are situated) was 98 %! (*Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* 2007).

³⁴SCs get free books also in high school.

no complaints from people about the functioning of the system, but we noted that a lot of time was spent in queuing when special deliveries of low price kerosene had been announced.³⁵

The revenue administration is also managing a number of *regular welfare schemes*, especially old age pension (OAP), and various distress and accident relief schemes. The basic eligibility criteria for receiving OAP are that the single person should not have the support of a male son or grandson and that the value of the property, except a house, owned by the person is not more than Rs. 5000. The scheme includes pensions for the aged (65 and above), distressed agricultural labourers (60 and above), deserted wives, destitute widows, and physically handicapped. For these categories, Rs. 200 is paid and 4 kg of rice is distributed through the PDS shop every month (above the age of 90, they get 10 kg). In addition, there are some schemes pertaining to compensation in the event of deaths and accidents (Welfare Schemes of the Revenue Department 2007). The total outlay for 2004-2005 for Kulithalai Taluk in respect of these schemes was about rupees two million. Despite their apparent generality, these welfare schemes are promotional and carried out only to the extent that there is funding for it and applicants come forward with claims. Many people do not get access, either because they are not aware of them or because there is not enough funding with the authorities. Political favouritism also plays a role in the distribution of these welfare benefits.³⁶

Another important state intervention is the distribution of patta on house plots for landless people. In Poyyamani, we have recorded 3 such instances of distribution from 1970s onward. In that village, temple and *poramboke* land (i.e., land owned by the state and used by the village collectively) have been distributed to people already living on these lands.

Yet another task is the construction of welfare houses for SCs and in a few cases other lower castes. In our study area, SCs in the dry villages have received new houses in many villages, which is one reason behind the dramatic increase in the number of concrete houses since 1979/80 (see Chapter 6 above).

A final, but very important task entrusted with the Revenue Administration is disaster relief. A case study of disaster relief, pertaining to the floods that ravaged the villages in 2005 is presented in Annexure II.

9. Conclusions

The experience with Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu, unlike the more successful cases of Kerala³⁷ and West Bengal, and also to a lesser extent, states like Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka, has been rather mixed. The State government, under the leadership of either of the major Dravidian

³⁵ Hariss-White has evaluated the impact of PDS in some villages in two villages in North Arcot and found that it 'remains a redistributive measure, important in the calorie base of the poor' (2004a: 392). More recently, the price of rice in the PDS in the state has been reduced to 1 rupee a kilo. However, it must also be noted that the entitlement of a household varies between 12 and 20 kilos of rice per month, while the average per capita consumption in rural Tamil Nadu is around 10 kilos per month, implying an average household requirement of 50 kilos per month. More recently (2010), inflation has seriously compromised the food security of the poor.

³⁶ Barbara Harriss-White uses the term "gently politicised". See Hariss-White 2004b for a similar but more detailed analysis.

³⁷ Heller et al, 2006, describes the relative success that decentralisation has had in Kerala, but also how shifting political configurations influence the process in various ways. A similar analysis is made by Chathukulam and John 2002.

parties, has been loath to devolve power to elected local bodies. Out of 29 functions listed in the 1994 Act, less than half have so far actually been placed under the Panchayat system. The district Panchayat is a rather toothless body with hardly any powers. The district planning committee, a statutory requirement, is for all practical purposes an ineffective advisory body. The bureaucracy, represented by the district collector, has been given powers to supersede lower level local bodies. At the block level, the Block Development Officer often call the shots vis-à-vis the elected chairperson of the Block Panchayat, acting under direction from the district collector, who, in turn, takes orders from the state government. Though two state finance commissions (SFCs) have already given their awards, and a third has been constituted, the recommendations of the SFCs have not been fully endorsed and implemented by the State government. Further, even the promised financial devolution does not always occur, with the state government using a variety of strategies to delay or renege on its commitments, though the situation seems to have improved marginally recently.³⁸ The three key devolutions required for successful democratic decentralization, namely devolution of functions, finances and functionaries, has simply not occurred in the case of functionaries, mostly not occurred in the case of functions, and has occurred only minimally in the case of finance.

Our field studies illustrate some aspects of this decentralisation process in more detail.

What we have seen is that when it comes to the development of local government, the situation on the ground is far from static. Even if constrained by prevailing caste, class and gender relations, persons elected to local bodies clearly develop ambitions, and constitute a powerful lobby seeking greater devolution of powers and finances. The women members, many of whom may start out as *benamis* (proxies) of their male relatives, also develop political skills and ambitions, and seek greater say, as do the Scheduled Caste representatives.

Thus, over a decade or so of the new Panchayati Raj, despite bureaucratic obstacles, despite the unwillingness of the state governments to devolve powers and finances, and despite the inadequacy of training and empowerment of the new representatives, local body politics has emerged as a keenly contested domain. A new political culture and political leadership is slowly taking shape in the villages we have studied.

At the same time, it is clear that the general increase in service delivery that we have observed should be attributed to the political process at the state level and to improvements in the classical line administration, with its line of command and flow of resources from the state government to the district administration and its hierarchy of officials reaching out to the villages with various activities. Our strong impression is that over the past 25 years significantly more welfare resources now flow to rural areas and that the levels of corruption may have decreased (cf. the case study above of flood relief in 2005). We interpret this as an outcome of the political process involving mobilisation of people by various political and social forces including the major political parties and mass organisations of working people as well as some civil society organizations. There seems to be a strong pressure exerted by the electorate on the contending political parties to deliver welfare, even if welfare may be defined in more than one way. It is as if the electorate is saying that, 'If you cannot deliver something, you cannot rule the state'.³⁹

Our field studies have also focused on two important social issues, viz., caste and gender relations, both of which illustrate the changing social dynamic of rural Tamil Nadu.

³⁸ For an analysis of fiscal decentralisation in Tamil Nadu in comparison with other states, see Oomen 2006.

³⁹ The more recent practice of giving cash to voters openly and widely, observed in the 2009 parliamentary elections in the state, constitute a disturbing phenomenon.

While caste relations have remained rather stable over the past 25 years, we note that lower caste mobilisation is on the rise, in our case seen through SC struggles of various kinds. This is facilitated by a variety of social and political forces and state agencies like the State Human Rights Commission and the fact that media today is active in reporting about these struggles.

When we look at transformations affecting women the changes are even more impressive. Twenty five years ago there was strong autonomous collective action among the farmers in our villages, especially in the dry villages. Today the most important 'collective' action in the villages we have studied is with the blessings of the State, involving primarily women in Self Help-Groups.

Besides the important function of providing members with smaller or bigger loans, the SHGs provide a possible platform for women's active participation in local politics. The relationship between the SHGs and the elected local bodies is in the process of evolving. SHGs of women presently are positively disposed to women's participation in elected local bodies, but the process may turn more complex with the neo-liberal policy framework promoting an 'NGOisation' of the SHG formation process in ways akin to the promotion of so-called 'public-private' partnerships. For the moment, the state has been the initiator of the process of mobilisation of women into SHGs, with the help of NGOs. (It has also sought to link banks with the provision of microfinance to SHGs within a larger context of financial liberalization and reduction in institutional credit to agriculture and petty production in the countryside.)

Theoretically, this alerts us to the fragility of the notion that social movements are always formed by actors in 'civil society' as opposed to the 'State' and other actors. The 'State' is neither an unchanging nor a monolithic entity. With changes in levels of government and priorities of various contending classes associated with the state, necessitated either by pressures from 'below' or by global financial and other pressures from 'above', its tactics change. SHGs constitute a complex phenomenon, entailing both co-optation by the state and a potential for enlarged democratic space to be wrested from below.

However, as we have shown above, the SHG-programme does not live up to the rather grandiose proclaimed aim of poverty alleviation, since it hardly reaches the poorer groups.

Finally, women's entry into local politics through the mandatory reservation system seems to be more important than the SHG-programme in furthering women's empowerment with lasting effects. It is a rather spectacular 'jump-start' with the massive entry of 33 per cent of the seats including the positions of President and Vice-Presidents. It offers a broad and stable social opportunity to enter the public sphere and a process of learning the game of politics in which training and resources play an important role. It helps women act in public spheres and express issues of their concern. In the Panchayat, women may learn to interact across caste and gender and discover what people from other backgrounds are thinking. Actual participation and learning from others is the critical "mass" that is needed for women to have an impact in governance.

At the same time, this process suffers from the same bias as we have seen in the case of micro-finance. It is the more affluent women who can be active in Panchayat politics, since money plays such an important role. Moreover, women's participation is constrained by male influence over their candidacy and functioning in the various boards, as well as by their caste- and class positions. They are also, like their male counterparts, constrained by the paucity of public funds for local development, which leaves many demands unmet.

Nevertheless, on the basis of our empirical findings, we can say that the reservation for women in local politics has not only changed the conditions for local collective action but has led to several potentially positive advances for women as well as for the local political system and administration.

What we have observed in our six study villages regarding women's entry into politics and into micro-credit groups signal social changes. These changes go hand with other changes, which are mutually reinforcing the empowerment of women: Women are now much more visible in the non-agricultural sector, whether as workers in various trades or as self-employed petty entrepreneurs, in educational institutions as teachers and students, and in the small but growing public sector. They also benefit from the rudimentary, welfare state.

Annexure I: Field Notes of Gram Sabha Meeting in Poyyamani village.

The meeting took place on January 26, 2006.

There were 50 women (mostly from SHGs – Women’s Self Help Groups), 20 men and 20 children in the meeting.

After welcoming the participants, the Panchayat president read out the resolutions – more a list of what has been achieved so far in the Panchayat during the present term. This contained all the civic facilities created in the village during the present president’s term, celebration of Pongal to raise awareness among public about sanitation and so on.

Following this, petitions were received from public who had gathered there. Totally 45 petitions were submitted to the Gram Sabha. 35 out of 45 petitions sought increase in the rice supply under PDS. They claimed that they are living below poverty line and they should be given 35 kg of rice every month instead of 20 kg supplied at present. Demands in the other petitions were as follows.

- *Sanction of flood relief to certain households in Kottaiyar Thootam where they still face some water logging after the floods in November 2005*
- *Request for farmer’s identity card*
- *Demand for single electric light under the single light scheme for huts*
- *A joint petition signed by 13 people under an organization called “Poyyamani Indira Kudi Urimai Makkal” demanding public toilet especially for women. It was alleged that the roads are used as public toilets, which creates problems for peoples’ health and hygiene. These petitioners are mostly from Ambedkar Nagar and belong to the scheduled castes.*
- *People from Kottaiyar Thottam demanded a proper road to reach Pettavaithalai to go to schools and the bus stand. It is said in the petition that the people in this hamlet have to cover four km to reach school and nearest bus stand.*

The petitions were received by the President and he promised to follow it up.

What is more interesting are the questions raised by the participants and the heated discussions that ensued.

The first issue was raised by an old man who resides in Poyyamani. He said the parapet walls and railings in the bridge that is across the Nangam Vaikal passing through the road leading to Pettavaithalai from Poyyamani are damaged. He said it is in a dangerous position as there is risk of people falling into the canal while cycling or going in two-wheelers in the night time. The president said that he has already requested funds for this from MLA and MP from their constituency development funds. But so far there is no response from them (funds allotted for MLAs and MPs respectively from the State and Central Governments for developing their constituencies). Just repairing the damaged parapet wall could be undertaken by the Panchayat itself, but it requires widening the width of the bridge and that is why they depended on outside funds. Now that the elections are round the corner, the president said that they will put more pressure on the MLA/MP to complete this work.

Murugan⁴⁰ from Karaikalam raised the issue of steps in the canal near the place where people take bath and wash their cloths. The president said that the funds for this, Rs. 25 000, is already allotted. But they could not undertake construction because of heavy water flow in the

⁴⁰ All names mentioned are fictitious and have been made up by us.

canal. Since they have to exhaust the funds before the accounting year, this fund is used for some other road construction. However, the president promised that the work will be undertaken in the current year.

More heated accusations came from Selvam of Pulavarpuram, a scheduled caste colony in Poyyamani village. This hamlet is represented by a woman ward member in the Panchayat. Selvam said that their hamlet is completely ignored by the sweepers of this Panchayat. He said that people don't ever come to their street. Once, out of pressure, they came to clean the drainage. But they removed the dirty silt from the drainage and threw it in the same street. He also said that the public TV room in their street is locked and the key taken over by someone. The main allegation is against the ward member, that she is not taking active interest in solving the problems of her ward people. In fact she is the sister of Selvam's mother. He said while Logambal is questioning everything and taking action, why not she who is our ward member. Selvam also suggested that the cleaning staff should get the signature of some street resident after cleaning a street.

The President said that there is no adequate sanitary staff in the Panchayat and until we get more people it is not possible to clean all the places on a regular basis. He said that people themselves should take active interest in maintaining their environment clean and neat. With regard to the TV room, the president said that it is locked because someone from the street tried to use this room to stock his paddy. It is not meant to be a godown. If someone from the street is willing to maintain the public TV in the street, he is willing to hand over the key to him. The female ward member got wild at the accusations of Selvam and she asked him to check the resolutions passed in the Panchayat in the past about the demands of the people of Pulavarpuram. She said in the recent past she is not active because her husband is sick. She also said that, had her husband been in good health, he would have taken up all the relevant issues. This implies that her husband acts on her behalf on the ward issues. Heated discussions followed for about half an hour and Selvam walked out of the meeting without any conclusion.

Annexure II: A Case study of Flood and relief in November – December 2005⁴¹

The following case study illustrates in some detail the overall character of the local system of government and welfare provision that we have attempted to outline above.

The heavy rains and floods in November 2005, the considerable damage they caused, and the relief operations undertaken by the administration bring to light both the strength and some of the weaknesses of the local government in organising welfare and development activities. We witness the welfare state in action, the process of ruling, the struggle for power and the pressure on the political system from various classes and interest groups.

In our wet villages, it rained heavily during October-November 2005. The massive rains between the 21st and 25th of November 2005 led to the quick filling up of canals and tanks, the overflow of huge water masses and the breach of bunds in many places leading to flooding of crop fields and house settlements. Standing crops and houses were submerged under water and houses were damaged. It took several days before the water subsided. Quite naturally, agricultural operations came to a standstill and agricultural wage labourers went without work for many days. In the dry villages away from the river, the flooding and damage was much less, but there were places where crops were affected and houses damaged.

Of our six villages, Nangavaram and Rajendram were most affected. Whole hamlets were flooded, houses surrounded by water and kacha houses damaged. The other wet village in our study, Poyyamani, is high lying and was not much affected.

The Revenue Department set up 14 relief centres in Kulithalai Taluk. In some cases, people were relocated for refuge, food and shelter. The Government through the Revenue Department provided food and some local agent, school or NGO organised the relief including food preparations.

The then Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, Ms. Jayalalithaa, announced that all victims would be compensated as follows:

- Rs. 2000 plus 10 kg of rice, 1 litre of kerosene and a dhoti and a sari for those whose *kacha* houses had been fully damaged.
- Rs. 1000 plus the same kind relief for those whose *kacha* houses had been partly damaged.

In the meantime, people tried to repair the breaches to prevent more flooding. However, most noticeable was the almost desperate hunt for ration cards to the PDS outlets in the villages. People knew that only card-holders would be entitled to relief measures, if any. The CM's announcement had aroused high expectations, it seems.

The implementation of the household relief measures was fairly quick but a bit chaotic and it is not easy to sort out what really took place. It was the village administrative officers (VAOs) and the *Talayaris*,⁴² who were in charge of damage assessment. Within a short period, lists of victims were submitted to the Revenue Department. Since the funds for relief were with the state

⁴¹ This section owes a great deal to the local investigations and reports by our field assistant Mr. S. Mariasusai and our colleague Göran Djurfeldt in November 2005.

⁴² Talayari was the assistant to the traditional village officer, *Karnam*, in charge of village land and other registers. The same term is now used for the assistant to the Village Administrative Officer.

government, the Collector in the meantime asked the Panchayats to use some funds for relief, but the rural development (RD) officials complained and said that there was not much cooperation in this. However, at least some of the Panchayat presidents were engaged in submitting petitions for relief from their Panchayat inhabitants.

We heard stories about quarrels between the VAOs, the Talayaris and Panchayat Presidents about who should be on the list. In Naganur, one of our dry villages, it is said that the VAO did not dare to visit the village for a week, because he feared the rage of those who wanted relief without any real reason. When we discussed the matter with the de facto President in Naganur, he complained that the VAO and RD had not consulted him about the damages caused. They had given Rs. 1000 plus kind relief to 13 households, while according to him there were about 30 households with damaged houses.

We came across some people whose houses had been damaged but did not come on any list or get any compensation, but on the whole we think that the RD did a fair and careful, though conservative, assessment.

We witnessed that in some places people did not get the full amount but had to part with some commission to the officials who distributed the money, around 10 % or Rs. 100 out of the 1000 to be distributed. Nobody dared to complain about this practice and risk foregoing the relief.

Overall, the damage was greatest by far in Rajendram and Nangavaram, where numerous households received relief, mostly of the value of Rs. 1000. In the other four villages, only a few households got the relief.

The contrast between the selective and targeted relief in Poyyamani⁴³ and the much larger relief in Nangavaram and Rajendram is interesting. Do they represent two extremes of the way the local governments function? Is it inefficiency and leniency in the latter case and the opposite in the former case? Or is it due to political considerations that the staunch AIADMK supporters in Rajendram got abundant relief (Elections to the State Assembly were due in April or May 2006), while the DMK-led Poyyamani ended up with just the bare minimum of relief? At least in Rajendram, we witnessed some attempts at political influence in the decisions about relief recipients.

In fact, the main consideration in the distribution of flood relief seems to have been the actual extent of flooding and damage. Poyyamani is a high lying area. When we asked the DMK people there about the relief given and the suspicion of political influence, they said that Poyyamani is situated in a high lying area and did not suffer much, while the whole of Nangavaram is a low lying area and many houses were affected. They did not say anything about political interference in this case. The limited aid given in Naganur and Kalladai also points in this direction.

What can be said about the distribution is that it seems that leading politicians had an opportunity to give abundant support in the case of those villages that were most affected. In one case, we have evidence of this influence. In other cases we heard about, the evidences are more circumstantial.

At the same time, the expectations on getting relief among people were higher than the relief actually distributed. There was also resentment among those whose houses had been severely

⁴³ We have similar low figures for Naganur and Kalladai as well.

damaged but who got just the smaller compensation of Rs. 1000 instead of Rs. 2000, while they saw people whose houses had not been damaged getting Rs. 1000.

This resentment, probably propelled both by the unevenness of the implementation and by the statement of Jayalalithaa about helping all affected persons, culminated in the last week of December when villagers around Kulithalai staged protest demonstrations and held meetings about the way the flood relief had been handled by the administration. In Kulithalai, village people even gheraoed the Tashildar⁴⁴ in the street outside the Taluk Office and refused him to proceed before giving an explanation. The press reported him as saying that people tried to attack him. But this was apparently not true. People just surrounded the official to get an explanation. He had said that the money for relief had not arrived from Chennai, but people did not believe him. Our fieldworkers noted that some of the protests and demonstrations appear to have been very spontaneous and not instigated by any organised force, political or otherwise, in the villages. Young people were often leading the protests.

This was quite in contrast to the various bigger and more organised protest demonstrations organised in major towns by almost all opposition parties in the state on 30 December 2005. The main demand here was that flood relief should be handled by an all-party committee to avoid any malpractices.

We also note that there was no announcement of relief to farmers whose standing crops had been damaged. But officers from the Agricultural Department were asked to make damage assessments in a very short period of time. We heard stories how they, while being unable to make a thorough study, just made up some figures and submitted them. No compensation had been given when these lines were being written in late January 2006.

We have also so far not heard of any plans of desiltation of tanks and canals and repair of canals bunds to prevent a repetition of the flooding in coming years. People in many of our villages have demanded these measures for years but to no avail.

An additional problem is the encroachments on canals and tanks, often done by rich farmers with political connections. In many cases, they fill up the canals with soil to extend their holding or start cultivating part of the tank bed, etc. When heavy rains come, the area is thus extremely vulnerable to flooding. Where is the power to address this issue in the system?

⁴⁴ Tashildar is the chief of the taluk administration, i.e., revenue administration.

Annexure III: Main Government schemes for rural areas:

Valar Kalvi (Education Development): Central Government Scheme, lot of staff and covering all villages with two fieldworkers, some people read newspapers in the morning, but few (very few) come to evening classes after the hard work during the day. Identification and rehabilitation of school drop outs

Namadhu Gramam, cent per cent **literacy** in a village without any drop out, **rainwater harvesting, total sanitation** (Hindu, 5/8/05) State Government

Sarva Siksha Abhiyam, SSA, buildings, offices of BDO, school buildings, toilets, drinking water facilities, class rooms (Hindu, 5/8/05). Central Government

Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana, SGRY, **Employment scheme**, Central Government. Rs. 54 per day including Rs. 5 kg. per day. This is the scheme most often mentioned in connection **road building** in our interviews. Implemented in 2003 and on-wards

Sampoorna Gramin Swarojgar Yojana, SGSY, funds for self-employment, e.g., SHGs. Central Government

Indira Awaz Rozgar Yojana, (Hindu, 5/8/05) probably what is called IAY, Indira Niveiva Kudiruppu Thittam ('Remember Indira House Living Development'), Central Government, used for **group house building** for SC (85 %) and backward castes (15 %).

PMGY – Pradhamanthiri Grama Yojana Thittam – focus on **group house** and **link road** to main road in the villages', **Central Government?**

Magalir Thitttam, a Tamilnadu Government women's development scheme.

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