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# POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN TAMIL NADU – A STUDY

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### ABSTRACT :

Women constitute nearly one half of society, and their participation in political institutions is an important indicator of democratic development. In Tamil Nadu, the political empowerment of women has developed through social reform movements, expansion of female education, democratic participation, political mobilisation, reservation policies and local self-government institutions. The constitutional reforms introduced through the 73rd and 74th Amendments provided an institutional framework for women's participation in Panchayats, Municipalities and Corporations. Tamil Nadu subsequently strengthened women's representation in rural local bodies by increasing reservation from one-third to 50 percent in 2016. This study examines the historical background, constitutional provisions, reservation policies, participation of women in local governance, role of political parties and women's organisations, major achievements, challenges and future prospects of women's political empowerment in Tamil Nadu. The study argues that political empowerment should not be understood merely as numerical representation. Effective participation in decision-making, leadership, political awareness, education, economic independence and institutional support are equally important dimensions of empowerment.

**Keywords:** Women, Political Empowerment, Tamil Nadu, Local Government, Panchayat, Reservation, Political Participation, Gender Equality.

### Introduction

Political participation is an essential component of democracy. Democracy cannot be considered fully representative when a significant section of the population remains outside the decision-making process. Women have historically faced social, economic, educational and cultural barriers that restricted their participation in public affairs. Tamil Nadu occupies an important position in the history of social reform and women's advancement in India. The development of women's education, social reform movements, participation in the freedom movement and later involvement in electoral politics contributed to the gradual transformation of women's public role. Political empowerment refers to the process through which women acquire the opportunity, confidence, institutional authority and resources necessary to participate in political decision-making.<sup>1</sup> It includes voting, contesting elections, holding public office, participating in political organisations, influencing policies and taking part in local governance. The development of local self-government has been particularly significant. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment created a constitutional framework for Panchayati Raj institutions, while the 74th Amendment provided a framework for urban local bodies. Reservation for women became an important mechanism for bringing women into elected institutions. Tamil Nadu initially provided one-third reservation for women in rural local bodies under the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994. In 2016, the State increased this reservation to 50 percent in rural local bodies, with the stated objective of strengthening women's political participation and empowerment. Thus, the study of women's political empowerment in Tamil Nadu provides an opportunity to understand the relationship between constitutional democracy, social transformation and women's leadership.<sup>2</sup>

### Historical Background of Women's Political Participation in Tamil Nadu

The history of women's political participation in Tamil Nadu cannot be separated from the wider history of social reform and modernisation. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women's education gradually expanded. Social reformers questioned practices that restricted women's education, mobility and participation in public life. The emergence of modern education created opportunities for women to acquire knowledge and develop awareness of social and political issues. The growth of print culture also enabled women to engage with debates concerning education, social reform and political rights. The Indian freedom movement provided another important opportunity. Women participated in political campaigns, public meetings, nationalist activities and social organisations. Their involvement demonstrated that women could participate actively in public affairs beyond the domestic sphere. The twentieth century also witnessed the emergence of women's organisations and social reform movements. These organisations

promoted women's education, social equality, legal rights and public participation. The gradual expansion of voting rights after independence created a constitutional basis for women's participation as equal citizens.

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### Constitutional Framework for Women's Political Empowerment

The Constitution of India established equality before law and equal citizenship. Several constitutional provisions provide the foundation for women's political participation.<sup>3</sup>

#### Article 14

Article 14 guarantees equality before law and equal protection of laws.

#### Article 15

Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds including sex. It also permits special provisions for women and children.

#### Article 16

Article 16 provides equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.

#### Article 243D

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment introduced reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. At least one-third of directly elected seats in Panchayats are reserved for women, including seats reserved for women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

#### Article 243T

The 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment extended the constitutional framework to urban local bodies, including reservation provisions for women. These constitutional provisions transformed women's political participation from a social aspiration into an institutional right.<sup>4</sup>

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### Women and Local Self-Government in Tamil Nadu

Local government has become one of the most important avenues for women's political participation in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994 established a three-tier rural local government structure:

1. Village Panchayat
2. Panchayat Union
3. District Panchayat

The initial reservation system provided one-third of seats and offices for women. In 2016, Tamil Nadu increased reservation for women in rural local bodies from one-third to **50 percent**. This applied to seats and offices in Village Panchayats, Panchayat Union Councils and District Panchayats. The policy was explicitly presented as a measure to strengthen women's political participation and empowerment. This change represented an important institutional development because it increased the number of women who could enter elected local government. Women have therefore become:<sup>5</sup>

- ❖ Village Panchayat Presidents
- ❖ Panchayat Ward Members
- ❖ Panchayat Union Councillors
- ❖ District Panchayat Members
- ❖ Municipal Councillors
- ❖ Municipal Chairpersons
- ❖ Mayors and other local representatives

Tamil Nadu's urban local-body framework also includes reservations for women, including provisions concerning seats and offices of Mayors and Municipal Chairpersons.<sup>6</sup>

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### Impact of Reservation on Women's Political Empowerment

Reservation has played a significant role in increasing women's numerical representation.

Before reservation, political institutions were often dominated by men because of social traditions, economic limitations, lack of political networks and unequal access to resources. Reservation created an institutional entry point for women.<sup>7</sup>

#### Major effects include:

##### Increased representation

More women have obtained opportunities to contest and hold elected positions.

##### Political visibility

Women's participation in Panchayats and municipalities has increased their visibility in public life.

##### Leadership development

Local government provides women with practical experience in administration, budgeting, public meetings and implementation of welfare programmes.

##### Political awareness

Women representatives gain greater awareness of government schemes, administrative procedures and public issues.<sup>8</sup>

##### Role-model effect

Women holding public office can encourage younger women to consider political participation.

**Greater engagement with community issues**

Women representatives frequently participate in discussions concerning water supply, sanitation, education, health, roads and welfare programmes. However, numerical representation alone does not guarantee complete political empowerment. The quality of participation and independent decision-making are equally important.

**Women, Education and Political Awareness**

Education is one of the most important foundations of political empowerment. An educated woman is more likely to understand:

- Voting procedures
- Constitutional rights
- Government schemes
- Local government functions
- Legal rights
- Public administration
- Political institutions
- Budgetary processes

The expansion of women's education in Tamil Nadu has contributed to the development of political consciousness. Education also helps women communicate confidently in public meetings and interact with government officials. However, political awareness should not be limited to formal education. Adult education, political literacy programmes, leadership training and awareness campaigns can also strengthen women's participation.

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**Economic Empowerment and Political Participation**

Economic independence is closely connected with political empowerment. Women who lack independent financial resources may face difficulties in:

- ❖ Contesting elections
- ❖ Conducting political activities
- ❖ Travelling to public meetings
- ❖ Maintaining political networks
- ❖ Accessing information
- ❖ Spending time on public affairs
- ❖ Tamil Nadu has developed various programmes aimed at women's socio-economic empowerment. The Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women has promoted Self-Help Groups and livelihood activities. Government documentation identifies the Self-Help Group movement as an important mechanism for socio-economic empowerment and capacity building among women. Self-Help Groups can indirectly strengthen political empowerment by developing:
- ❖ Collective decision-making
- ❖ Leadership skills
- ❖ Financial discipline
- ❖ Public speaking
- ❖ Community participation
- ❖ Awareness of government schemes

Thus, economic empowerment can create a foundation for greater political participation.

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**Role of Self-Help Groups in Political Empowerment**

Self-Help Groups have become an important social institution in rural Tamil Nadu. Women who participate in SHGs regularly meet together, discuss financial matters and collectively make decisions. These activities provide opportunities for developing leadership and organisational skills. The Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women developed the Mahilir Thittam programme and supported the formation and networking of women's Self-Help Groups. Government policy documentation describes the programme as part of the wider effort toward women's socio-economic empowerment. SHGs can contribute to political empowerment in several ways:

**Collective Awareness**

Women learn about government schemes and public institutions.

**Leadership**

Group leaders acquire experience in organising meetings and communicating with officials.

**Community Participation**

SHGs often become involved in issues affecting villages and communities.

**Financial Independence**

Savings and income-generating activities can increase women's confidence.

**Political Participation**

Women with experience in collective decision-making may become more willing to participate in local governance. Therefore, SHGs can function as a bridge between economic empowerment and political empowerment.

**Women in Urban Local Governance**

Women's political participation is not limited to rural Panchayats. Urban local governments also provide opportunities for women to participate in:

- ❖ Municipalities
- ❖ Corporations
- ❖ Town Panchayats
- ❖ Ward committees
- ❖ Municipal councils<sup>9</sup>

Tamil Nadu's urban local-body election framework contains provisions relating to reservation of seats for women and reservation of offices such as Mayor and Municipal Chairperson. Official records for the 2022 ordinary urban local-body elections document reservation arrangements for women and women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Women's participation in urban local governance has particular importance because urban representatives deal with issues such as:

- ❖ Drinking water
- ❖ Waste management
- ❖ Public health
- ❖ Roads
- ❖ Street lighting
- ❖ Public transport
- ❖ Housing
- ❖ Sanitation
- ❖ Women's safety

Consequently, urban political participation provides another important avenue for women's leadership.

#### **Women in State and National Politics**

Although local government has provided a major entry point, women have also participated in state and national politics. Women have served as:

- ❖ Members of Legislative Assemblies
- ❖ Ministers
- ❖ Members of Parliament
- ❖ Political party leaders
- ❖ Local government representatives
- ❖ Social activists
- ❖ Community leaders

Tamil Nadu's political history includes prominent women leaders whose careers demonstrated the possibility of women occupying highly visible political positions. At the same time, the presence of a few prominent women leaders should not be confused with broad-based political equality. The more important question is whether women from different social and economic backgrounds have sustained opportunities to enter political institutions.<sup>10</sup>

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### **Major Challenges to Women's Political Empowerment**

Despite considerable progress, women continue to face several challenges.

#### **Patriarchal Social Attitudes**

Traditional attitudes may regard politics as a male-dominated sphere. Such attitudes can discourage women from contesting elections or exercising independent authority.

#### **Financial Constraints**

Election campaigns and political activities require financial resources. Women with limited economic independence may face disadvantages.

#### **Family Responsibilities**

Women frequently carry substantial responsibilities relating to household work, childcare and elder care. These responsibilities can restrict the time available for political activities.

#### **Lack of Political Experience**

Women entering politics for the first time may lack experience in political organisation, administration and campaigning.

#### **Political Violence and Harassment**

Women politicians may face intimidation, verbal harassment or other forms of pressure, which can discourage participation.

#### **Proxy Representation**

In some cases, the elected woman representative may face pressure from male family members or political intermediaries to allow others to exercise practical control over decision-making. This issue demonstrates why reservation must be accompanied by political education and leadership development.

#### **Digital Divide**

Modern politics increasingly depends upon digital communication and social media. Women without adequate digital literacy may face difficulties in accessing information and participating effectively.

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## Political Empowerment Beyond Numerical Representation

The success of women's political empowerment should not be measured only by the number of women occupying seats. Effective political empowerment requires:

### **Representation + Participation + Decision-making + Leadership + Accountability**

A woman representative should have the opportunity to:

- ❖ Participate actively in meetings
- ❖ Understand government documents
- ❖ Examine budgets
- ❖ Raise public issues
- ❖ Communicate with officials
- ❖ Implement development programmes
- ❖ Make independent decisions
- ❖ Represent community interests

Therefore, the transition from “**presence**” to “**effective participation**” is an important stage in women's political empowerment.

### **Role of Political Parties**

- ❖ Political parties are important institutions in the political empowerment of women. They influence:
- ❖ Candidate selection
- ❖ Leadership development
- ❖ Political training
- ❖ Campaign opportunities
- ❖ Access to political networks
- ❖ Representation in decision-making bodies

For broader political empowerment, women need opportunities not only to contest reserved seats but also to obtain positions within party structures and participate in policy-making. Women's wings of political parties can provide organisational experience and political training. However, meaningful empowerment requires women's participation in important decision-making positions across political organisations.

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## Suggestions for Strengthening Women's Political Empowerment

The following measures may strengthen women's political participation in Tamil Nadu:

### **Political Education**

Regular training programmes should be organised for elected women representatives.

### **Leadership Training**

Training should include public speaking, administration, budgeting and conflict resolution.

### **Digital Literacy**

Women representatives should receive training in digital governance and online government services.

### **Legal Awareness**

Awareness of constitutional rights, local government laws and welfare legislation should be strengthened.

### **Economic Support**

Women should have greater access to financial resources and livelihood opportunities.

### **Family Support**

Social awareness programmes should encourage families to support women's political participation.

### **Prevention of Harassment**

Strong institutional mechanisms should protect women representatives from intimidation and harassment.

### **Strengthening SHGs**

Self-Help Groups can be linked with leadership and civic education programmes.

### **Youth Participation**

Young women should be encouraged to participate in student organisations, community groups and democratic activities.

### **Independent Decision-Making**

Training and institutional support should help women representatives exercise their authority independently.

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## Conclusion

Political empowerment of women is an essential component of democratic development. The experience of Tamil Nadu demonstrates that women's political participation has developed through a combination of social reform, education, constitutional safeguards, reservation policies, local self-government and women's organisations. The introduction of reservation in local bodies created opportunities for women to enter institutions of political power. Tamil Nadu's increase of reservation in rural local bodies from one-third to 50 percent further strengthened this institutional pathway. However, political empowerment cannot be measured solely by numerical representation. Women must have the knowledge, confidence, economic independence and institutional support required to participate effectively in decision-making. The future of women's political empowerment in Tamil Nadu therefore

depends upon moving from **representation to participation, from participation to leadership, and from leadership to effective decision-making**. Women's political empowerment is not merely a women's issue. It is an important dimension of democratic governance, social justice and inclusive development. A political system that provides meaningful opportunities for women to participate can strengthen the representative character of democracy.

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