

From Quota to Reality: A Study on the Factors Determining the Performance of Elected Women Representatives in Coimbatore's Local Bodies

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Abstract

The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution passed in 1992, brought to the fore millions of women to the helm of affairs in their villages and towns. Article 243D and 243T of the Indian constitution mandates the state governments to include a provision in the respective state acts for reserving a minimum of one third of seats for women at all levels in local bodies. In order to align with this Act and also focusing on women empowerment, the Tamil Nadu assembly passed two bills that guarantee 50% reservation to women in both urban and rural local bodies in the State. The bills were introduced to make necessary amendments to Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994 and various City Municipal Corporation Acts to increase reservation for women from 33% to 50%. Tamil Nadu is the 17th state to legislate 50% representation for women in local bodies. The emergence of women in leadership positions has caused perceptible changes in our villages and cities in a span of three decades. Women are learning the art of politics.

Keywords: *Local governance, Reservation, Women empowerment, Political participation*

I. Introduction

The 73rd and 74th Amendment Act enacted in the year 1992, established the provision of 33% reservation to women in local bodies. Article 243D and 243T of the Indian constitution mandates the state governments to include a provision in the respective state acts for reserving a minimum of one third of seats for women at all levels in local bodies. This policy decision to reserve seats for women was a mighty step towards creating necessary institutional arrangements for empowerment of women, though a lot more needs to be done at the political and societal levels. Women were expected to bring different values, preferences and perspectives into the political arena. It was expected that if women enter into politics in a large number, they will change the whole texture of present-day politics. Women's issues were expected to find high priority on the agenda of political parties and women's presence in decision-making positions was expected to promote elimination of discrimination against women, etc. Some believed that women will purify politics while others held that it will feminize corruption.

In order to align with the Amendment Act and also focusing on women empowerment, the Tamil Nadu assembly passed two bills that guarantee 50% reservation to women in both urban and rural local bodies in the State. The bills were introduced to make necessary amendments to Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994 and various City Municipal Corporation Acts to increase reservation for women from 33% to 50%. Tamil Nadu is the 17th state to legislate 50% representation for women in local bodies. But studies show that the 'critical mass' of women engendered by the reservation system has not performed the assigned function at the expected scale. Against this background, the problems of women representatives at the grassroots have to be analyzed and the factors that play a role in their decision making must be documented to ensure proper implementation of 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts throughout the country.

II. Review of Literature

Kumar and Ghosh (2024) conducted research and observed that India's 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, which empowered local self-governments (Panchayati Raj Institutions) and reserved one-third of electoral seats in these bodies for women, has elevated women's participation in rural governance. They found that India is among the foremost countries for women's participation in local governments, with over 1.45 million women shaping local decision making. They also added that women leaders are a critical link between local governance, sustainable development, and gender equality. However, across the country, their contributions to local governance remain undervalued.

Gengiah (2022) identified that the mobile numbers of male family members are provided in the nomination papers. Those mobile numbers either belonged to fathers or husbands. Male members of the family (either husband or father) attended the call when the author contacted the young elected women Panchayat presidents for the first time for the study. Male family members acted as Presidents of the gram panchayats even though they were not elected, and women who filed the nomination for the position got elected. Still, they were mute spectators in panchayat functioning. Husbands or fathers run the office of the gram panchayats on their behalf, and women members sign wherever their signature is sought. The major issues that the researcher identified were proxy.

Mani K (2019) identified that there are divergent views on the reservation policy. The researcher expressed the opinion of both the proponents and opponents. Proponents stressed the necessity of affirmative action to improve the condition of women. Some recent studies on panchayats have shown the positive effect of reservation on empowerment of women and on allocation of resources. Opponents argue that it would perpetuate the unequal status of women since they would not be perceived to be competing on merit. They also contend that this policy diverts attention from the larger issues of electoral reform such as criminalization of politics and inner party democracy.

Mallick (2018) found that the mandatory provision of reservation for women is the step towards their political awakening and empowerment. But, he identified that in reality, due to this reservation policy, many women are legally and situationally compelled to come to politics. Since, they are inexperienced and not exposed to politics they are reluctant to attend meetings. Lack of confidence also prevents them from asserting their powers, rights and performing their duties. He recommended that the realization of their capabilities, potentialities and role in society and nation would definitely strengthen their self-image and foster confidence in them to take action effectively. He also added that reservation policy will be more effective if the male members of their family do not interfere in their duties as Panchayat leaders.

The review of available literature portrays that there is a scope for in depth study regarding women's participation in politics and their level of awareness about their roles and responsibilities. After 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, women participation in Panchayats has increased. But whether they are properly prepared for their responsibility or whether they have clarity of their roles or not hasn't been fully analyzed.

III. Statement of the problem

Empowerment of women is neither an easy process nor comes merely with the institutional arrangement for women representation. It requires a change in the social institutions, people's mindset, and far more determined effort on the part of the women representatives, NGOs, officials and policy makers concerned. Although women from different backgrounds, classes and communities have assumed the role of people's representatives, the patriarchal attitudes, lack of political experience and administrative knowledge, and a plethora of social structural limitations under which women function in these institutions have become big impediments in the performance of their expected responsibilities. The research study will look into the demographic profile of the elected women representatives and analyze how their socio-economic and family background has an impact on their performance. Their level of awareness about the Panchayat Raj Institutions

(PRIs), roles and responsibilities will be evaluated to know how effective the implementation of 50% reservation has been in empowering the women in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu.

IV. Objectives of the study

The research tried to ponder upon the following objectives:

1. To analyze the social background of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) of local bodies and its impact on their functioning
2. To analyze the economic background of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) of local bodies and its impact on their functioning

V. Research Methodology

a. Sample design

Tamil Nadu has 38 districts and among them, **Coimbatore district** was selected as the study area using Simple Random Sampling and Convenient Sampling method. Also, Coimbatore comprises a highly heterogenous population. So, choosing samples from this district would provide a better representation of the entire Universe of the study. Thus, elected women representatives of local bodies in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu constitute the Universe. The total number of elected women representatives was 1754, including 469 representatives in urban local bodies and 1285 representatives in rural bodies. The sample size for the study was 351 elected women representatives, based on the Krejcie-Morgan Table on Sample Size justification. Multistage Stratified Random Sampling technique was used to arrive at the number of samples which will be representative of the whole universe.

b. Data Collection Techniques

The study used both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was collected using quantitative methods, especially survey method and distribution of questionnaire among the elected women representatives. In-depth interview technique was also used for quantitative data collection to gain in-depth understanding about the functioning of women representatives. Secondary data that were used include government records, statistical figures, records of local body administration, etc. Other sources including journals, research studies, etc. that were earlier conducted about the performance of women representatives in other parts of the country were also used to arrive at generalisations.

VI. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data collected from the respondents were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

1) Social background of the respondents:

a. Age of the respondents

Table 6.1 – Age of the respondents

Age	Frequency	Percent
21 - 30 years	21	6.0
31 – 40 years	134	38.2
41 – 50 years	123	35.0
51 – 60 years	60	17.1
61 – 70 years	10	2.8
Above 70 years	3	0.9
Total	351	100.0

The age of the respondents is presented in Table 6.1. The results indicate that almost 80% of the respondents belong to the productive age group i.e. between 21-50 years. The remaining 20% of the respondents are above 51 years of age and they confess that they have difficulties in performing their duties because of ageing and health related factors.

b. Religion of the respondents

Table 6.2 – Religion of the respondents

Religion	Frequency	Percent
Hinduism	295	84.0
Islam	25	7.1
Christianity	31	8.8
Total	351	100.0

Table 6.2 represents the religion of the respondents. Majority of the respondents (84%) belong to Hinduism indicating that it is the majority religion in the district, followed by Christianity (9%) and Islam (7%). Also, the women representatives from different religions say that their religious principles and customs act as a hindrance in coming out and performing their duties.

c. Community of the respondents

Table 6.3 - Community of the respondents

Community	Frequency	Percent
OC	21	6.0
BC	165	47.0
MBC	67	19.1
SC	98	27.9
Total	351	100.0

Table 6.3 represents the community of the respondents. The distribution of seats among the different communities strictly adheres to the reservation system that is mentioned in the 73rd and 74th Amendment Act, 1993. The study found that one-third of the seats were reserved for SC population in all levels of local body administration. Majority of the respondents say that their community leaders and voters belonging to their community exhibit support to them either directly or indirectly, when it comes to fulfilling their roles and responsibilities.

d. Family type of the respondents

Table 6.4 - Family type of the respondents

Family type	Frequency	Percent
Joint family	130	37.0
Nuclear family	221	63.0
Total	351	100.0

Table 6.4 represents the family type of the respondents. While 37% of the respondents belong to a joint family setup, 63% live in a nuclear family setup despite facing hardships in managing the dual responsibility of

household works and public duties. Women representatives living in joint families said that it was easy for them to manage the dual task, as there was someone who would be taking care of the household responsibilities, whenever they had to go for meetings or any public services.

e. **Education of the respondents**

Table 6.5 – Education of the respondents

Education	Frequency	Percent
Illiterate	20	5.7
Primary	66	18.8
Secondary	85	24.2
Higher Secondary	76	21.7
Graduate	75	21.4
Post-graduate	20	5.7
Others	9	2.6
Total	351	100.0

Table 6.5 represents the education level of the respondents. While 65% of the respondents have completed only their school education, only 26% of the respondents have gone up to college education. Also, 4% of the respondents have not received any formal education and they still opine that lack of education has never stopped them from discharging their duties.

2) **Economic background of the respondents**

f. **Occupation of the respondents**

Table 6.6 - Occupation of the respondents

Occupation	Frequency	Percent
Agriculture	41	11.7
Business	27	7.7
Home maker	216	61.5
IT	13	3.7
Teacher	24	6.8
Others	30	8.5
Total	351	100.0

Table 6.6 represents the occupation of the respondents before getting elected to the position. While 62% of the respondents remained as home-makers before getting elected also, only 10% of them were involved in professional employment (which many of them continue to do even after getting elected as EWR).

g. **Annual family income of the respondents****Table 6.7 - Annual family income of the respondents**

Annual family income	Frequency	Percent
1 – 2 lakhs	148	42.2
2 – 3 lakhs	87	24.8
3 – 4 lakhs	53	15
4 – 5 lakhs	34	9.7
Above 5 lakhs	29	8.3
Total	351	100.0

Table 6.7 represents the data on annual family income of the respondents. While 82% of the respondents have an annual family income of less than 4 lakhs, the remaining 18% only belong to the better annual income category. Representatives with comparatively less family income say that their extended family, friends and political party provide them with financial assistance to help them in discharging their public duties.

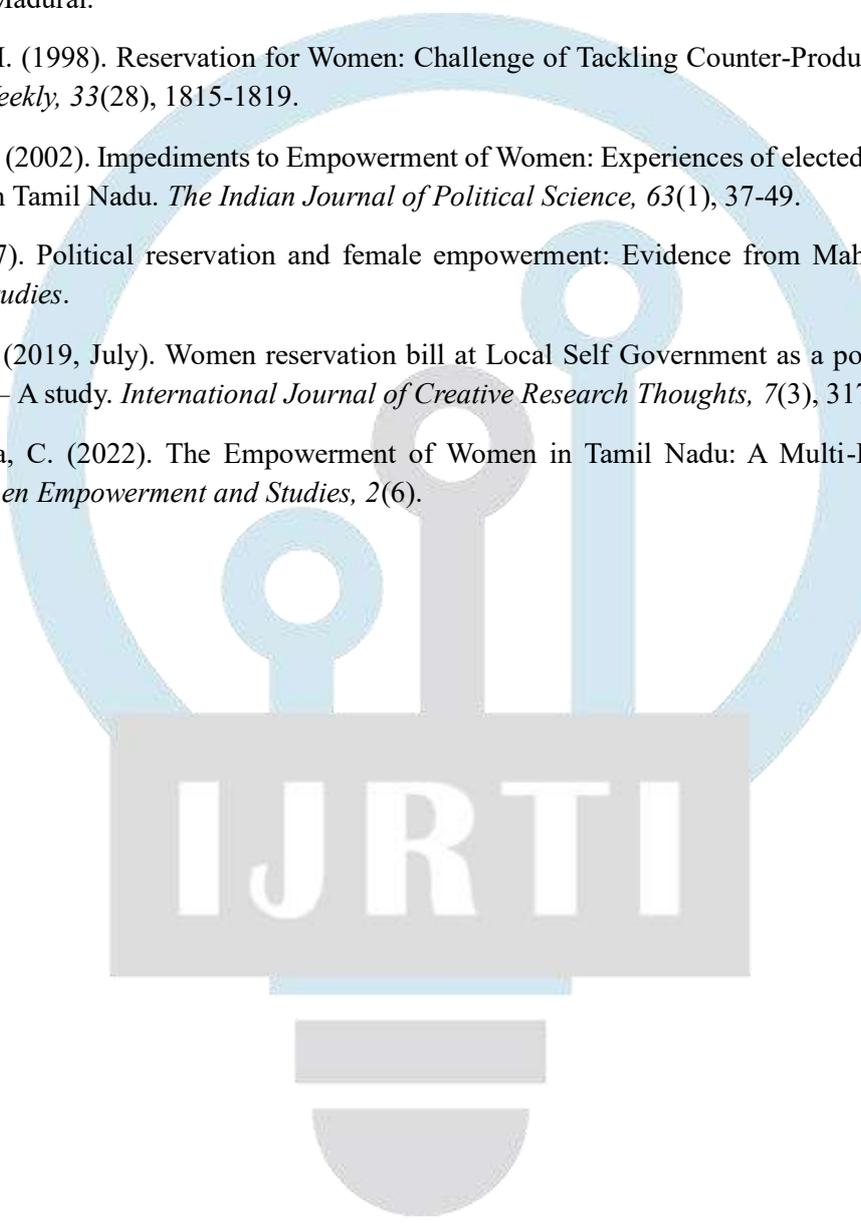
VII. Conclusion

The socio-economic background of the elected women representatives has both positive and negative impact on their functioning and performance. Despite the legal and theoretical framework, a lot more needs to be done to bring practical changes in the mindset of representatives as well as the public to give real shape to the Amendment Act. Certain immediate steps must be taken to ensure the true success of the implementation of 73rd and 74th Amendment Act. It includes capacity building and training programs for the women representatives; curbing 'Proxy' representation; establishing support networks and peer groups; digital empowerment and technology access to women representatives; taking reservation beyond symbolism; protecting women representatives from harassment and defamation; providing incentives to women for political continuity; changing public perception about women leadership through campaigns; institutionalizing women's issues in local agenda, etc.,

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A large, light blue watermark logo is centered on the page. It features a stylized lightbulb shape with a circular top and a semi-circular base. Inside the circle, there are three vertical lines of varying heights, each ending in a small circle, resembling a stylized 'I' or a set of bars. Below the circle is a grey rectangular box containing the text 'IJRTI' in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below the box are two horizontal bars, one solid grey and one white with a grey border, and a semi-circular grey shape at the bottom, completing the lightbulb-like appearance.

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