CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Importance of the Study

In the context of India, caste based politics has always remained in the forefront. But during the last two decades, the assertion of the people from low castes including the Dalits has assumed unprecedented significance. The Dalit question is one of the most important questions in today’s political and academic debates in India. Dalits are underprivileged on all social, economic and political fronts which lead to their misery, discrimination, exploitation and oppression by the caste dominated society. One of the prominent aspects of economic, political and social relations revolves round the issue of inequality based on class, caste, race and gender.

According to the theory of the caste system (Varna Model), Hindu Society was divided into four orders, namely, the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Sudras (John Campbell Oman, 2003). The men from the first three castes were considered twice born or 'Dvija' and entitled to wear the sacred thread at the Vedic site of Upanayana whereas the Sudras were not allowed to use the sacred thread (Ranjit Rajadhyaksha, 2004). The Sudras had to do all menial works such as cultivating the land, mending shoes, washing clothes etc. Besides, the Sudras were forbidden to eat, play or even sit with the people of the first three castes (Mark Juergensmeyer, 1988).

They carried the stigma of untouchability and hence, they were not permitted to take water for drinking from the wells of the first three caste people. The caste-based discrimination has resulted in a vicious circle of poverty, illiteracy and sapping of confidence among the Dalits. This practice continued to widen the gulf between the Dalits and the Non-Dalits.
Eminent social and political philosophers like Mahatma Gandhi, an ardent champion of removing untouchability within the Hindu-Chaturvarna frame-work, B.R.Ambedkar, Joytiba Phule, great reformers and others noticed and addressed the pitiable condition of Dalits. After Independence, India has been enacting many social legislations to uplift the socio-economic status of the Dalits with the main focus on the removal of untouchability and discrimination against the Dalits; raising their social status by giving equal status with other segments of the people; providing voting rights, reservation in education and jobs and Dalits’ participation in political activities. The main aspect the of socio-economic status of Dalits is their awareness about and participation in various political activities. It is strongly felt that the Dalit consciousness about political activities may contribute to various decisions relating to their rights and privileges. Hence, the Dalits’ participation in political activities is considered to be an important area of study.

The creation of the Panchayati Raj System is perhaps the best transformation in democratic India to realize the participation of Dalit folks and women in power sharing. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India was envisaged as a device to decentralize powers in democracy.

It is a welcome change that the new Panchayati Raj system weakens the bureaucratic stranglehold. No doubt, attempts should be made to strengthen the Panchayati Raj system against feudalist casteism, bureaucracy and state government, but how far it has helped the Dalits to come to the centre stage is worth questioning. It is evident that the upper castes, which controlled the affairs of the village, cannot tolerate the changes being brought about by the decentralized democratic institutions. Even after being duly elected, the Dalits are not getting the power and the status they deserve.

The present research tries to examine the factors influencing the emergence and empowerment of Dalit and non-Dalit women leadership, to trace the problems that they face in performing their functions and to identify the leadership styles of Dalit and Non-Dalit women leaders in the Panchayati Raj institutions.
1.2 Panchayati Raj: Historical Background

The Village Panchayat System is an organization, institution or system existing in India since ancient times. It is a real local self government, providing an opportunity to local people and adequate powers and resources to equip them to solve the local problems. During the Vedic era powers vested in the hands of people and the organization was known as ‘Panchayat System’ K.P.Jaiswal said, “National life and activities in the earliest times of record were expressed through popular assemblies and institution”.

1.2.1 Panchayati Raj System in Pre-Independence Period

During the Vedic era Panchayats held a superior position. In the Mahabharata period Panchayats were powerful administrative units. Even Kings were deterred from interfering in the functioning of these primary units, extending local administration and justice to people. K.M.Pannukar considered Panchayats as the basic foundation of ancient India. Barring decisions regarding war, the Panchayats were vested with power relating to security of villages, taxation, deciding disputes arising locally and executing schemes and plans of common interest.

Pre-Independence Development

When the British set foot in India they were concentrated mainly around trading centers. So, setting up Village Panchayats was not on their agenda. Their interest was limited to the creation of local bodies of nominated members in the major towns. In 1687, the first municipal corporation was formed in Madras. This body was empowered to levy taxes for building a guild hall and schools. Gradually, the sphere of activities of this corporation and similar bodies set up in other major towns and also their taxation powers widened.
Lord Mayo’s Resolution (1870)

In 1870, the Viceroy, Lord Mayo, passed a resolution for decentralization of power to bring about administrative efficiency in meeting the demands of the people and to add to the finances of the “Existing imperial resources which will not suffice for the growing needs of the country” (1) It was therefore out of fiscal compulsion that Lord Mayo’s resolution on local self-government came to be adopted.

The Bengal Chowkdari Act (1870)

This Act marked the beginning of the revival of the traditional Village Panchayat System. The act empowered district magistrates to set up Panchayats of nominated members in the villages to levy and collect taxes to pay for the chowkidars or watchmen engaged by them.

Ripon’s Resolution (1881)

Lord Ripon’s first scheme was elaborated in his resolution of September 30, 1881 on financial decentralization. In some provincial governments reorganized district committees were formed. The government proposed to give to the reorganized committees greater power over education, public works and medical relief, than had yet been entrusted to such bodies and the entire charge of these services was to be transferred to the local budgets.

Ripon’s Resolution (1882)

The resolution recommended that the smallest administrative unit—the sub-division, taluka or the thasils—should ordinarily be placed under a local board, two-thirds of whose membership was composed of elected representatives. As for the local boards the provisional government might create district boards, with powers of co-ordination or control. The term of the members was to be two years and compulsory retirement by rotation was to be provided for.
Royal Commission on Decentralization (1909)

The Commission, after reviewing the working of the local and the district boards in the various provinces of the country, came to the conclusion that due chiefly to their unrepresentative character and inadequate powers, these bodies had not been a success.

The Commission recommended the creation of a genuine electorate consisting of the members of the Village Panchayats, the provision for an elected majority on all boards, and a due representation to minorities through nomination. They also recommended the formation of Village Panchayats and reconstitution of the local boards where they had been abolished, so that local self-government might be built up from the bottom.

Government of India Resolution (1915)

The principle of elected majority on the boards was accepted, but the resolution did not answer the question of reforms of the boards and electorates.

Montague – Chelmsford Report (1918)

The report put local self-government under the domain of Indian ministers in the provinces. To make local self-government both fully representative and responsible, the reforms suggested that there should be complete popular control over local bodies and the largest possible independence for them from outside control.

Government of India Resolution (1918)

It accepted the principle of substantial elected majorities on all the boards. The elective principle was to be reinforced by the democratization of the local electorate. The representation of minorities was to be secured by retaining the practice of nomination rather than by introducing some system of communal or proportional representation.
1.2.2 Panchayati Raj System in Post – Independence Period


Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957)

The Committee felt that development cannot progress without responsibility and power being given to the community. It was with this objection that the Committee recommended the early establishment of statutory elected local bodies and devolution to them of the necessary resources, power and authority. Therefore, in order to encourage people’s participation and to overcome the defects of the Community Development Programme, Panchayati Raj institutions came into being in almost all the states. These became the basic institutional apparatuses through which socio-economic transformation of rural India was to be achieved.

Madras Panchayati Raj Act – 1958

In the post-Independence era, the first enactment in democratic decentralization in the state was the Madras Village Panchayats Act, 1950. Pursuant to the White Paper on the “Reform of Local Administration” in 1957, the Madras Panchayats Act, 1958 and the Madras District Development Council Act were enacted with the following salient features:

a) A two-tier system of Village Panchayats and panchayat unions.

b) Creation of panchayat unions co-terminus with the community development blocks.

c) Village Panchayat presidents to become ex-officio members of the panchayat union councils with the chairperson of the panchayat union council directly/indirectly elected.
d) Entrusting the panchayat unions and Village Panchayats with a large number of developmental and welfare functions.

e) Abolition of district boards.

f) Creation of the District Development Council as an advisory body. This two-tier system operated very well till 1975 and elections were held regularly. Subsequently, the tenures of the panchayat unions and Village Panchayats were extended up to 1.2.1977 and 12.9.1979 respectively. Thereafter, Special Officers (Block Development Officer for all the Village Panchayats in a block and Divisional Development Officer for all the panchayat unions in a division) managed the rural local bodies till the next elections in 1986. The elected rural local bodies continued in office till March 1991. Again, no elections were held till October 1996 and the Special Officers managed the rural local bodies.

**Ashok Metha Committee (1977)**

The Committee recommended the reorganization of the Panchayati Raj bodies into two main tiers. It felt that the three tiers in vogue could continue for some more time, but in the long run only two tiers should take the responsibilities of local and regional development.

The Committee recommended that the block should not be the first point of decentralization. It should only have an executive committee of the Zilla Parishad as in Maharashtra to implement the development programmes formulated and approved by the Zilla Parishad. It however, added that in some states where the block is regarded as a decentralized unit close to the people, it could continue as a transitional measure. In view of the fact that then existing Village Panchayats were weak both financially and resource-wise, the Committee recommended the constitution of Mandal Panchayats.
The Committee also suggested that each mandal panchayat should be based around a service centre which would be a big village, a small town or a central village accessible almost equally from all other villages forming the mandal panchayat. The committee further assessed that the inability of the Panchayati Raj institutions to come up to their expectations lay in their weak financial resources. Therefore the Committee recommended far – reaching changes in the Panchayati Raj set up. However, before the implementation of the report could be ensured, the Janata Government fell, the Congress Party came into power in 1980 and the Ashok Metha Report was not politically acceptable.

**G.V.K.Rao Committee (1985)**

At the initiative of the Planning Commission another committee under G.V.K. Rao was appointed in 1985 to suggest ways of revamping rural local governments. The Rao Committee recommended a bold scheme of democratic decentralization in which the district level body was to be of pivotal importance.

**L.M.Singhvi Committee (1986)**

In 1986 appeared the L.M. Singhvi Committee report submitted at the instance of the Ministry of Rural Development. After tracing the growth and development of democratic decentralization, the Singhvi Committee resurrected the nearly forgotten Gram Sabha, comprising all the inhabitants of a village and called it the embodiment of direct democracy.

Besides, it wanted to vest the Panchayati Raj with constitutional status, saying that a separate chapter should be added to the constitution of India so as to make the identity and integrity of the Panchayati Raj institutions reasonably and substantially inviolate. It wanted the establishment of nyaya Panchayats for a cluster of villages.
Sarkaria Commission (1988)

The Sarkaria Commission on centre – state relations (1988) did not favour the idea of the L.M.Singhvi Committee to grant constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions. The Commission advocated that the power of enacting any law on the Panchayats rest exclusively with states.

1.3 Constitutional Status

In this section, the Sixty-Forth Constitution Amendment Bill (1989), the Seventy-Fourth Amendment Bill (1990), the Seventy – Second Amendment Bill (1991), the Tamil Nadu Panchayati Raj Act, 1994, 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992 are discussed.

1.3.1 Sixty-Forth Constitution Amendment Bill (1989)

The Sixty-Forth Amendment Bill sought to make it obligatory for all the states to establish a three-tier system of Panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels. However, the directive that states having a population of less than 20 lakh would not be obliged to establish Panchayats was to be valid for five years and in case of dissolution they were to be reconstituted within six months.

Another significant provision stipulated that the Election Commission was to be responsible for the superintendence, direction and control of preparation of electoral rolls and the conduct of elections to the Panchayats. It also provided that the accounts of the Panchayats should be kept in a form prescribed by the governor on the advice of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Another significant provision related to the constitution of a Finance Commission every five years to review the finances of the Panchayats and recommend principles on the basis of which the state legislature could determine the taxes to be appropriated by or assigned to the Panchayats.
It also stipulated that all seats in Panchayats at all levels were to be filled by direct elections. However, the state legislature could provide for the representation in Panchayats, without voting right, of members of the Legislative Assembly.

Nearly 30 percent of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat was to be reserved for women and allotted by rotation to different constituents in a Panchayat.

**1.3.2 Seventy-Fourth Amendment Bill (1990)**

The Bill provided for a Gram Sabha at the village level and for Panchayats at the village and such other levels as the state legislature would decide. Thus every state was free to experiment with Panchayati Raj taking into account the local factors and not adhere to a rigid three-tier system. The Village Panchayats were to be filled by direct elections and any other Panchayats partly (50 percent) though direct election and partly by any other mode to be decided by the state legislature.

The Panchayats would have a fixed tenure of five years unless dissolved earlier. It is not clear from the bill who has the authority to dissolve Panchayats and in what circumstances. However, fresh elections would have to be held within six months. It also contained provision for setting up of the State Finance Commission which would decide how taxes, duties and tolls were to be divided between the state and the Panchayats and also to determine how these were to be assigned to them.

As regards reservation for women, the bill goes ahead of the Sixty-Fourth Amendment Bill, reserving 1/3 of the seats.

**1.3.3 Seventy – Second Amendment Bill (1991)**

The Bill provides for the constitution of the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha is a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to
a village comprised within the panchayat area at the village level. The Gram Sabha may exercise such powers at the village level as the legislature of a state may provide. It provides for a single tier panchayat at the village level and if need be the legislature of a state may provide for the constitution of Panchayats at the intermediate or the district level or both.

All the seats in a panchayat at the village level and intermediate level, if any, shall be filled by persons chosen by direct voting from territorial constitutencies in the panchayat area. The seats in a panchayat at the district level, if any, shall be filled by election in such manner as the legislature of a state may provide. The Bill further provides that not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairperson in the panchayat at each level shall be reserved for women.

The term of the Panchayats is for five years with a provision for reconstitution within six months if dissolved sooner. The governor of a state shall within one year form the commencement of the Act and thereafter at the expiration of every fifth year constitute a Finance Commission.

It is left to the jurisdiction of the state legislature to provide for the composition of the Commission, the qualifications and other details. In matters of elections, audit of accounts, taxes, etc., the state legislature has been empowered to make provisions.

The Congress Government under Narasimha Rao introduced the Bill in September 1991. It was referred to a Joint Select Committee of parliament. The Lok Sabha passed the bill on 22 December 1992 while the Rajaya Sabha passed it the following day. Following the ratification by more than half the state assemblies, the President gave his assent on 20 April 1993. The act was brought into force by a government notification on 24 April 1993 as the Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992
1.3.4 Seventy-Third and Seventy-Fourth Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992

After the 1989 parliamentary election, the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill introduced by the government could not be enacted, as the Rajya Sabha did not approve the Bill. However, in 1992, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was passed on 23.12.1992. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments came into effect on April 24th, 1993. Section 243 g of the Constitution was incorporated under the 73rd Amendment, which determined the scope and sweep of the mandate for devolution of powers and functions to Panchayati Raj institutions. The scope of delegation of powers extended to 29 items specifically listed in the newly inserted Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution. Further, the 74th Constitutional Amendment provided for District Planning Committee. According to the direction of the Constitution the devolution of functions, powers and responsibilities to Panchayats must be a substance that will enable them to function as institutions of self-government.

1.3.5 Tamil Nadu Panchayati Raj Act, 1994

State governments were required by law to carry out amendments or to enact new legislation before 24.04.94 on Panchayats in tune with the said constitutional amendments. Accordingly the Tamil Nadu Panchayati Raj Act 1994 was enacted and came into force from 22.04.94 in Tamil Nadu. The 1994 Act has brought in a number of changes in the Tamil Nadu panchayatis raj structure.

- Three tier system viz., Village Panchayat, panchayat union (Block Panchayat) and district panchayat came into existence.

- Panchayat’ as a generic term was used for all three tiers. Town Panchayats were excluded from the purview of the Act and brought under the Nagarpalika Act.
Members of the three tier rural local bodies, were to directly elect the presidents of the Village Panchayats. Chairpersons of panchayat union councils and district Panchayats were to be elected indirectly from among their elected members.

Reservation of seats and offices for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes was made in proportion to their population in every local body. One-third of the total number of seats and offices were reserved for women. Rotation of offices in all these categories in all three tiers would be once in 5 years.

Uniform term of 5 years was fixed for members and chairpersons of all three tier local bodies. Power of supercession of Panchayats by government was taken away. Ordinarily election should be conducted within six months from the date of occurrence of vacancy.

Tamil Nadu State Election Commission was constituted as an independent body under section 239 of the Act to conduct election to the local bodies regularly. Electoral roll of the Legislative Assembly was adopted for panchayat election.

State Finance Commission, under the mandatory provision of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment should be constituted as per section 198 of the Act, 1994.

District Planning Committee should be constituted under section 241 (1) of the Act, 1994 to consolidate the plans prepared by the Panchayats and municipalities in the district to prepare a development plan for the district as a whole.

The concept of ‘Grama Sabha’ consisting of all persons registered in the electoral roll relating to a Village Panchayat was revived and the state provided for specific powers and functions to be performed by such Grama Sabha.
1.3.6 Constitution, Functions and Powers of Village Panchayat

In this section, constitution, functions, powers and finance of Village Panchayat are discussed.

1.3.7 Constitution

A Village Panchayat is constituted with a population of not less than 500 as per the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act 1994. Each Village Panchayat is divided into 2 to 5 wards. All wards are divided into multi member wards with 2 to 5 members.

1.3.8 Functions and Powers

Village Panchayats are primarily responsible for the provision and maintenance of basic amenities like drinking water, street lights, link roads, streets, village sanitation, drainage etc. The functions of Village Panchayats are classified as obligatory functions and discretionary functions.

(a) The obligatory functions are

- The construction, repair and maintenance of all village roads, that is to say, all public roads in the village (other than those classified as national highways, state highways, major district roads and panchayat union roads) and of all bridges, culverts, road-dams and causeways on such roads
- The extension of village sites and the regulation of building
- The lighting of public roads and public places in built-up areas
- The construction of drains and the disposal of drainage water.
- The cleaning of streets, the removal of rubbish heaps, jungle growth and prickly pear, the filling of disused wells, unsanitary ponds, pools, ditches, pits or hollows and other improvement of the sanitary conditions of the village.
• The provision of public latrines and arrangements to clean latrines whether public or private.

• The sinking and repairing of wells, the excavation, repair and maintenance of ponds or tanks, the construction and maintenance of water-works for the supply of water for drinking, washing and bathing purposes.

• The opening and maintenance of burial and burning grounds

(b) The discretionary functions are

• The planting and preservation of trees on the sides of all public roads in the village subject to mutually agreed terms and conditions between the Village Panchayat and the authority which maintains the road in case the road is not maintained by the Village Panchayat itself.

• The lighting of public roads and public places in areas other than built-up areas

• The opening and maintenance of public markets other than markets which are classified as panchayat union markets

• The control of fairs and festivals other than those classified as panchayat union fairs and festivals

• The opening and maintenance of public landing places, halting places and car-stands and public cattle-sheds

• The opening and maintenance of public slaughter-houses

• The opening and maintenance of reading rooms

• The establishment and maintenance of wireless receiving set, playgrounds, parks, sports, clubs and centers of physical culture.
• The opening and maintenance of literacy imparting and social education centers.

• The construction of public works utility and the provision of other facilities for the safety, health, convenience, culture or recreation of the inhabitants of the village.

Village Panchayat shall prepare plan according to the local resources and execute such plan by identifying:

(a) Infrastructure gap like requirements of water supply, roads, streetlights, sanitation etc.

(b) Plan for economic development on the basis of land and water resources.

(c) Plan for the upliftment of the families living below poverty line to improve their income through providing/upgrading their skill, access to resources and credit to take up self-employment or wage employment.

(d) Plan a system of improvement of social sectors particularly on health, education, women and child welfare and other aspects for better quality of life for the people.

It is the duty of every Village Panchayat to ensure that all the natural resources including manpower resources in the panchayat village are used efficiently to improve their productivity and provide full facilities in the village so that all families earn enough income.
Removal, no confidence motion and dissolution of Village Panchayats

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<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
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<tr>
<td>Removal of president and vice-president of Village Panchayat</td>
<td>205 and 206</td>
<td>• The inspector in his own motion or representation from 2/3 members about president or vice – president.</td>
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<td>• Explanation from president or vice – president</td>
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<td>• Place this subject before special meeting of Village Panchayat</td>
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<td>• Inspector after considering views of Village Panchayat remove the president or vice-president.</td>
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<td>No confidence motion against vice-president</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>• Representation from more than half of members in sanctioned strength.</td>
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<td>• No confidence motion should be carried with support of 2/3rd members of sanctioned strength.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dissolution of Village Panchayat</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>• On the pinion of government that a Village Panchayat is not competent to perform or persistently makes default in performing duties imposed on it or exceeds or abuses its powers, the government may dissolve such Village Panchayat.</td>
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1.3.9 Finance

The resources for the Village Panchayat are taxes including fees and charges, assigned or shared revenues and government grants.
Taxes and Levies

Village Panchayat levies the following taxes, fees and charges:

- House tax
- Professional tax
- Tax on agricultural land for specific purpose
- Advertisement tax
- Licensing fee for building plan and lay out approval
- Fees and charges on market fee, water charges, fees on cart-stand.
- Other sources like revenue from social forestry, fishery rental, income from market, fairs, ferries, 2C tree tax, fines and penalties etc.

Assigned and shared revenues:

- Local cess
- Surcharge on stamp duty
- Entertainment tax (70% share)
- Seignorage charges on mines and minerals

Grants:

- Government of India Finance Commission grant
- State Finance Commission grant,
- Development grants under schemes like JGSY, IAY and RCRSP.

1.3.10 Other Statutory Institutions-Grama Sabha

Under Section 3 of Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994, a Grama Sabha is envisaged for every Village Panchayat consisting of persons registered in the electoral roll relating to the panchayat village comprised within the area of the same Village Panchayat. The Grama Sabha is the foundation of the grass-root level democratic institution. It is an instrument through which the public directly enjoy the power and feel the pulse of administration. The collective wisdom of Grama Sabha guides the Panchayati Raj institutions in their
planning and execution of development functions. Social auditing is an integral part of the Grama Sabha, which ensures transparency in administration and accountability of Panchayati Raj institutions to public.

**Functions of Grama Sabha:**

The Grama Sabha is performing the following functions:

- Approve the village plan.
- Approve the Village Panchayat budget.
- Approve the audit report Village Panchayat
- Review the progress of all schemes implementation entrusted to the Village Panchayat
- Approve the list of beneficiaries selected for various programmes.
- Approve and select location of facilities to be created in the village.
- Reviews the completions of works executed by the Village Panchayat and scrutinize the list of works undertaken for the year.
- Promote communal and social harmony among various groups of people in the village.
- Mobilise voluntary labour and contribution in cash and kind for implementation of various development programmes.

Statutorily, Grama Sabha meetings shall be conducted in such a way that intervening period between two Grama Sabha meetings shall not exceed more than six months. However, the Government of Tamil Nadu have issued instructions to conduct Grama Sabha meeting at least on four important days as mentioned below in a year:

- 26th January
- 1st May
- 15th August
- 2nd October
The Grama Sabha was made effective by amending the Act suitably to reduce the quorum from 1/3rd of electors to 1/10th of electors in the Village Panchayat.

**Functional Devolution**

In order to make the Panchayati Raj institutions genuine institutions of self government, the Government of Tamil Nadu undertook simultaneous devolution of functions and finances to empower three tier Panchayats with powers to function freely and fairly and delineated role clarity amongst the three tiers and encouraged people’s participation in the grass root level democratic institutions. Care has been taken to ensure that the decentralization of powers and delegation of responsibilities are compatible with appropriate devolutions of financial resources.

**Villages Panchayats**

- The Village Panchayat president is the executive authority in respect of all administrative and financial matters. The cheque drawing power vests with two persons where cheques are signed jointly either with vice- president or any other member nominated by Panchayat for this purpose along with the president.

- Village Panchayat administration has been simplified. About 60 registers and forms were reduced to 31 registers and forms

- The responsibility of selecting individual beneficiaries in respect of all poverty alleviation programmes and selected welfare programmes has been entrusted to the Village Panchayats and more specifically to the Grama Sabha.

- Village Panchayats do not depend on external approval for administrative sanction for works up to one lakh, taken from their own sources.
• The Village Panchayats have been given freedom to execute works up to Rs. 2000 at a time and Rs.5000/- for the whole year without any sanction from technical authorities.

• The presidents have been empowered to draw self cheque up to Rs. 500/- to meet the contingent expenditure.

• To give considerable autonomy to the functioning of the Village Panchayats, the Government of Tamil Nadu empowered the Village Panchayat to use the services of chartered private engineer for estimation, supervision of works and execution of works with estimate up to Rs.1 lakh from panchayat general fund. It will make the Village Panchayat free to use the local engineers rather than depending on the block engineer/assistant engineer stationed at block level.

• The Village Panchayats have been given power to independently maintain the street lights and attend to the repairing and maintenance of hand pumps and power pumps for water supply purpose by utilizing locally available skilled labour and buying materials with ISI marks locally themselves following usual procedure of calling quotation without any external interference.

• The power to approve layouts and building plans in Village Panchayat area has been given to the president of the Village Panchayats. These powers were vested with panchayat union commissioner.

1.4. Focus of this Study

In this thesis, various factors contributing to the empowerment of Dalit and Non-Dalit women presidents elected from the election held on 16th and 18th of October, 2001 for the Village Panchayats and their role and performance in the Panchayati Raj system is studied in Villupuram District of Tamil Nadu.
1.4.1. Theoretical review for empowerment:

Kamala Bhasin (1992) asks the question why women need to be empowered. Women have led the peace and ecology movements in many parts of the world. She believes that sustainable development has to be woman centered. She does not say this because she is a women or a feminist. Historically and even today women take care of the basic needs of society like food, fodder, full, shelter, nurturing. They are also more to tune with nature. As child-bearers, they have had to be more in tune with their own nature. They have also been creating and nurturing. She does not say that. It is because of women’s socialization for centuries, and because of their pre-occupation with sustenance, nurturing, nursing.

Empowerment of women means many things to Bhasin (1992);

- It means recognizing women’s contribution, women’s knowledge.
- It means helping women fight their own fears, and feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.
- It means women enhancing their self-respect and self-dignity.
- It means women controlling their own bodies. It means women becoming economically independent and self-reliant
- It means women controlling resourced like land and property.
- It means reducing women’s burden of work, especially within the home.
- It means creating and strengthening women’s groups and organizations.
- It means promoting qualities of nurturing, caring gentleness, not just in women but also in men.
1.4.2 Concept of Empowerment

The concept of women’s empowerment was introduced at the international Women’s Conference at Nairobi in 1985 that defined it as redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women Pmecha and Khatik (2005). For them, empowerment is a process of challenging the existing power relations and gaining greater control over the sources of power. Empowerment implies power. Empowerment of women means developing them as more aware individuals who are potentially active, economically productive and independent and they are able to make intelligent decisions in matters that affect them.

For Giffen (1989), women’s empowerment is ‘adding to women’s power’ and ‘transformative capacity’. It is a radial transformation of power relations between women and men, kabeer (1990). It seeks to change society through a rearrangement of power, Beteile (1999). From the feminist perspective, women’s empowerment is ‘power over’ (Deutchman 1991).

1.4.5 Levels of Empowerment

- Empowerment at house-hold level;
- Empowerment at community level; and
- Empowerment at government level.

Dimensions of Empowerment

- Social;
- Economic;
- Psychological; and
- Political

Social Empowerment

- Mobility of women-within and outside the village;
- Status of women within the family and the village community;
- Changes in gender-based discriminations and gender relation and
- Decision-making.

**Economic Empowerment**

- Women’s income, able to bring home money
- Ownership of assets
- Savings – from being a debtor to a creditor,

**Psychological Empowerment**

- Self-esteem
- Confidence
- Feeding courageous
- Improvement in self-image

1.4.6 **Political Empowerment**

According to Vettivel (1992), activities that use the governmental advantage to improve one’s socio-economic position are political in nature. This implies that the ability to meet strategic needs would require influence. Influence requires power. Thus, power has to be acquired first to gain the ability to meet the strategic needs.

- Participation in Panchayat affairs and Grama Sabhas
- Participation in village/block/district level committees
- Using electoral rights
- Participation in user groups like water users
- Participation in campaigns
- Inter phase with police – block/district administration
- Contesting in local elections.
There are several reasons for promoting political empowerment of women, for example;

- There is a persistent belief that inclusion of women into the political process or governance would change the way in which the politics of development is carried out. That women are supposed to be more concerned about the common good; their style of development would be less corrupt and more cooperative (Hust, 2004).

- Political empowerment would strengthen women’s own position both socially and economically. Political empowerment would also go towards meeting the strategic needs of the women which can be defined as their ability to prevent gender division of labour, male violence and sexual exploitation, ability to gain control over resources, ability to gain control over their own bodies and establishment of political equality (Molyneux, 1985 and Kabeer (1999).

Women will have to gain, retain and use the political power to empower themselves to meet their strategic needs. They have to force existing power holders to share power with them and it would necessarily lead to conflicts with they will have to encounter in the process of gaining power,. When women gain power and attempt to meet the strategic needs, it is likely that the first level of conflict will be with the husband, the mother-in-law, the father-in-law and the father. The second level of conflict will be with the community and panchayat leaders and the third level will be with the government officials.

The understanding of political power must be broadened to include, besides the access to basic needs and services, strategic needs like freedom and ability to (a) make decisions about their own life options, for example, marry or not to marry, when, where and how much to study/work, where to live, etc. (b) make others implement one’s decisions and (c) influence decisions about others in the household, community, nation and international arena at large (Batliwala, 1994). Some academics like Kelkar (2005) feel that women’s ability to make strategic choices in terms of rights to assets, markets and services is what empowerment is all about.
1.4.7 Women’s Empowerment and Social Transformation

Two approaches to women’s empowerment have been identified: sponsored and self-driven. ‘Sponsored’ refers to efforts made by the state. Such as statutory provisions, legal enactments and programmes focusing in empowerment. ‘Self-driven’ refers to empowerment through self-mobilization. Several scholars maintain that true empowerment of women can only occur through women’s own efforts to mobilize and organize themselves by means of a mass movement. However, it has been argued that the two are not always exclusive and that they are dialectically intertwined. These imply that women’s empowerment entails a process of social transformation – changes in gender relations and gender inequality between women and men.

1.4.8 Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equity

“Equality is not a question of the redistribution of power; it is also a question of a change of values. It is here that theories of social change tend to diverge, for some theories believe that social change comes about mainly through the redistribution of power whereas others assign at least as much importance in it to the reconstitution of values”. (Beteille, 2005).

Women’s empowerment signifies increase in women’s power to achieve equality with men. The hardware framework for women’s empowerment assesses gender inequality at five levels in the following order:

- Control over one’s life;
- Participation in decision-making process;
- Conscientisation, debunking the belief in the natural determination of gender inequality. This is man-made and therefore can be altered;
- Access to resources and benefits and
- Material welfare.
There are gender gaps at all the five levels. These five levels can be viewed from top downward and bottom upward. Viewed from bottom upwards, women’s empowerment implies progressive elimination of gender inequalities at each level starting from below as women get more empowered. Looking at it from top downward, if a woman could get control over her life and over the levers of power in both the domestic and community power structures, then gender equality at other levels will automatically follow. This brings out the centrality of women’s empowerment for gender equality.

Beteille (1990) states, “Indian society is a notoriously hierarchical society. There are substantial inequalities of income and wealth and, what is more striking, vast number of persons continues to subsist below the line of poverty in both rural and urban areas. The most deep-rooted forms of inequality, built into the structure of traditional Indian society, are those based on caste and genders were social and not economic. Deep rooted ideas of purity and pollution governed the social standings of different castes and sexes; men and women were deemed to be of unequal moral worth as were the different ‘varnas’ and the social hierarchy was underpinned by a legal order in which privileges and disabilities were carefully modulated according to caste and gender”.

1.4.9 Characteristics of Empowered Women

According to Pamecha and Khatik (2005)

- Empowered women define their attitudes, values and behaviour in relation to their own real interests
- They have autonomy because they claim their freedom from existing male hierarchies, whether they live in traditional societies or modern societies
- Empowered women maintain equal mindedness. They respond as equal and cooperate to work towards the common good
- They act out roles that challenge male dominance
- They use their talents to live fulfilling lives
- They maintain their strength in the presence of pressure from religion and contribute towards the empowerment of all women
- They define their values and formulate their beliefs themselves; they do not derive their sense of being from male authorities nor do they live vicariously through men and Empowered women strengthen themselves through other women’s support and sustain their own moral visions. Their actions flow from their own distinctive ideals.

1.4.10 Women’s Status

The Hindu society gives women a subordinate status. A considerable amount of abuse and harassment of women also takes place within the family. Violence at home is common and is not confined to poor or illiterate families as often presumed. In some communities, female babies and girl children have been known to be systematically subjected to pervasive neglect. The extreme form of such neglect and abuse is manifested in female feticide and infanticide. Dowry has been the cause of harassment of young brides in thousands of reported cases at times leading to death.

1.4.11 Gender Disparity:

According to Amartya Sen (2001), Gender inequality is not one homogenous phenomenon, but a collection of desperate and interlinked problems and the different kinds of gender inequality were displayed in morality, maturity and basic facility, special opportunity, professions, ownership and even household matters. Gender disparity includes the discrimination of Dalit women as well.

In comparison with other 29 states and 7 Union territories in India, Tamil Nadu has consistently claimed the superiority of its schemes. While schemes are plenty, the ground reality among clearly identifiable sections, remains a grave area of concern (TSDR, 2000). In the present dispassion, we shall look into the classification of gender disparity at birth, growth and survival. The data portrays the plight of women in general which also includes Dalit women who are being discriminated based on gender.
1.5.1 Dalit movement in India:

In India, Dalits were counted as a separate group in the census reports from 1870 onwards. Under the suggestion of Lord Simon who headed a commission, they were called scheduled castes from 1934-1935 onwards. Even after Independence, this title continues for all officials’ purposes. Their long and bitter struggle has enabled them remarkably to reduce the gravity of oppressive caste discrimination, economic potentiation, marginalized political participation and an unjust social order.

1.5.2 Pre-Independent Dalit Movement:

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, a Non-Dalit was among the first social thinkers in Maharasstra to contribute for the well-beings of Dalits in the mid-nineteenth century. He worked ceaselessly for education of the women and Dalits, for upliftment of the underprivileged and downtrodden and for reform of the Indian social structure (Laxman, 1996).

A number of independent movements took place during the early decades of 20th century, namely M.C. Rajesh of the Depressed Classes Federation (DCF) in Madras presidency, Ayyankali in Travancore, Swami Sharadhanand and Dr.B.R. Ambedkar in Maharashtra in the initial phase of Dalit movement, the principal thrust was abolishing untouchability i.e. on temple entry, access to market places, removal of restriction on admission to schools, and free movement in public places such as roads, post office, etc. Sathyagraha was the most radical method of protest that was employed during this period. Militant protest was exception rather than the rule (Suresh, 1996: P.360)

The first All India Depressed classes’ conference was held on March 23-24, 1918. Eminent political leaders including Tilak participated in the same it was shed an All India Anti-untouchability manifesto to the effect that it would not observe untouchability in their every day life. Gandhi founded the Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1932. This resolution was to uplift the depressed classes both educationally and economically and removal of untouchability (Jain, 1997:P.20-22)
The second phase fought for a new identity as depressed classes and struggled to separate electorates and adequate representation for Dalits in elected bodies. Involvement of Dalits in the national movement was activated by the terminology of ‘Harijans’ (Means ‘children of God’) and ‘Dalits’ (Means ‘broken’ or oppressed) respectively and extended up to the mobilization of Dalits. DR.B.R.Ambedkar (1981: P.357) expressed, ‘there is lamentable lack of resources at commend. We have no money. We have no press. The cruelest of tyrannies and oppressions, to which our people are subjected, day in day out all over India, are never reported in press.

The emergence and growth of the Non-Brahmin movement did hold a considerable impact on the Dalit movement. Though the Non-Dalit caste and Dalits developed greater solidarity and cohesion in organizing against the Brahmins. Dalit organizations showed a preference for retention of their separate characteristics and to integrate them into broader political movement dominated by Non-Dalit caste (or) Brashmins. (Wash brook, 1989:P.215).

1.5.3 Dalit movement since Independence:

DR.B.R.Ambedkar was one of the chief architects of independent India in originating Indian constitution. His sudden death in 1956 and thereafter the lack of a second rung of leaders brought the Dalit movement, which he had so effectively led for so long, to a grinding halt. The movement has in fact not recovered since and has not produces another leader with a capacity to hold various factions together within the fold of a single political organization (Suresh, 1996: P.367). With the spread of education and exposure to new ideas, restlessness among the Dalits increased. But owing to the pressure of upper castes dominating all fields and their own divisions was, coming as a hindrance in the way of their unity and emergence as a strong political and social movement.

Small organization such as the Dalit panthers of Maharastra, Dalit Sanghrsha Samiti of Karnataka, Dalit Sena of UP, the Dalit Maha Sabha of AP, and Dalit organizations in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Bihar and Gujarat sprung up
during this phase. In 1988, attempts were being made to invite all small groups. Organizations and parties under a Dalit federation, to discuss common problems like annihilation of caste, de-Hinduisaiton, to concentrate on economic and social development and strive to win power. (file:///A/article.htm). Despite their articulateness and their strident projection of the programmes they have been unable to develop links in Rural areas (Suresh, 1996:P.376).

National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) was launched on 10 Dec, 1998 by concerned human rights activists who worked among Dalits and were studying the effectiveness of the implementation of SC/ST (prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989 in the different states of India. It upheld that ‘Dalit rights are human rights’ (NCDHR, 2000).

1.5.4 Dalit Movement in Tamil Nadu:

Irattaimalai R.Srinivasan (1859-1945) organized the Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1881. The depressed classes’ mission society of Madras was established in 1909. It took up the task of society of Madras was established in 1909. It took up the task of educations the oppressed classes (Jain, 1997: P.20). Violence and human rights violations towards Dalits are indescribable in Tamil Nadu. In response to the struggles of Dalits in the state some of the organizations like peoples watch, Dalit Media Net work, Dalit Liberation Education Trust and International Dr. B.R.Ambedkar centenary movement have merged in the concrete activities of these organizations, for instance, Federation for Dalit Action and Liberation (FDAL) at Vadipatti, near Madurai had launched out action to retrieve ‘ Panchami lands’ from unlawful occupiers (The Hindu, July 22, 2000: P.4; TT, July 4, 2000: P.16).

1.5.5 Disparity of Dalit Women

Dalit women face specific problems which are uncommon to other caste women. Though in gender disparity they confront with the problems which common for all women, they are often alienated even from their fellow-women. The identity of caste excludes them from other women. The following discussion narrates the discrimination experienced uniquely by Dalit women in different aspects of life.
1.5.6 Isolated habitation:

In rural India Dalit lived in separate hamlets away from the main village and it is called as ‘colony’ and other area is called as ‘oru’. In some places where the Pallar community people lived, it is called “Pallachery” and for Parayar ‘Paracherry’ (‘Cherry’ means ‘Slum’). To abolish this crude style of life and to bring communal harmony. Samathuvapurams (equality villages) project was introduced in Tamil Nadu. But how far it served its objectives remains a question. Dalits had to worship in a separate temple, had to fetch water from isolated well (or) pond (or) had to wait for the caste people’s mercy to pour some water in their pots. They were obliged to use burial grounds set apart for their exclusive use.

1.5.7 Disparity as Rural Dalit Women

To live in rural India is to be deprived of basic amenities for daily living. But, according to census of India 2001, 72.22% of Indian population is living in rural areas (TN 56.14%). Among Dalits, 81.3% live in rural areas and only 19% of them live in Urban areas in rural areas 44.7% of the Dalits live below the poverty line (Sakantala, 1999). Dalit women, who constitute half of this population are different from those of other poor and rural groups, from other Indian women and from Dalit men. They have been placed in most villages in such way that they constitute negligible percentage of the total population of the villages. Being small in number and with no support from fellow Dalits in neighbouring villages. They seldom protest the injustice alone to them (Ramaiah, 1998).

The UNDP Report (1997) indicates that poverty has been retained over the years in India and has been carried over from one generation to the next among the 40% of the rural Dalits population eradicating poverty has become the main focus during the Ninth five year plan (1997-2002) and the target is to reduce poverty by 5% over the next 10 years. The vast majority of affirmative action policies and programmes, Which are targeted towards the rural poor, are yet to reach the most disadvantaged groups of rural Dalit women.
Majority of Rural Dalits are engaged in their traditional jobs, consequently they remained still poorer (Sunderaj, 2000 : xvii) and it is said that about 75% of them live below poverty line. However, there is a gradual change in rural areas because they have become aware of their rights, education, improvement in economic conditions and welfare measures. (file://A/Dalit women in India.htm). The ways in which rural women are involved in social life as well as the consequences of that involvement have abearing on the rural women’s issues and the large struggles. Chipko movement, for instance, is a significant victory of the participation and involvement of Indian Rural women. In 1974, when forest officials and contractors came to cut trees, women literally hugged the trees to prevent their cutting with the concern of preservation of forests and the maintenance of the eco-balance in the sub-Himalayan region.

Commitment of different movements and involvement of women in the private and government machineries have brought definite changes in their lives. It also approached that the present movements need to involve more number of women towards transformation and progress in the society. The following discussion underlines how various organizations and leaders have come up at various points of history to upgrade the status of Dalits at international, national and state level.

1.5.8 Dalit women’s movement:

Dalit women’s movement can be characterized in one sense as the rebellious child of two movements existing prior to it namely Dalit and women’s movement. The impetus for forming autonomous Dalit women’s experiences with both movements. Dalit women live mostly in villages where they work as agricultural labourers by the side of their men. Even in urban areas they are largely illiterate and work in the unorganized sector (Nandu, 1998 : P.114). However, they have traditionally filled the ranks of Dalit movements or women’s movements.
The position of Dalit women was commonly under represented or neglected by women’s and Dalits movements. The lone case of independent Dalit women’s organisations was the All India depressed classes women’s conference held its session in Nagpur on July 20, 1942. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar addressed the impressive gathering of more than 20,000 Dalit women and had asked them to eliminate the inferiority complex from the hearts and minds of their children and educate them by indicating high ambition in them. He had also asked them to stand by their men on an equal footing (Das, 1979: P. 193-194).

In the late eighties Dalit women increasingly started arguing that their needs, difficulties and aspirations were seldom accounted by both movements. They felt the need for the separate platform and emerged as a recognizable category of Dalit women’s movement in early nineties. During this period three Dalit women’s organisations were created on a national scale. In 1987 Ruth Manorama, president of women’s voice, helped to organize the first national meeting of Dalit women in Bangalore that gave rise in 1995 to the National Federation of Dalit women that was protesting in Durban at the anti-racism conference from August 31 to September 7, 2001 (File: //A/low – caste women to protest at UN Racism meeting.htm.). It demonstrated and demanded that caste discrimination be considered and condemned on for with racism.

All India Democratic women’s Association (AIDWA), a national women’s movement organized a convention on Dalit women’s Rights against untouchability and oppression, to support the castes of Dalit women (THT, Dec 21, 1998). National conference on Dalit women held in 1999 brought out a report of Dalit women’s rights and status in India (NCDHR, 2000).

1.5.9 Dalit women’s movement in Tamil Nadu:

The status of Dalit women in Tamil Nadu is dismal, Dalit women movements gave taken numerous efforts to uplift their situation (AIDWA)All India Dalit Women Association initiated in organizing women in different parts of India especially in Tamil Nadu (Bumiler, 1991). The following instances vividly describe their involvement in the struggles of Dalit women.
• At Surilipatty, Theni District, women were molested by high caste men on Dec 16, 1997. AIDWA women condemned and agitated against this event.

• At Oddanchatram, Dindugul District, Dalit women were asked to stand in a separate quench in Public Distribution System (PDS) shops. They were not allowed to stand along with their follow women. Hence, AIDWA women organized meetings to highlight the problems of Dalit women in Dindigul. They also organized the same at Pondichery, Cuddalore and Chidambaram (Malai Malar, March 8, 2000: P.4).

In September 2000 Dalit women conference was organized and mobilizing nearly 10,000 Dalit women from all over the state by Tamil Nadu Dalit Pengal yakkam (Tamil Nadu Dalit women’s movement). They met discussed various issues such as untouchability, caste atrocities and the impact of globalization on Dalit women and violence against women during caste clashes.

The meet inherited a separate identity for Dalit women and made them aware of their rights (TH, Sep 13, 2000 : 5). But the various Dalit for a were not giving due importance to Dalit women and their problems (TH, Dec 14, 2000 : 5).

In fighting against the rampant problem of selling illicit liquor, Dalit women have played a major role. Two Dalit Self-Help Group women were assassinated in the brutal attack. Tamil Nadu Dalit Pengal Iyakkam (Tamil Nadu Dalit women’s Movement) headed by burnad Fatima along with other groups undertook a fact-finding mission in the victims village. Tamil Nadu Dalit Pengal Iyakkam (Tamil Nadu Dalit Women’s Movement) organized level meet introduce on education of untouchability in Nov 2001.In the International Movement Against all forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), Tamil Nadu women’s forum occupies significant position by doing the entire documentation of cases of discrimination and violence against Dalit women.
1.5.10 Legal Enactment :-

Realizing the pathetic plight of Dalits, Indian constitution had initiated to safe guard the rights of Dalits ie., Education (Article 15/5), reservation in employment (Article 16/4), Abolition of Untouchability (Article 17), and Reservation in Assemblies and Parliament (Article 330 & 332). In addition Untouchability Act 1955, Protection of Civil Rights Act – 1955 and Legal Free Aid Cells were erected. In 1989, India enacted the scheduled castes and scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act to prevent and punish state and private actors for abuses against Dalits, to provide for the rehabilitation and relief of the victims. With severe penalty advocated in this Act, Dalit women were not being registered under it (TH, Sep 9, 2000: P.4). If there is no considerable serious and sustained commitment in implementing constitutional safe guards and other national and international legal protections, Dalit women rights abuses would continue to exist and lead to most degrading forms of human life. (file:///A/Broken people. htm; TH, Jan 20, 2001:P.4).


1.5.11 Reservation:

Dalits struggles have resulted in reservation, the primary importance of their development. The political reservation had assured 79 out of 544 seats in the Lok Sabha and 577 out of a total of 3997 seats in all the state Assemblies for Dalits. However there is no reservation of seats in Rajya Sabha. Reservation policy of the government. departments. Pinto (2000) discussed interestingly on
whether reservation could be the answer for Dalit empowerment. Since over 50 years it had not brought out total transformation he suggested that an attack on the unjust system and inclusion of reservation in private sector was also needed.

### 1.5.12 Government programmes:

There are various developmental programmes available for Dalits which are yet to make aware to them (TH, Jan 4, 2002 : 4). Some of the Central government programmes cater to the upliftment and welfare of this oppressed group namely condensed courses of education for women, vocational training programme for women, awareness generation programme, family counseling centres, working women’s hostels, crèches for the children of working and ailing mothers. “Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Indira Mahila Yojana and support to training and employment programme for women. Each state government too has separate programmes for women and Dalits.

### 1.5.13 Approaches to women’s empowerment:

According to Taylor (2000), the various dimensions of empowerment ie., education economic, psychological, social and political were interlinked and could not be isolated. The most fundamental principle of system theory which pointed to the fact no single element of a system could change its relationships within the system without change occurring in the systematic nature or society. Henceforth, increasing women’s access to micro-finance and involvement in Self- Help Groups (SHGs) was assumed to initiate serious of various spirals of economic empowerment, increased wellbeing for women and their families and widen social and political empowerment (May Oux, 1999).

- Educational empowerment (may Oux, 1999).
- Economic empowerment
- Social empowerment
- Psychological empowerment
• Political empowerment
• Technological empowerment
• Futuristic view on empowerment
• Empowerment of women in India
• Organs for empowerment

1.5.14 Need for Dalit women’s empowerment:

Omvedt (1994) traced the history of the Dalit movement from its beginnings in the 19th century to the Dalit of its most famous leader, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, in 1956 especially in the states of Andrapradesh, Maharastra and Karnataka. She based her analysis on a modified historical materialism which takes into account the realities of caste, class and gender and included a critical analysis of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar thought which is the dominating ideology of the Dalit movement.

1.5.15 Governance:

Perhaps the most significant development for women in the last decade has been the introduction of 33% reservation for women in local village level (Panchayati Raj) elections more and more women have shown that once they have power, they are able to use it, to the benefit of society in general and women in particular. (http://www/twnside.org) However, there is ample delay currently in 81st constitutional amendment bill being considered for approval by the Indian parliament that will allow the Indian government to set aside 33 percent of the seats in the Lok Sabha and other legislative bodies in the states exclusively for women (file://A//someproblems in the movement for the Affirmation of Indian women – Alok Mishra.htm).
Since the onset of (PRI) Panchayati Raj Institution, (PRI) the percentages of women in various levels of political activity have risen from 4.5 percent to 25-40 percent. Through the experience of the Indian PRI, one million women have actively entered political life in India. Since the creation of the quote system, local women the vast majority of them illiterate and poor have come to occupy as much as 43 percent of the seats are spurring the election of increasing numbers of women at the district, state and national levels.

1.5.16 Efforts at the international level:

The international Dalit solidarity network was an initiative that has emerged among national and international human rights organizations and the development agencies in response to the struggle of Dalits in South Asia. Their goals were to raise consciousness on Dalit issues nationally and internationally, to advocate separately (or) United on Dalit human rights in international Lora, and to operate in smaller partnership groups on agreed regional (or) interest based areas of work.

Organizations involved in the network include international movement against all forms of discrimination and Racism (IMADR), voices of Dalits at International level.

Dalit solidarity forum – United States, Dalit solidarity Network – United Kingdom, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar Center for Justice and Peace – Canada, Bread for the world – Germany and India’s National federation for Dalit women (http://sss.hrm.org) UN sponsored world conference against racism, radical discrimination and related discriminations and intolerances’ in Durban, South Africa was held from August 31 to September 7, 2001 and the Dalit leaders attended the meeting un officialy (The, July 4, 2001: P. 14)
1.5.17 Organization of the Thesis

The study has been divided into six chapters:

The first chapter deals with the importance of the study, reasons for selecting the study, statement of the problem, historical background of Panchayati Raj system in pre-independence and post-independence period, constitution, functions and powers of Village Panchayat and other statutory institutions-Grama Sabha and Dalit status in the society, various theoretical reference for women empowerment. The Second chapter deals with available literature on empowerment of women, Dalit and Non-Dalit women and Village Panchayat Presidents. The third chapter deals with the research design and methodology adopted in this thesis. The fourth chapter deals with the analysis and interpretation of the data. The fifth chapter presents the findings of the present study. The sixth chapter presents suggestions and recommendations and future research.
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