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**Scheduled Castes,
Legitimacy and
Local Governance:
Continuing Social
Exclusion in Panchayats**

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SCHEDULED CASTES, LEGITIMACY AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE: CONTINUING SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN PANCHAYATS

Anand Inbanathan* and N Sivanna**

Abstract

People of the Scheduled Castes have a long history of being discriminated against, exploited, and placed at the bottom of caste society. The panchayati raj, after the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, brought in measures to overcome these past indignities, and provided a quota within ordinary seats and among the office bearers of the panchayats. There is, however, strong resistance among the higher castes (just above that of the Scheduled Castes in many cases), about reservation of the post of panchayat president for Scheduled Caste people. This paper looks at some of the consequences of having a quota for the Scheduled Castes for the post of president in the grama panchayats of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, with the concept of legitimacy to consider the perceptions of the higher castes as well as the participation of the Scheduled Castes in panchayats.

In order to overcome the disadvantages of being in groups designated as Scheduled Castes, measures have been taken to provide an opportunity to these groups to participate in the functioning of the panchayats, both as ordinary members and as presidents. Reservations have been in the same proportion as their population in the state, and also include reservation of seats for women. Seats that have been reserved for the Scheduled Castes have, by and large, been occupied by members of these groups. However, an issue that is also of concern is whether or not, after they have occupied these seats, they have been able to participate in the deliberations and decision-making of the panchayats. As ordinary members and as presidents, have people of the Scheduled Castes been able to participate, or have they been prevented from doing so by the higher castes and those dominant in the area of the grama panchayats? This paper discusses certain issues that are related to the participation of Scheduled Castes in the panchayats of two states, viz. Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, and through the perceptions of legitimacy of participation of Scheduled Castes in panchayats.

There is a statutory requirement to reserve seats in the panchayats for the Scheduled Castes, as ordinary members and also for the post of president and vice president (in Karnataka), and president (in Tamil Nadu there is no reservation for the VP position). Variations are always likely in different parts of the states, the population of specific Scheduled Castes in each place, and the local communities/castes that are found in different areas of the states. An important consideration in this study is the reaction of the locally dominant caste to the office bearers from the Scheduled Castes and also women (if they are also Scheduled Castes—in this study we did not select any president who was not of the Scheduled Castes). We intend to examine this issue in the context of two districts in Karnataka and four in Tamil Nadu. Karnataka has two large and widely recognised dominant castes, viz., Vokkaligas and Lingayats (Srinivas 1987). There are, however, some locally dominant castes that are smaller and their dominance is confined to limited areas. Dominant castes in Tamil Nadu are less

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widespread, in the sense that a single caste may be dominant only in a relatively small area, and therefore, the number and identity of dominant castes in different districts may vary.

It's not new to say that the situation of Scheduled Castes in the panchayats has not been of a high order in terms of their ability to participate in the decision-making process of the panchayats or the overall power that they command following their election to the panchayats. Studies in different states of the country have confirmed that notwithstanding the provisions of affirmative action and reservation for men and women of the Scheduled Castes, their political standing has not reached a level where they can be said to be able to function relatively independently, as compared to being proxies or taking instructions from dominant individuals of the villages (see Mathew and Baviskar eds., 2009). Leiten and Srivastava (1999) in fact indicated that their Jat respondents in Uttar Pradesh had stated that it would lead to an "inversion of the natural social order," if people of the Scheduled Castes became the *pradhans* of panchayats. Their opposition was more against having Scheduled Caste *pradhans* than against ordinary members of the panchayats, the former being seen as a position of some power and prestige compared to the latter. Leiten (1996) had even suggested in this earlier publication that representatives from Scheduled Castes were nominal members or "namesake" members as he called them. The nominal status as representatives was seen elsewhere too and was not confined to Uttar Pradesh.

Scheduled Castes and Grama Panchayats in Karnataka

Wide disparities exist between people of the Scheduled Castes and those of other castes. This could be seen in virtually all human development indicators. While constituting about 18 per cent of the population of the state of Karnataka, Scheduled Castes are concentrated in the lower economic categories, in both rural and urban areas. In rural areas, they constitute the largest section of landless people, and own only 11.65 per cent of agricultural land available, mostly of poorer quality and without irrigation even though they are dependent on agriculture. They are thus, more likely to be employed as unskilled/manual daily wage labourers.

The weak economic and social status of the Scheduled Castes contributes to their fragile political position in the panchayats. Karnataka, as well as other states of the country, has provided reservations for the Scheduled Castes for the ordinary panchayat seats and the positions of president and vice president (several states have not reserved the position of vice president for any specific group). What now needs to be looked at is the development of the people of Scheduled Castes over the intervening period when the reservation of seats has been in force. During this time, what has been the overall effect on the people of the Scheduled Castes in terms of how other castes have treated them, and how these groups (non Scheduled Castes) have reacted to the situation of Scheduled Castes as representatives, presidents and vice-presidents? Evidently, when we speak of the participation of the Scheduled Castes, it can also be assumed that we are going to look into how much of political power the other castes are willing to concede to the Scheduled Castes, which they had earlier considered as their prerogative, or even their right. A situation of confrontation is automatically built into such a case, when the state introduces by law something that not all social groups (castes) may be willing to accept. Thus, the decision making power of the Scheduled Caste representatives and presidents could vary from

place to place. This is not to suggest that the state has brought into the system of local government a diverse and complicated distribution of power, but that such power can be demonstrated or manifested only when the Scheduled Castes are sufficiently strong to actually hold onto the power acquired through their elections. We would concentrate on hard evidence from the grass roots on patterns of participation in diverse parts of the state.

Scheduled Castes and Grama Panchayats in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu has a Scheduled Caste population that is 19 per cent of the total population of the state. However, they are not uniformly distributed across the state, a district such as Kanyakumari having only 4 per cent of the population who belong to the Scheduled Castes, and in Thiruvarur it is 32.4 per cent (Census 2001). Reactions to the presence of Scheduled Castes have varied from place to place and even within the districts. This state has also witnessed extreme forms of violence against Scheduled Caste members who had contested and won the president's seat. While this was not found over the entire state, the fact that they had happened at all gives sufficient grounds to acknowledge that the antipathy towards the election of Scheduled Castes to the president's seat is very real. Factors that affect the reaction towards the Scheduled Castes include their distribution in each grama panchayat (village council) area and whether there is a substantial presence of a higher and dominant caste in that same area. If the population of Scheduled Castes is low then they are likely to be dominated and have very little scope for independent functioning even if they were to be elected to panchayat posts. The dependence of Scheduled Caste members on landowners who are of relatively higher castes (dominant castes may be of the castes now designated as Backward Class rather than upper castes as such) is also related to their employment and income earning prospects, which would be severely impeded if they were to go against the wishes of these higher caste land owners and locally dominant groups.

In various parts of Tamil Nadu, caste consciousness has been of an extraordinarily high order. Any act that the locally dominant castes consider as "improper", i.e., where a Scheduled Caste individual has done something which the higher castes think is not in keeping with their lower status and which in effect is an affront to the higher castes, is very severely dealt with. One such "improper" act is where people of Scheduled Castes have contested for the post of panchayat president. However, Scheduled Castes are not only entitled to contest, but these posts are reserved exclusively for them. Therefore, no one from any other caste is eligible to contest these seats. Earlier studies and literature have indicated that a reason for the strong reactions against the Scheduled Castes was the government's affirmative action in support of Scheduled Castes (see Vincentnathan 1996; Radhakrishnan 2002; Kannan 2007).

In recent times, a change in the constitution of panchayat representatives is that the reservation of constituencies for a particular group has been increased from one to two successive terms. We presume that this would aggravate existing tensions, considering that even the one-term reservation was found to be too much for some groups to accept when it concerned the Scheduled Castes. Antipathy towards the reservation of seats in the panchayats for Scheduled Castes has been documented in the case of Kallars, Vanniyars, and Gounders. We have taken into consideration the dominance of different castes in the grama panchayats selected in this study.

Theoretical Considerations

Dominant Caste

The concept of “dominant caste” is taken from the conceptualisation of M N Srinivas, where he had stated, “A caste may be said to be ‘dominant’ when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can be more easily dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low” (Srinivas 1987: 97). This conceptualisation has been subject to revisions, not least by Srinivas himself, who saw changes occurring since he first articulated this definition and, therefore, needed to bring in other characteristics to be more in tune with existing conditions. Thus, he included the number of educated people who were in a caste, and also the occupations that they pursued (ibid). The Tamil Nadu situation, however, indicates that even castes fairly low in the caste hierarchy, but just above the Scheduled Castes, can be dominant. Arun (2007: 31) referred to these castes as “dominant low castes”, and included among them the Thevars, Vellalars, Udayars and Chettiars.

Legitimacy

The concept of ‘legitimacy’ has been discussed for many years, to discern whether a government has valid grounds (legitimacy) to govern. In more recent times, it is generally considered within the ambit of democracy. An important question that has also been discussed in this context is that of public order. Inasmuch as governance involves the rule of the few over many — those who are subject to this rule should feel that this rule is legitimate, acceptable, and will comply with the pronouncements of the few. Or, as Max Weber suggested, the fact of people submitting to any order implies that they believe in the legitimacy and authority of the entity imposing such an order (Stillman 1974: 33). Thus, when there is a willingness to submit to the order of these few it also furthers the stability of the government (Grafstein, 1981).

Carl Friedrich suggested that a government may be considered legitimate if most people subjected to it believed it to be so. In his own words, the “question of legitimacy” is the “question of fact whether a given rulership is believed to be based on good title by most men subject to it” (in Stillman, 1974:34) Friedrich also indicated that legitimacy does not necessarily mean legality. Stillman, on the other hand, found several weaknesses in Friedrich’s definition of legitimacy and gave his own, to suggest that a government is legitimate only if the “... results of governmental output are compatible with the value patterns of society” (ibid: 39).

While a prominent view of legitimacy is that it is a crucial element in the stability of the political order and is also the means to ensure the people’s acceptance of the rule of a particular regime, an alternative view lays greater emphasis on political institutions than individuals [Grafstein 1981(b): 52-53]. Thus, if the institutions are acceptable, obedience to the rulers’ decisions are through proper institutional procedures (ibid. 58). Niklas Luhmann’s view is that “the political process produces legitimacy” (quoted in Herz 1978:324). A similar view is that of Lipset, who said legitimacy “involves the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society” (in Stillman: 34). David Easton (1975:451) indicated that legitimacy was “the conviction ‘that it is right and proper... to obey the authorities and to abide by the requirements of the regime’”. Further, he states that it is

also probable that were the regime to be considered illegitimate, support for this regime would be withdrawn or is likely to be withdrawn.

Political legitimacy implies that the entity wielding political power is morally justified in doing so (Buchanan 2002: 689). Political power, on the other hand, "is the attempt to make, apply, and enforce rules monopolistically over the broadest class of citizens," (ibid: 690). Political legitimacy may not by itself get the people to comply with the pronouncements of the government, though governments would prefer that they are not obliged to use coercive measures which would be difficult and costly (ibid: 694). However, Buchanan's contention is that rather than project a 'consent theory' to explain why some people wield political power and others do not, it is more convincing to bring democratic theory to explain such inequalities. In this explanation, it is now suggested that the inequalities in power can be justified by the citizens having "an equal say" in "determining who will wield political power" and "determining what the most fundamental laws are" (ibid: 710). This will also suggest an adequate explanation of why people would submit to such a rule and also that the government has now the required credibility or legitimacy to wield power. Evidently, there is also the indication that legitimacy is related to participation in the political institutions and, in fact, participation enhances legitimacy. Conversely, lack of participation of all or almost all citizens reduces the legitimacy of these political institutions. While in the Indian state there is no group that is excluded from political participation due to their group identity, the participation of most people is at the minimal level that such inclusion occurs i.e., voting. The practice of exclusion, however, is found more often in the manner in which representatives are elected, and reservations too play a role in the exclusion of some groups even if the stated intention was to "include" rather than to exclude any group.

In a discussion on democratic legitimacy, Benhabib (1996: 69) suggests that "...it is a necessary condition for attaining legitimacy and rationality with regard to collective decision making processes in a polity, that the institutions of this polity are so arranged that what is considered in the common interest of all results from processes of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals." Further, she goes on to say that the closer that collective decision making processes are to this model, the greater is their legitimacy (ibid).

What does the above have to do with the state of affairs of the panchayats, and the reservations that have been provided to the people of the Scheduled Castes? We would like to suggest that the question of legitimacy comes into the situation in several ways. The laws enacted, not only to constitute the panchayats but also to put in the details of the structure and functions of these institutions, were essentially imposed from "above", i.e., initially through the Constitutional Amendment (73rd), and then the specific Panchayati Raj Acts of the state governments. At the village level it is the ordinary people who have to live with these institutions and in the form in which they have been "imposed". Hence, while the institutional set up has ignored the traditional structure of society and the functioning of the local groups that could be considered as the "dominant castes", it is now incumbent on these groups to accept the new ruling as a "*fait accompli*". Would they accept such a condition, and in what manner would dominant castes in different places adapt to the situation in which they find themselves? It is here that we need to bring in the concept of legitimacy, and to examine whether the people who are subject to the new institutions of local government would see their role and status in a

different light than what they had been accustomed to. The Scheduled Castes on the other hand have been subjected to great indignities in the past and the new institutions may present them with the means to come out from such a condition. But they too would face difficulties to see their new roles as a reversal of what they had been accustomed to (though possibly in a more positive light than the dominant castes would see them).

The study was carried out in two districts of Karnataka, viz., Mandya and Gulbarga. In Tamil Nadu, with a wider dispersal of dominant castes, four districts were selected, viz., Cuddalore, Sivagangai, Ramanathapuram and Theni. A total of six panchayats were selected in each state, to explore the relations between Scheduled Caste presidents and the dominant caste of that area, i.e., in the area of the selected grama panchayat. All the elected representatives in each panchayat were to be interviewed and for the most part this was accomplished (a few were missed because they could not be located).

Tamil Nadu

The enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment made it mandatory that all Panchayati Raj Acts of the states of the country should follow a uniform system, where reservations were made for women and the Scheduled Castes for the ordinary seats as well as the post of president. While the reservation of seats for women has been accepted to some extent, the same has not been the case with the reservation of presidents' posts for the Scheduled Castes. In view of the conceptualisation of legitimacy what also needs to be kept in mind is that different theorists have emphasized different factors as being the essence of legitimacy. If the institutions of government are acceptable to the people then they are legitimate; or if the procedures of governance are acceptable then they are legitimate; and, since legitimacy is now considered as being related to democracy, if the people are able to participate in governance, then the system of government is legitimate. We have to now consider how the principle of legitimacy is manifested in the panchayats.

The two grama panchayats in Cuddalore have the Vanniyars as the dominant caste in that area. Most land in this area is also owned by the Vanniyars, and the people of Scheduled Castes depend on the Vanniyars for their livelihood. The Vanniyars control the functioning of the panchayats. Even though the presidents were elected with the support of the Vanniyars, subsequently, all decisions were taken by the Vanniyars. One of the panchayats (Pallipattu grama panchayat) is dominated by a Vanniyar who is a union panchayat councillor and also controls the panchayat president. The vice president is a Vanniyar and he is associated with the Vanniyar union panchayat councillor and together they manage the panchayat. The president cannot do anything without their approval. The development works are handled by these two people and it is said they also take funds from the panchayat for development works but do not finish the work. An additional means of controlling the president is through the police sub-inspector of the area, who is a Vanniyar. The panchayat secretary acts in concert with the Vanniyar's wishes, and not that of the president. The population of both the Vanniyars and the Scheduled Castes is about the same, but otherwise there is no equality between them.

The second panchayat in Cuddalore (Annaveli grama panchayat) has a woman as president (the president's post was reserved for a Scheduled Caste woman). In numbers, the Vanniyars

outnumber the Scheduled Castes. As in the other grama panchayat in the area, the Annaveli grama panchayat also has the Vanniyars as the predominant landowners and the Scheduled Castes are preponderantly among the landless. The reservation of the president's post for Scheduled Castes caused considerable distress to the Vanniyars, and they created trouble for the members of the Scheduled Castes during the elections because of the reservations. The president functions under the control of the vice president and her husband. The vice president's husband was the previous president of this grama panchayat. He is now the Union Panchayat president, and also runs the grama panchayat along with his wife. The cheque book for operating the panchayat bank account is with the vice president in her house, and the president has to go to her house to get any cheque. The president was elected with the support of the Vanniyars on the condition that she is a person who can be easily dominated.

In the panchayat, the Scheduled Caste members are not allowed to speak. Development activities in the Scheduled Caste colony are minimal, and even though it is a Scheduled Caste woman who is the president, there is no special consideration for Scheduled Caste welfare. The Vanniyars, in fact, think that a Scheduled Caste woman should not be the president. A petition was given to various people that the Scheduled Castes are being denied their rights. After that confrontation the Vanniyar dominance has reduced to an extent.

The Udaiyars dominate the panchayat area of the grama panchayat (Sinthalaseri grama panchayat) in Theni district. This group provided the grama panchayat with presidents for two terms, and they were not happy with the post now being reserved for a Scheduled Caste member. While there is no clear dominance of an individual from the Udaiyars, the caste itself is said to be in a dominant position and the vice president is from this caste as well. The Panchayat president gets less respect in the grama panchayat's office than the Panchayat clerk who is respected more than the president as he is from a higher caste. Even in the programmes and schemes for Scheduled Castes, such as group houses, these were given less priority. The president had to wait for a long time to get approvals because the block level panchayat administration was very reluctant to consider the demands of a Scheduled Caste member.

The Endupuli grama panchayat in the same district is dominated by the Thevars. The Pallars and Paraiyars form the biggest groups among the Scheduled Castes while the Arunthathiyars form the smallest group. This panchayat has been dominated by one family. The head of this family was the district secretary of the DMK party and he was the first of the grama panchayat presidents. After his term a relative was made president, and then the son of the first president became the third president. It came as a shock to them that a Scheduled Caste person was to become the next panchayat president. However, they chose a Pallar woman they could control. The president, however, is not allowed even to sit on the president's seat. While the woman president does not know what to do as president, it is her husband who advises her on panchayat matters. Ultimately, she had to do exactly what the Thevars tell her to do, particularly the vice president who is a Thevar man. The president has only one role, and that is to sign the panchayat documents.

Some other reasons for selecting a Pallar as president of this Panchayat were that a large number of the Scheduled Caste people comprising Pallars and Paraiyars were living far away from the main hamlet named Endapuli where the Thevar community is dominant and where the panchayat office

is also located. The other group of Scheduled Castes – Arunthathiyar, is in the minority and resides in the same hamlet of Endapuli. An important fact behind opting for a Pallar for the post of president was that the Paraiyars are numerically as large a group in this area as the other two groups. There were many conflicts between the Thevars and Paraiyars, and they became rivals. The Arunthathiyars residing in the same hamlet were not preferred as president because they would have access to the Panchayat office. Due to all these factors, the Thevar community decided to put up a Pallar candidate who could be controlled and also keep away other Scheduled Castes from entering the Panchayat office.

Thanjakkur grama panchayat in Sivagangai district has Thevars as the dominant caste in the area. They also control the functioning of the grama panchayat. The Arunthathiyars are the Scheduled Caste group in this grama panchayat area, comprising only four families. When it was declared that the president's post was reserved for Scheduled Castes, it caused considerable distress because there were very few people from the Scheduled Castes. The Thevars threatened the Arunthathiyars not to contest for the president's post. They were also compelled to give a petition to the District Collector to make the president's post open to all (i.e. not to reserve it for Scheduled Castes). The Collector enquired into this issue and said the Government Order cannot be rescinded and that the post of president had to be reserved for the Scheduled Castes. Although the Thevars created trouble for the Arunthathiyars, eventually one of the Thevars, a dominant member of this group, persuaded the community to allow a member of the Scheduled Castes to become the president. He also managed to get 'his' candidate elected (in preference to the candidate put up by the previous president and another dominant member of the Thevars). However, an interesting fact is that the vice president is the son of the previous president. All along, the intention of the previous president was to have a president he could control and with his son as vice president, he could virtually run the grama panchayat. This was foiled by the other dominant Thevar. This member of the Thevars, however, also indulged in malpractices with the help of the panchayat clerk, and as the president was illiterate, it was easily accomplished. The president complained to the police about the dominant Thevar's activities. He was later arrested, and the clerk too was suspended by the district panchayat. The reaction from this man and his supporters was to attack the president and his family. They also complained that the president had selected inappropriate people for the NREGS, and based on this he was to be dismissed as president (this event took place when the present study was being conducted). The police did not accept the complaint from the president when his family members were attacked by the dominant caste and did not even consider the fact that the president's very young child was seriously wounded. The case of the president's dismissal is pending before the Court. Even before the case has been decided in Court the dominant caste people have been threatening to have him removed from the panchayat.

The Thiruvadanai grama panchayat is in Ramanathapuram district and the majority of the people are Thevars and Yadavars. Panchayat presidents in the past were from one or the other of these communities. The Thevars are the traditional leaders of the panchayat. In this panchayat as well, there was considerable discontentment after the president's post was declared as reserved for the Scheduled Castes. However, as they could not do anything about it, they (Yadavars and Thevars) decided to nominate a person from the Arunthathiyar community thinking that they could dominate and control this man. The vice president is from the Thevar community. Women of the panchayat were elected with

the support of their respective castes. After they were elected their husbands performed their duties as representatives. The president who was elected had the support of various communities, including the Pallars, Thevars, Yadavars and Pillaimars. That made it easy for him to get elected. He has a reasonable level of education (graduate) and has also read about the panchayati raj. The earlier presumption that the president could be controlled by the dominant castes of the grama panchayat seemed to be belied as he started functioning without their overall approval. They, therefore, chose to oppose the development measures he initiated, filed false petitions against him and complained against him to the District Panchayat office and to the District Collector. None of the petitions was able to stand scrutiny, were declared false and dismissed. The president is isolated in the panchayat and does not play a role in functions that take place in the panchayat area. The clerk is also against the president. Since the Thevars chose a president from the Arunthathiyar caste, the Pallars have been at odds with the Thevars and do not support the president in his work as grama panchayat president. The Yadavars too appear to be ambivalent about supporting him.

From the point of view of the upper castes (not 'high', but they are above the Scheduled Castes in the traditional caste hierarchy), who are dominant in many areas of Tamil Nadu, the question of legitimacy manifests itself in different ways. We saw in the areas dominated by different "dominant castes" that they were able to impose their will on the functioning of the panchayats through the choices that they made in selecting the person who was to be the president of the grama panchayat. This was done not only by the dominant castes, but within these castes it was by local dominant individuals. The dominant individuals were also able to derive power not only because of their own personal characteristics but also because of their relation to the "dominant caste" of which they were members. Both appear to be linked, and the dominant individual/s is/are able to accomplish what they do by being a part of the dominant caste.

The dominant castes also perceive that the system is not legitimate because it confers the post of president on a person who is "below" them in the caste system. That seems to be highly objectionable to them and is the reason for insisting that the reservations for Scheduled Castes as president be changed and that no one from the Scheduled Castes should become president of the panchayat. If the upper castes are contesting the legitimacy of the system, we have also to note that this legitimacy has been undermined by the lower democratic content in its functioning. The Scheduled Castes are being prevented from participating in the panchayats, as representatives they are not in a position to speak in meetings (for the most part) and their views are not taken into consideration or implemented. Further, the Schedule Caste president of the panchayat is only nominally a president who cannot function independently and has to strictly comply with the views of the dominant individual/s of the panchayat. While we have considered factors such as education and landholdings, i.e., the relative position of these representatives in terms of presumably "non-caste" attributes, we also find that even with higher education and with a moderate landholding the panchayat president who is a member of a Scheduled Caste is not able to function independently. Right from his election, he has had to do what the dominant individual of that place told him to do. When he differed, he was removed as president. Thus, what is evident is that while higher education and higher landholdings may have relatively higher weightage in a more open system and, therefore, higher status to the individual, it does not make any

difference in the case of a person from the Scheduled Castes. Likewise, the situation of women representatives who have been elected president due to the reservations, have both their caste identity (as Scheduled Castes) and the fact that they are women carrying more or less the same weight, that together pulls them down to the point where they have virtually no standing in the panchayat as a president.

What is of particular importance is not just the matter of a higher caste claiming to be above another caste in the social hierarchy. But generally, in Tamil Nadu, most dominant castes are also near the lower end of the caste hierarchy, and in fact, can be considered as dominant low castes. To the dominant castes it is not a question of the legality of placing a member of the Scheduled Castes as president of the panchayat (i.e. in conformity with the law), but it is a matter of having a person from a "low" caste in a position of authority. The sensitivity of these dominant castes appears to be that someone from a "low" caste is being placed above them, and as such it cannot be tolerated or accepted. The law has stated that the Scheduled Castes should have a quota among panchayats seats and positions of president. The law has not taken into account the sensibilities of the people of the villages in accommodating what is unacceptable to them.

Members of these dominant castes were clearly disinclined to have presidents who were from the Scheduled Castes. This was not openly and explicitly stated in the interviews with the grama panchayat representatives. We had additional information from other sources, including ordinary people of the villages and the officials who made the situation much clearer. The question of legitimacy is not an issue for these locally dominant castes. They do not dispute the power and authority that the government wields, and is able to bring in a legislation that makes reservation mandatory for people of Scheduled Castes in the panchayats. They have more down to earth reasons for objecting to the Scheduled Castes as presidents. For one, there are villages where agricultural work in the fields owned by the locally dominant castes is done by the Scheduled Castes. That these employees and wage labourers now occupy positions of importance, as presidents, makes the locally dominant castes unhappy. Even when a president is relatively better off economically, and also well educated (a graduate) they do not find him acceptable and seek ways to have him removed from the post of president. This does not make it possible for someone not of a Scheduled Caste to become a president—the reservation for a specific group is for a period of two five year terms in Tamil Nadu. What is also clear is that locally dominant castes find a person of a Scheduled Caste even remotely tolerable only if that person remains a nominal president, whom the dominant caste individuals can control. A Scheduled Caste president who can function as an independent and effective president offends the sensibilities of the dominant castes. They see the Scheduled Caste president as trying to dominate them, and show that he is in a "higher" position. Dominant castes may also have individuals who are prominent entities, who have certain attributes that make them dominate the functioning of the panchayats. They are able to do this also because Scheduled Caste presidents who are socially and economically in a lower position, from numerically small groups, cannot gather enough supporters to withstand the aggressive intentions and actions of the dominant castes.

Within the overall situation where people of Scheduled Castes were not held in esteem in the panchayats, our study has data about the participation of the representatives of various groups in the

decision making of the panchayats, and the manner in which the ordinary members can present their views in the panchayats. The male representatives have suggested that they have more scope to participate in the panchayats, and the women have said they have less scope to participate. There are complicating factors here, which need to be considered. The first is that gender is an issue with the female representatives, and it inhibits their capacity to function as full members of the panchayats. They are dominated by various men, their own family members, their husbands, or dominant men of the villages. This kind of hindrance is less visible in the case of men, but their caste identity evidently is seen to be present as a factor. The almost unanimous response from men and women to the question whether the presidents of the panchayats can take decisions on their own, was an emphatic 'no' (only one non SC woman respondent answered differently). We have to recall that all the presidents in this study are from the Scheduled Castes.

Our tables below have sometimes presented a mixed picture. Our interviews with representatives have indicated that by and large, the representatives, particularly of the Scheduled Castes and even more so among Scheduled Caste women have less of a role in panchayat meetings, and in the decision making of the panchayats. Representatives have also not agreed that decisions are made by one or two dominant members of the panchayats, though we have been clearly informed that dominant individuals outside the panchayat members have been the ones who run the panchayats. An almost unanimous view is that the Scheduled Caste presidents do not have any decision making powers. A much higher proportion of Scheduled Caste members have also indicated that representatives are not equal in terms of the power that they wield in the panchayats.

Table 1: Do you agree with the view that all members are consulted, and issues discussed before decisions are taken? (Tamil Nadu)

N=54

		SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
Consultative (all member are consulted, and issues discussed before decisions are taken)	Yes	5 33.3%	1 11.1%	8 47.06%	6 46.2%	20 37.04%
	No	10 66.7%	8 88.9%	8 47.06%	7 53.8%	33 61.11%
	No answer			1 5.88%		1 1.85%
Total		15	9	17	13	54

Table 2: One or two dominant members decide, and others have to agree

N=54

		SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
One or two dominant members decide, and others have to agree	Yes	3 20.0%	4 44.4%	1 6.3%	3 23.1%	11 20.8%
	No	12 80.0%	5 55.6%	15 93.8%	10 76.9%	42 79.2%
	No answer			1		1
Total		15	9	17	13	54

Table 3: President Decides

N=54

		SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
President decides	Yes	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1 7.7%	1 1.85%
	No	15 100.0%	9 100.0%	16 94.12	12 92.3%	52 96.30%
	No answer			1		1 1.85%
Total		15	9	17	13	54

Table 4: Decided on the basis of outside instructions (from party, or any other individual/s)

N=54

		SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
Yes		3 20.0%	4 44.4%	6 35.3%	3 23.1%	16 30.2%
No		12 80.0%	5 55.6%	10 58.8%	10 76.9%	37 69.8%
No answer				1 5.9%		1 1.85%
Total		15	9	17	13	54

Table 5: In the case of those occupying reserved seats, do you find it difficult to present your case to the panchayat on any particular issue that the panchayat subsequently discusses?

		SC Men	SC Women	Other Women (Reserved)	Total
Yes		11	7	2	20
No		4	2	2	8
Total		15	9	4	28

Table 6: Do you think, in thiees panchayat, every member is more or less equal in terms of power

N=54

		SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
Do you think, in this panchayat, every member is more or less equal in terms of power	Yes	3 20.0%	0	10 62.5%	8 61.5%	21 39.6%
	No	12 80.0%	9 100.0%	6 37.5%	5 38.5%	32 60.4%
	No answer			1 5.88%		
Total		15	9	17	13	54

Table 7: Do women, Scheduled Caste members get a chance to speak?

N=54

		SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
Do women, SC members get a chance to speak?	Once in a while	8 53.3%	1 11.1%	2 11.76%	1 8.3%	12 22.22%
	Only when issues pertaining to SC/ST discussed	3 20.0%	3 33.3%	12 70.58%	7 58.3%	25 46.30%
	Hardly get a chance to speak	2 13.3%	2 22.2%	0	1 8.3%	5 9.26%
	No chance is given to speak	2 13.3%	3 33.3%	1 5.88%	3 25.0%	9 16.67%
	No answer			2 11.76%	1 7.69%	3 5.56%
Total		15	9	17	13	54

Table 8: Participation of members in grama panchayat activities: do you attend panchayat meetings? (Tamil Nadu)

N=54

		Attend Meeting		Total
		Yes	No	
Sex	Male	30	1	31
	Female	16	7	23
Total		46	8	54

Karnataka

Karnataka displays certain features that are at variance with the situation in Tamil Nadu. This is not to suggest that caste does not play a major role in the functioning of the panchayats or even in the composition of the panchayats — it does. Reservation of seats has been provided for ordinary seats and that of office bearers for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, and Backward Castes. All this makes for a large proportion of the panchayat seats being reserved for one group or the other. However, the intensity with which people of Karnataka see the presence of members of Scheduled Castes occupying ordinary seats of the panchayats, which have been reserved, or even that of the office bearers, i.e., presidents and vice presidents appears to be much lower than what we found in Tamil Nadu. Even though there have been caste conflicts (see for example, Assadi and Rajendran 2000), the immediate problem was not that of the panchayats or the reservations within panchayats. Karnataka had seats reserved for members of Scheduled Castes even in the Panchayati Raj Act of 1983, and the panchayats that functioned from 1987 (reservations were only among ordinary seats, and not for executive positions). So there have been reserved seats for over 20 years in the panchayats of Karnataka. In the grama panchayats, the tenure for presidents and vice presidents is 30 months, in a panchayat's term of 60 months (i.e. five years). The reservation for each group is for 30 months as well. However, even within this 30-month period, there is usually rotation of members from the same group that take's up the president's post. So there is often a change of president's every 12 months. In

a grama panchayat there are usually 3-4 persons from the Scheduled Castes, so if the panchayat president's post is reserved for someone from a Scheduled Caste, then each Scheduled Caste member may be able to hold the president's post for a year. This is a local arrangement and not required by the Panchayati Raj Act (which only mentions the 30-month tenure for each group). The relatively short tenure for each individual, and the 30-month term for the entire group (so far as the reservation for each group is concerned) has brought in certain peculiar characteristics that are not seen in the panchayats of Tamil Nadu (where the same individual can be president for 10 years, due to the reservation for each group having been enhanced to two panchayat terms). Besides, the frequent changes of incumbents to the posts of president and vice president also make for less aggressive or less intensive reaction against presidents of certain groups, but also leads to some less desirable outcomes such as auctioning of these positions (all within the group for which the post was reserved). Further, when the panchayat members are less educated, politically inexperienced and usually first-time elected members of a political institution, it is easier for members more accomplished in politics and higher in the social-economic hierarchy to control them.

In the context of the reservation of seats for both Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes and for women, Karnataka has a distinct history compared to most southern states. The system of reservations came into vogue as far back as in 1874, when the then Princely Mysore state earmarked seats for members of backward classes in the Mysore Administrative Service (see Manor 1972). Further, it was extended to larger sections of society through successive backward classes commissions. In more recent years, it was during the Janata Party rule in Karnataka, in the early 1980s, that 25 per cent of the seats in the panchayati raj institutions were reserved for women. Therefore, taking the various conceptions of legitimacy into consideration, one can argue that the people in Karnataka were sensitised to institutional measures in the form of reservation of seats.

If we take the meaning of legitimacy as one where the institutions of government are acceptable to the people, there is no evidence of people opposing the PRIs on the question of inclusion of hitherto marginalised or alienated sections such as the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women, into positions of power. When the system was introduced in 1993 with a Constitutional mandate behind it, there was no organised protest against such a move, irrespective of political parties or caste groups. Likewise, the procedures of governance where a woman or a Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe is allowed to head a panchayat when the members of dominant and high castes are ordinary members, there was no protest over the decision of the parliament (through the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment), but acceptance (however reluctantly) of what was passed as an Act of the Parliament. From the third angle, of enabling people's participation too, the system of governance is legitimate under PR, since the rules and regulations plus the capacity building mechanisms are created to provide a congenial environment for people's participation. This refers to both the holding of the people's assembly (Gram Sabha) and the transparency mechanisms that the Act upholds.

An important consideration in the case of Mandya district is that it is dominated by Vokkaligas, in politics and in the grama panchayats as well (see Chandrashekhar 2009). With the rule that is presently in vogue, Vokkaligas qualify for reserved seats among Backward Castes. They are also a

strong agricultural caste and are in a position to contest and win unreserved seats. Taken together it results in a very large number of seats in the grama panchayats being occupied by Vokkaligas¹. This also facilitates the dominance of individuals from this caste who are representatives (or even when they are not elected representatives) in the panchayats. Dominance of the panchayats by members of the dominant caste is not unusual in Karnataka, and more often than not, it is the dominant individuals who control the functioning of the panchayats. At times, these “big men” of the village are not even elected representatives, but their local standing enables them to control the grama panchayats (see Inbanathan and Gopalappa 2003).

There are, however, several intervening features in the functioning of the panchayats, where, despite the provisions of the Panchayati Raj Act, in giving space to people of disadvantaged groups, subtle and latent curbs and checks are also imposed on their behaviour as leaders, and in their participation in panchayat matters. This is where we need to make a clear distinction between participation in contrast to mere representation. In this, despite its long history of affirmative action, Dalit movement, and representation given to vulnerable sections even before the 1993 Act, the situation in Karnataka closely resembles that of in Tamil Nadu.

The first significant situation is the selection of candidates to the fray from these reserved categories particularly the Scheduled Castes (and Scheduled Tribes). Our study districts are located in the south and north of Karnataka where the social composition includes one of the two dominant castes of the state, viz., Vokkaligas and Lingayats. In fact the Lingayats are the dominant caste not only in northern Karnataka but share dominance with the Vokkaligas in southern Karnataka as well.

In the stage of selecting suitable candidates to contest the elections, the study shows that adjustments were made by choosing such persons who would co-operate with the leaders from dominant caste/s and would not start asserting their new-found status. One should also recognise here the changes in the social structure of various districts in the state, where one or two middle castes have risen to positions of dominance. This is by virtue of the various policy reforms that have been effected. For example, the Kurubas, the Marathas and the Edigas are stronger in districts where they are numerically strong. Thus, each panchayat election in Karnataka is converted into an active ground for ensuring that the status quo of dominance of the caste in question (Lingayat or Vokkaliga) is not disturbed.

Field studies in Gulbarga and Mandya provide ample proof of the reluctance of the members of the hitherto politically dominant castes to surrender their dominance, and who contrive to have their ‘own’ candidate contest and win. Though not supportive of the reservations for Scheduled Castes in various positions of the panchayats, they are rendered helpless by the Act and make special efforts to have candidates whom they can control (see also Inbanathan 1999). As one respondent from Gulbarga asked, “How can we survive if power goes to Scheduled Castes?” Virtually all people of non-Scheduled Caste groups share the feeling that if power goes to members of Scheduled Caste it will be at their expense. As groups that have, for years, been dominant in various fields (land ownership and wealth), as well as in the political field, they are reluctant to be ‘ruled’ by the Scheduled Castes. Another

¹ In 2000, with information for all the grama panchayats of the district which we got from the Mandya Zilla Panchayat, we found that 52 per cent of the representatives of the grama panchayats in the district were Vokkaligas.

perceived threat to the upper/dominant castes is that unlike in the past, today there are better educated, strong willed and politically knowledgeable youth among the Dalits. Gulbarga has also been influenced by the Dalit Panthers movement of Maharashtra as well as by the Dalit Sangarsh Samithi (DSS) movement of Karnataka. It also had a local leader, Shyamsunder, who mobilised the Dalit youth to fight for their rights. In Mandya too, the DSS is quite deep rooted and strong. It has created an awakening and awareness among the Dalit men and women to fight for their rights and make use of the facility of reservation. The dominant castes are, therefore, unhappy with the fact that they have to surrender power to the new leaders and at times even function in positions lower to that occupied by Scheduled Castes (as presidents), i.e., the very people who were subservient to them and whom they dominated for many years.

Transfer of leadership from the dominant to the marginalised groups can be seen in various ways. One, is the extreme case where there is a tendency towards intolerance to providing power to the groups that were considered as being at the “bottom of society”. The second is where there is the challenge that the dominant groups have to face following the greater awareness and capacity of Scheduled Castes to take up the mantle of leadership. A third dimension put forward in both the districts by a few members of the traditional leadership states that ‘whoever comes must be good and work for the welfare of the community’. They observe that one has to obey the changes imposed by the government or the Constitution. But, selecting candidates should be on the basis of bringing in good men and women who are educated and who will work as effective representatives. This, however, is not happening according to them. A view that has also been articulated is that due to organisational abilities, a better and improved leadership of people from the Scheduled Castes has been seen. The DSS and other organisations have empowered the Scheduled Castes—both leaders and the common people among them. Thus, they are perceived as being able to provide better leadership.

There is a gender dimension too in their reluctance to having Dalits as presidents. In these districts, more so in Gulbarga, a male president rather than a woman is preferred if both are from Scheduled Castes. Passing a no-confidence motion (this tactic has been in vogue for several years, even from the panchayats that followed the enactment of the Panchayati Raj Act of 1983) and manifesting other forms of non-cooperation against a woman president’s actions give clear indications that a woman Scheduled Caste president is considered as even less acceptable than a male Scheduled Caste president.

In both the districts of Karnataka, the dominant communities were not only the traditionally dominant castes but also included those that had come to prominence in recent decades due to the policies of the government. For example, in the grama panchayats of Mandya district, the Vokkaligas were no doubt the dominant community, actively involved in matters relating to local governance, besides participating in other decisions pertaining to the area’s economy and polity. But this situation was complicated by the new-found assertion of the middle castes due in no small part to the reservation of seats in employment. The Besthas (Fishermen) have now entered into a triangular combination between the Vokkaligas and the Scheduled Castes. In fact, this region has witnessed caste-related tensions between these communities, mostly taking the issue of protective discrimination.

The field data from Mandya district reveal that a number of candidates have come under the influence of local caste leaders and political leaders (like MLAs). Alliances between the elite from upper castes, the Scheduled Castes and the fishermen groups were formed due to the sharing of economic benefits. This is a significant development considering that the Grama Panchayats lie in a politically important area and there are a number of socio-political processes encouraging the forging of alliances across caste and class groups. The areas of the district where our selected grama panchayats lie have a moderate degree of affluence. However, the villages still suffer from shortage of drinking water and other such basic amenities. This has often caused much conflict between Grama Panchayat members. The result has been factional politics and members divided on political party lines. The poor and lower castes are also excluded from basic amenities such as drainage, sanitation, village roads, houses for the poor and electrification.

In Gulbarga district, there is domination of castes from economically higher levels. Caste-based discrimination is quite high and members from the weaker sections hardly participate in panchayat activities. The members of the grama panchayats do not co-operate or take up developmental programmes with commitment. There are caste-based internal quarrels and ignorance among members of the vulnerable sections. The Lingayats and Scheduled Castes are the numerically larger communities here and the former is the dominant caste with considerable land owned by them. The grama panchayats have politically influential leaders both within the panchayat and outside. Although the members of the panchayat are literate, there was resistance from the upper castes against devolution of political power to the members of the vulnerable communities (Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe).

We find that more than caste-based differences and distances that are to be maintained, alliances and compromises form the core of the operational mechanisms of the Panchayat Raj system. The upper/dominant castes give in when the priority is to respect the Constitutional mandate. They try to then get the best for themselves from the existing system by selecting candidates from among the Scheduled Castes who are capable of working, but take up issues in a non-confrontational manner and enable the dominant castes to have their way. But inherent in this exercise is a bitter feeling that they (upper castes) have to now listen to the Scheduled Castes or at least have to converse with them. As an ex-headman from the Vokkaliga caste said, "Since old times, we have been living like kings. Now we have to be under the control of these (Scheduled Caste) people". But the same upper castes do co-operate at times when benefits have to go to the beneficiaries proposed by them. As a member stated, "Old leaders (like Shankar and Chowdaiah) do help us and give us importance and offer suggestions. But there is a feeling of contempt inside. There are also a few who are very jealous and do not co-operate, and give considerable trouble. The intensity and extent of such non-co-operation is high wherever the concerned Scheduled Caste member or president is a woman".

A number of actions are taken by members of dominant castes on the eve of elections or when one has to field candidates for panchayat elections. These include bringing pressure on the day of filing nominations, putting the Scheduled Caste candidates under certain compulsions, display a temptation of money, and financing the cost of canvassing. All this is done by the rich among the dominant caste (Gowdas) to influence the process of selection of beneficiaries and controlling the grants that come to the panchayat once the candidate supported by them wins. The candidate who later becomes the

elected panchayat member is forced to attest the decisions taken by these dominant caste leaders. They choose persons among Scheduled Castes (male or female) who are ready to listen to them and dance to their tune. Once they are elected the functions of representatives and presidents and vice presidents are taken over by members of the dominant castes.

Upper caste/dominant leaders often created situations where the Scheduled Caste president had to listen to them; otherwise they faced negative consequences like opposition from other members, or a no confidence motion being passed against them. As a Scheduled Caste representative remarked, the dominant caste leaders on occasion divided the Scheduled Caste members and brought conflicts between them. They started discriminating among the Scheduled Caste members or spread rumours among the electorate that Scheduled Caste representatives were corrupt, and this made the Scheduled Caste community itself rise against Scheduled Caste representatives.

When we sought the reaction of members of dominant caste groups on how their own caste members functioned in relation to presidents from Scheduled Caste groups, their version or justification of their behaviour was that being illiterate, Scheduled Caste members were ignorant of what needs to be done, and what is written in government letters. What is the use of electing such leaders? Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes is alright, but the educated among them should be made to contest. Dominance of the upper castes is mostly due to the ignorance of Scheduled Castes about rules, procedures and fear of officials. It so happens (according to them) that most of the incapable or incompetent are from the groups of Scheduled Castes and women.

We should immediately clarify that members of dominant castes did not openly display their antipathy towards power going to castes far below them in the social hierarchy. They also realise that when the Scheduled Caste president is their puppet they do not have any reason to hinder his/her activities, because the president is functioning only in accordance with their own instructions, or as in some cases, not doing anything at all and leaving it to a dominant individual to carry out the functions of the panchayat president. As a possible means of avoiding such an outcome, Scheduled Caste members suggested that only the highly educated among them should contest for panchayat seats. The government should fix a minimum level of education for the members. Another version of these members' suggestion is that if the Scheduled Caste representatives possess a thorough awareness of the functioning of a panchayat, then they will not be exploited. In Gulbarga, whenever a Scheduled Caste is elected or becomes the head of the panchayat, there is a lot of opposition from the upper castes. What they found most objectionable was that they had to take their problems to a member of the Scheduled Castes, which they found abhorrent, and secondly, even nominally they were not comfortable to be under the control of a Scheduled Caste member. As was the case before the panchayati raj enactments took place, it was the Gowdas (Vokkaligas) who were leaders of the villages. Now, in a sense, they had to hand over the village leadership to the members of Scheduled Castes (at least in a nominal sense).

An important factor in the grama panchayats of our study is that in most these places, the dominant castes were in a preponderant strength compared to those of the Scheduled Castes. Even when they were not, they were able to wield considerable influence by virtue of their economic strength based mostly on the ownership of land. While members of dominant castes were found among the

landowners, most of the Scheduled Caste members worked as labourers for the dominant caste landowners before contesting elections, and often they continued to do so even after becoming panchayat representatives.

Women members from the Scheduled Castes suffer a double disadvantage—as women and as Scheduled Castes. Apart from their views not being considered in the panchayats, many women stated that male representatives did not even allow them to speak in the meetings. Wherever there are educated, knowledgeable women members, the men (representatives) do not cooperate with them on panchayat matters. Vokkaligas, Lingayats, other backward but non-Scheduled Castes, all get together and start ill-treating the Scheduled Caste members in subtle ways. No work is given to the Scheduled Caste members without commissions or control. They mislead them from taking the right decision or gang up with officials of the same caste (upper) and exploit the Scheduled Caste members.

In a case in Mandya district, the president's post was earlier for a candidate from a general category, but the next time it went to a Scheduled Caste. Between the two periods there was so much difference in the attitude of the upper caste members that the Scheduled Caste president was troubled to the maximum extent. In another case, the Scheduled Caste candidate was kidnapped in a car by the dominant caste supporters. The candidate was not released till the elections were over. He was also offered a lot of money. The situation becomes tenser when a Scheduled Caste wins from a general seat. This is never tolerated by the dominant and upper castes who do not have any support from the Panchayati Raj Act to oppose people of Scheduled Castes contesting a general seat, and in the process depriving them of a chance to win that seat (i.e. if the person of an Scheduled Caste group were to win). As it is, the occasions when Scheduled Castes contest and win general seats (not reserved) is very rare.

In both districts, despite the existence of the panchayat raj system for nearly two decades in its present form, the earlier conditions under which Scheduled Castes lived have hardly been reduced. For example, in many of our study villages, there is still the practice of preventing the entry of ex-untouchables into temples. They are not served by the village barber or washerman. However, since the panchayati raj system provides them an opportunity to contest elections, become members and even head the panchayats, the youth among Scheduled Castes have become more assertive and demanding. As a result, many backward and forward castes have united to oppose this new force.

Our tables below indicate a slightly different set of responses compared to those in Tamil Nadu. This is particularly for the questions related to participation, where the representatives in Karnataka have suggested that they have a higher degree of opportunity to participate than in Tamil Nadu. Also, the indication in the Tamil Nadu panchayats that presidents cannot take any decisions is somewhat moderated in Karnataka by nearly one fourth of the respondents indicating that the president decides on various matters. We were not convinced with these replies, inasmuch as the clear indication was also given that the presidents who were from Scheduled Castes did not have the kind of power either to take decisions in the panchayat, or even to carry all members with them on various matters that were brought before the panchayat representatives (at panchayat meetings).

Table 1: Participation of members in grama panchayat activities

N=86

		Frequency	Percentage
1.	Attending meetings		
	Yes	86	100.0
	No	-	-
	Total	86	100.0
2.	Frequency of visits		
	Daily	42	48.8
	Alternatively	16	18.6
	Once in a week	25	29.1
	Once in a month	3	3.5
	Total	86	100.0

Table 2: Do you agree with the view that all members are consulted, and issues are discussed before decisions are taken?

Response	SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
Yes	7 (100.0)	7 (87.5)	43 (100.0)	26 (92.9)	83 (96.5)
No	(0)	1 (12.5)	0 (0)	2 (7.1)	3 (3.5)
Total	7 (100.0)	8 (100.0)	43 (100.0)	28 (100.0)	86 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parenthesis are percentage to the total

Table 3: Do you agree with the view that decisions are taken by one or two dominant members, and others have to agree

N=86

Response	SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
Yes	1 (14.3)	2 (25.0)	7 (16.3)	6 (21.4)	16 (18.6)
No	6 (85.7)	6 (75.0)	36 (83.7)	22 (78.6)	70 (81.4)
Total	7 (100.0)	8 (100.0)	43 (100.0)	28 (100.0)	86 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parenthesis are percentage to the total

Table 4: Do you agree with the view that, by and large, the decisions are taken by the President?

N=86

Response	SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
Yes	1 (14.3)	2 (25.0)	11 (25.6)	10 (35.7)	24 (27.9)
No	6 (85.7)	6 (75.0)	32 (74.4)	18 (64.3)	62 (72.1)
Total	7 (100.0)	8 (100.0)	43 (100.0)	28 (100.0)	86 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parenthesis are percentage to the total

Table 5: Do you subscribe to a view that the decisions are decided on the basis of outside instructions (from party, or any other individual/s)

N=86

Response	SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
Yes	0 (0)	1 (12.5)	5 (11.6)	2 (7.1)	8 (9.3)
No	7 (100.0)	7 (87.5)	38 (88.4)	26 (92.9)	78 (78.0)
Total	7 (100.0)	8 (100.0)	43 (100.0)	28 (100.0)	86 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parenthesis are percentage to the total

Table 6: Do you find it difficult to present your case to the panchayat (on any particular issue) that the panchayat subsequently discusses?*

N=86

Response	SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
Yes	6 (85.7)	3 (37.5)	25 (85.1)	21 (75.0)	55 (64.0)
No	1 (14.3)	5 (62.5)	18 (41.9)	7 (25.0)	31 (36.0)
Total	7 (100.0)	8 (100.0)	43 (100.0)	28 (100.0)	86 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parenthesis are percentage to the total

Table 7: Do you think, in this panchayat, every member is more or less equal in terms of power

N=86

Response	SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
Yes	6 (85.7)	3 (37.5)	26 (60.5)	16 (57.1)	51 (59.3)
No	1 (14.3)	5 (62.5)	17 (39.5)	12 (42.9)	35 (40.7)
Total	7 (100.0)	8 (100.0)	43 (100.0)	28 (100.0)	86 (100.0)

Table 8: Do women, Scheduled Caste members get a chance to speak?

N=86

Response	SC Men	SC Women	Other Men	Other Women	Total
Once in a while	1 (14.3)	4 (50.0)	10 (23.3)	10 (35.7)	25 (29.1)
Only when issues pertaining to SC /ST discussed	5 (71.4)	4 (50.0)	11 (25.6)	7 (25.0)	27 (31.4)
Hardly get a chance to speak	0	0	11 (25.6)	3 (10.7)	14 (16.3)
Always chance to speak	1 (14.3)	0	11 (25.6)	8 (28.6)	20 (23.3)
Total	7 (100.0)	8 (100.0)	43 (100.0)	28 (100.0)	86 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parenthesis are percentage to the total

Conclusion

Taking two states for a comparison of panchayat presidents who are from the Scheduled Castes we have reviewed the situation in the context of dominant castes that are in different areas and in the areas of the grama panchayats that were selected for this study. We selected panchayats with men as presidents as well as those with women presidents. We can briefly consider the conclusions reached by reviewing the information from these states. Based on the reactions of the people of the dominant castes in Tamil Nadu, there is a clear indication that they feel more strongly than the dominant castes of Karnataka about people of Scheduled Castes becoming presidents. While we do not say that there is no aversion or reluctance to have Scheduled Caste presidents in Karnataka, the kind of reactions in Tamil Nadu suggested that the locally dominant castes were prepared to go further than those in Karnataka, to try to prevent Scheduled Caste members from becoming presidents. 'Non-violent' methods like coercing Scheduled Caste people to petition the District Collector to make the panchayat an un-reserved panchayat (or at least not for Scheduled Castes) were utilised in one panchayat of our study. In another, the family of the Scheduled Caste president was threatened with violence if the president did not do what an important member of the locally dominant caste wanted him to do. Karnataka did not display such strong signs of their disinclination to having Scheduled Caste presidents, though measures were taken to try to ensure the 'election' of presidents who were very easy to control and turn into puppets. This kind of 'election' was observed in Tamil Nadu as well.

A factor that appears to be instrumental to the reactions from the different dominant castes in the two states is that in Karnataka the dominant castes, Vokkaligas and Lingayats are in the upper half of the caste hierarchy. Lingayats in fact consider themselves as equal to Brahmins in the position they hold in society, while Vokkaligas are an agricultural caste that can be placed somewhere in the middle of the caste hierarchy. Other locally dominant castes may not have such a clear position in the upper half of the caste hierarchy, but their dominance is on a much smaller scale than the two castes mentioned above. In Tamil Nadu, most of the castes that are dominant are near the lower end of the caste hierarchy, and just above the Scheduled Castes. It is possible that these castes are more sensitive to their position above the Scheduled Castes, and feel that if a Scheduled Caste person were to become a president, then it is almost as if this dominant caste was being pushed down below the Scheduled Caste, something they would never find acceptable. Being president of the grama panchayat appears to be seen in the sense of "ruling" over them, and this is a clear reason why their sensitivity to a Scheduled Caste president of the panchayat is of a much higher level than if the Scheduled Caste person occupied one of the ordinary seats of the panchayat. The sensitivity increases against having a woman who is also a Scheduled Caste and a president. In this case, gender perceptions, as well as the caste identity are seen in combination, and in most places, in both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, there is no inclination in the dominant sections of local society to help the woman function as a president. She is completely ignored, except when it comes to matters where the president is indispensable, such as signing cheques. At all other times, someone else actually performs the functions of the president. In this circumstance, the situation in both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu is almost the same, notwithstanding the often noticed condition that educational levels in the grama panchayats are somewhat higher in Tamil Nadu than in Karnataka, for both men and women.

Legitimacy in the nature in which panchayats have been organised and in which they function are not seen in the same manner by different groups. If we look at the organisation of the panchayats from the perspective of the higher castes, or castes higher than the Scheduled Castes but who are also dominant in the area, then we find that they do not consider the system as being legitimate, in the sense that they think it has been improperly organised. They are not bringing into question the authority of the Parliament or the state legislature to enact laws. What they see is in more down to earth existential conditions and the situation in which they find themselves, for instance, in Tamil Nadu, where the dominant castes can be perceived as “dominant low castes”, but who wield considerable power if not authority. There is also the perception that after years of enjoying a superior position in comparison to that of the Scheduled Castes, they now find themselves at the “receiving end” as it were, and have to take orders from Scheduled Castes. That does not really happen (i.e. taking orders from Scheduled Castes), but they seem to believe that if a Scheduled Caste person becomes a panchayat president, people all over will not only see that person as the incumbent president, but simultaneously presume that he or she is also wielding both the authority and power as grama panchayat president. That’s our reading of the situation here, inasmuch as we have to recognise that grama panchayats in particular are not institutions with any great power and authority, more so in states such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

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