

Leadership Behavior of Consecutively Elected Scheduled Caste Panchayat Presidents: A Case Study in Theni District, Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

This paper highlights the life story and management practices of Scheduled Caste Elected Leaders who have been consecutively elected to the post of Panchayat President in different Village Panchayats of Theni district, Tamil Nadu. Drawing upon the research findings from studies on SCs Leadership - which shows (a) that SCs leadership has yet to achieve significantly the social acceptance, as envisaged in the spirit of the Constitution; (b) that caste based identities and practices continue to exclude SCs leadership from exercising their leadership roles; (c) that as elected representatives SC leadership was not able to articulate group specific interests or exercise their own judgments in decision-making; (d) that SCs leadership did not take part in deliberations or contribute to major decisions – this paper centre around the factors influencing the emergence of these consecutively elected panchayat presidents as leaders, the management practices they have adopted, their leadership Style, the best practice and initiatives they have taken for the development of their respective Panchayats, and their performance as leaders.

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Introduction

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 enlarged the space for people's representation and their agency in matters of governance and moved decisions making closer to them. The Act particularly sought to correct the prolonged marginalization of poor, marginalized and under-represented people such as women, scheduled tribes (STs) and scheduled castes (SCs). This Act along with the ensuing State Acts on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) provided for mandatory provisions of (a) reservation of seats and (b) the obligatory Gram Sabha meetings that have given the SCs, STs and women in villages, an opportunity to participate in the political decision making. Because of affirmative actions of this Act, a critical mass of Scheduled Caste leadership has appeared in local bodies. Research findings show that the number of elected representatives from the Scheduled Caste community increased at all levels of panchayats. At the same time increase in the number of representation from this community does not necessarily lead to their empowerment. Studies find that the Scheduled Caste leadership has yet to achieve significantly the social acceptance, as envisaged in the spirit of the Constitution. Caste based identities and practices continue to exclude them from exercising their leadership roles. As elected representatives they were not able to articulate group specific interests or exercise their own judgments in decision-making and therefore did not take part in deliberations or contribute to major decisions. At this juncture, it is important to look at the leadership behavior of Scheduled Caste leaders who have been consecutively elected to the post Panchayat President.

Objectives of the Study

This paper analyzes – through Case Study - the factors influencing the Emergence of 5 Consecutively Elected Scheduled Caste Panchayat Presidents in Theni District, Tamil Nadu. It also examines the management practices and initiatives adopted by them for the development of their respective Village Panchayats.

Case 1: Rajakkalpatti Village Panchayat Aundipatti block, Theni district

Rajakkalpatti village is situated in Aundipatti block of Theni district in Tamil Nadu. It is located 15 Km away from the Block Panchayat headquarters at Aundipatti and 39 Km away from District headquarters at Theni. Rajakkalpatti Village Panchayat consisted of four hamlets namely Rajakkalpatti, Azhagapuri, Sokkalinganathapuram and Kathirvelpuram. Rajakkalpatti village is considered as a revenue village. The total population of the Village Panchayat is 2,753 (2011 Census), which includes 1,372 male and 1381 female. Scheduled Caste Population is 772 with 385 male and 387 female. It also has 62 Scheduled Tribe populations (2.25%). Mr. C. Paulraj is a consecutively elected Scheduled Caste Panchayat President of Rajakkalpatti Village Panchayat. He is 50 years old, and studied up to 5th standard. He had no administrative experience but he was a good man and was very respectful to all, especially to elders in the village. He was a sweeper in the Village Panchayat. While in job, he learnt how the panchayat functions and gradually he had developed keen interest in the affairs of the panchayat. In 2006 elections, the post of Panchayat President was declared reserved for Scheduled Caste. As the announcement came, elders in the village persuaded Mr. C. Paulraj to contest the 2006 panchayat elections. Mr. C. Paul Raj contested the same and won by a margin of 348 votes. He also contested the 2011 elections and defeated his lone opponent by a margin of 498 votes. As Mr. C. Paul Raj assumed his office he faced stigmatization from his colleagues. The Vice – President of the village panchayat did not cooperate. He was not allowed to occupy the chair in his own office, neither was he allowed to chair panchayat meetings or gram Sabha meetings. In 2009, he attended leadership training programme at Kallipatti. After the training programme he visited his office regularly and made significant changes in his style of functioning, which reflected his confidence in handling issues head on. Gradually, he had gained the confidence and trust of the people and officials from the line department. However, he still had not gained the social acceptance within the Panchayat. He was still not allowed to sit in the chair of the Panchayat President office, instead he was made to sit in the visitors' chair in panchayat office. The MGNREGA workers belonging to the Nayyakkar community had also behaved very disrespectful to him. If he asked them to do work, they said, we know our work and you go and do your work. After being elected as the panchayat president for the second time he had attended another leadership training programme in Bhavani Sakar. Meanwhile, the villagers were regularly complaining about lack of sanitation, water stagnation, bad roads and the spread of

mosquitoes and diseases in the village. Mr. C. Paul Raj had to share his ideas to the Vice – President to solve the issues permanently. The idea was to plant saplings in empty areas of panchayat or in each and every street. The suggestion was implemented with certain modification. In each and every house, soak pits were constructed, saplings were planted in the panchayat office and in open spaces with the village and drains were cleaned and sanitized. The initiative paid huge dividend as most of the complains from the villagers were addressed with the active intervention of Mr. C. Paul Raj, who gained more popularity with the people and confidence with his colleagues, he had also slowly gained the respect of everyone in the village. However, in this village panchayat the Vice-President plays a vital role in the Gram Sabha and village panchayat meetings. Mr. C. Paul Raj was able to maintain a good rapport and mutual understanding with the ward members, but ward members are reporting to the Vice-President of the Village Panchayat only. In this Village Panchayat the Nayakkar Community is the dominant community. The Vice- President, being a Nayakkar, commands respect from the people and therefore, is the decision making authority. The president becomes a puppet. He would sign records and participate in GS and GP meetings chaired by the Vice President. Therefore, it has always been challenging for Mr. C. Paul Raj, being an SC, to assert his leadership and influence in the village. Despite being elected as Panchayat President in two consecutive elections, he was not able to articulate even the interest of his own community in decision making.

Case 2: Theppampatti Village Panchayat, Aundipatti Block, Theni district.

Theppampatti village is situated in Aundipatti block of Theni district in Tamil Nadu. Theppampatti Village Panchayat is located 17 Km from the Block Panchayat Headquarters at Aundipatti and 35 Km from District Headquarters at Theni. Theppampatti Village Panchayat consisted of only one village. Theppampatti village is a revenue village. The total population of the Village Panchayat stood at 1977 (2011 Census), including 980 male and 997 female, 724 Scheduled Caste Population (36.6%), including 356 male and 368 female. Most of the villagers are agricultural labourers. In this village too, Nayakkar are the dominant community followed by Muppar, Maravar, Chettiyar, Pallar, and Arunthathiyars' (Sakkiliars). Mrs. A. Pechiyammal is the Panchayat President of Theppampatti Village and she belongs to Arunthathiyar (Scheduled Caste) Community. She is 40 years old and studied up to 6th standard. Her family has 2 acre of wet land. At present she lives with her husband, a son and a daughter. She lives in a tiled house

with no toilet facility and water tap connection. Mrs. A. Pechiyammal worked as a cultivator of her own land. In 2006 elections, the post of panchayat president was declared reserved for SC Women. When the announcement came, the village elders asked Mrs. A. Pechiyammal's husband to pursue his wife to contest for the post of panchayat president. On the request and support of her husband and village elders, Mrs. A. Pechiyammal contested the 2006 elections competing with five candidates in the fray. She won the elections by a margin of 287 votes. In the subsequent panchayat elections in 2011, eight candidates were in the fray and again Mrs. A. Pechiyammal won the second time defeating her nearest rival with a margin of 158 votes. In this village panchayat too, the Vice president controls the entire administration of the panchayat. The vice-president took initiatives to build a new community hall in the village. At the time, the estimation for the construction of community hall was very high and the panchayat does not have adequate fund. Mrs. A. Pechiyammal's husband Mr. Ayyakkannu, had given suggestion to announcement tender for sand dumping in the stream of the village panchayat. Accordingly, the vice president announce tender for the same. From the money raised from tender, well structured community hall with all facilities was constructed. The Theppampatti Village Panchayat President Mrs. A. Pechiyammal is known as a Figurative Leader. She became the Panchayat President only based on reservation. Even after being elected as the panchayat president, she continues to rear her cattle's and cultivate in her own land. Whenever her presence in the Panchayat office is required, the Panchayat Secretary will call the husband and then she along with her husband will go to the panchayat office to put her signature wherever required. The vice president chaired all the important gram panchayat meetings as well as gram Sabha meetings and ward members are reporting to him only. On being asked what are the major challenges she faced as an elected leaders, she said she had received support from her family but caste identity politics is so strong in the village that she could not perform her role meaningfully. She also said that elders in the village and other communities supported her in two consecutive elections because she is easier to be controlled and manipulated.

Case 3: Govindanagaram Village Panchayat, Aundipatti Block, Theni district.

Govindanagaram Village Panchayat is 14 Kilometers from Theni. This village panchayat was known as Pattalathupatti in earlier days because, in 1855 an ex- military man Govindappa Naicker created this village. Govindappa Naicker's family members put the name

“Govindasamy” to the first male child in memory of him. This village is home to 7 freedom fighters of the Indian National movement. Today one is still alive. In the year 1952, Govindanagaram was declared as a separate Panchayat without any hamlet. The streets in this panchayat are straight and village is situated around a temple. The whole village looks like a lotus flower. The village is situated nearby the Vaigai river bed and majority of the people are engaged in agriculture. The village comprises of 1643 households. The total area of the Village Panchayat is 10.29 hectares. According to 2011 census total population of this village panchayat is 3256 including 1596 male and 1660 female. The Caste groups like Nayakkars, Thevars, and Asaris and Scheduled Caste people are living in this Village Panchayat. Among these Caste groups, the Nayakkars are the dominant caste. The total population of the Scheduled Caste is 703 which include 340 male and 363 female. Literacy rate is high in this village. Many people studied catering management course and settled in foreign countries. Nowadays, this village also called very fondly as “Mini Singapore” because almost one member from every family in this village works in Singapore. The economy of the village panchayat depends on agriculture, at the same time remittance from abroad helps in the improving the standard of living in this village. This village panchayat has 9 wards with nine ward members, six ward members are male and three are female. Two ward members belong to Scheduled Caste and others are from Backward Class. There are three noon meal centres, 128 public taps, 5 overhead tanks, 2 ground level water storage tanks have been constructed recently. There are two ration shops, one primary health centre, one branch library, Indian Bank branch office and a primary agriculture co-operative bank office in this Panchayat. An Ayyan Thiruvalluvar library is also functioning and the key is handed over to the youth group. They are enthusiastically interested in maintaining the library. Almost all the daily news papers are available in the library. Women are engaged with Self Help Groups through small saving activities. Non Governmental Organizations like LAW and MYTHIRI Society are also actively functioning in this Village Panchayat. Mr. S. Veluchamy S/O. Mr. P. Shanmugam aged 50 is the President of Govindanagaram Village Panchayat. He studied up to 5th standard. He belongs to Scheduled Caste (Arunthathiyar). He is married and has one son and one daughter. He lives in a tiled colony house with electric facility but without any toilet facility and individual household water tap connection. He is an agriculture laborer and his family annual income is Rs. 60,000/-. He does not have any asset and prior to entering into politics, he has never been affiliated to any political party. Mr. S. Veluchamy was urged by the

village elders and his family members to contest in the Panchayat election in the year 2006. He contested the 2006 election for the purpose of filling up the reservation in 2006. He was contested in the election with the support of Village elders and dominant caste group. Few self help group members and some the villagers from other caste were also helping him during his election campaign. He was also nominated by the formal Presidents' husband and his followers. According to the opinion of the Panchayat President, the support given by the village community as a whole was the major factor for his winning in the panchayat election. The traditional village panchayat also supported him. Naturally, he won in the 2006 election by a huge margin. He again contested the 2011 elections and won the same defeating his nearest rival by a margin of 299 votes. When Mr. S. Veluchamy elected as Panchayat president of Govindanagaram village Panchayat in 2006, he had no administrative experience. He also had no knowledge about the functioning of the panchayat and the entire administration of the panchayat was under the control of Vice- President of the Panchayat. Mr. Velusamy visited office every day but he does not allow sitting in the chair of panchayat office. After being elected consecutively for the second time to the same post, he had undergone a leadership training programme for elected panchayat representatives held in Bhavani Sakar. The training programme had improved the confidence and knowledge of Mr. Velusamy. He gained knowledge about Powers and functions of the Panchayat Presidents and also the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Raj Act, 1994. He gained knowledge about Panchayat Raj Institution from the training programme in Bavani Sakar. In 2012, he asked the vice president to implement timber tree plantation in and around the village. Accordingly tree saplings were planted in and around of the village panchayat and also constructed one children's park by the vaigai riverbank. As per the direction given by the state government, Mr. Velusamy regularly conducted Gram Shaba meetings without fail. In every GS proceedings he will have prior consultation with the vice president, ward members and the traditional panchayat leaders before the agenda was read out. If they suggest anything to include in the agenda for the Gram Shaba meeting he will include their views, opinion and suggestions in the agenda. Under his able leadership, Govindanagaram Village Panchayat maintains 23 record books and these books are regularly maintained and updated by the Panchayat Secretary. They are now computerizing the records and the village Panchayat Secretary had gone for the training to computerize the records of the Village Panchayat. The president, vice-President and ward members are having mutual understanding. The Panchayat meetings are held on a monthly basis without fail. However,in

these meetings Vice – President and Ward members from dominant community only make decision about various development schemes and its beneficiaries. In this Village Panchayat Vice – President and traditional panchayat leaders are playing a vital role in the Gram Shaba and Village Panchayat Meetings. The Panchayat President of Govindanagarm Village is delegating his powers and duties to Vice- President. He is known as Delegate leader. He has become a Panchayat President based on reservation and by compulsion of village elders'. He has elected only for just fulfill the reservation of seat. The Vice President of this Village Panchayat is the de facto leader and he only makes final decision on various schemes and programme beneficiaries. The main work of the president is to sign in documents and his full time job is selling fruits to various villages. On the whole, Mr. Veluchamy had little interest in contesting panchayat elections. He is an Agricultural Labour and he has one motor cycle and one colony house as an asset. He contested the elections by compulsion of village elders, family members and some relatives. He was selected by the village elders for the purpose of fulfilling the reservation policy. He is known as delegate leader. He never sits in the chair of Panchayat President but, regularly visited his office. He answers to both the Vice – President and the Village Traditional Panchayat leader.

Case 4: Megamalai Village Panchayat, K. Myladumparai Block, Theni District

The Megamalai Village Panchayat is located twenty five kilometres away from K. Mayiladumparai Panchayat Union and forty five kilometres away from its Head Quarters in Theni District. As per the 2011 census, the total population of the village is 2830 which includes 1471 Males and 1359 females, 554 Scheduled Caste Population with 287 Males and 267 Females and 79 Scheduled Tribes with 44 Males and 35 females. The village is inhabited by seven caste groups, which are Piramalai Kallar, Nayakkars' Kappillia Gounder, Kurumba Gounder, Chettiar, Maravar, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. Agriculture is the major occupation of the people in the village. They grow vegetables like beans, tomato and brinjal. Since the Panchayat is situated in a hilly area, several coffee plantations could be found in the village Panchayat. Some of the people cultivated cardamom in their estates. The total number of cultivators in the village stood at 863. Megamalai Village Panchayat consists of Nine Wards with Nine Ward Members. Among Nine Wards Five are Women and four are Men. One Male and one female Ward members' position is reserved for Scheduled Caste. Two female ward members are elected

from General ward and one Scheduled Caste ward member was elected from the General ward. Some of the hamlets are situated in forest in this Panchayat. People have electric connectivity in many of the hamlets. Instead of electricity facilities, they are having solar lights which were provided by the Village Panchayat. The major irrigation source is heavily depending on hill water. Some of them are using diesel engine for irrigation. Mr. M. Chelladurai S/o Muniyandi, age 51, is the President of Megamalai Village Panchayat. He studied up to 4th standard. He belongs to Hindu religion and Scheduled Caste. He is married and has one son and a daughter. His main occupation is agriculture and he own 2 acres of agricultural land and he lives in government planned concrete house with electric connectivity but without toilet facilities, and without private water tap connections. He is an active party worker of AIADMK even prior to the 2006 panchayat elections and he was also very active in the affairs of the village panchayat. He was a man with good nature, never had any quarrel or fights with anyone in the village. When in 2006, reservation of the post of Panchayat president was announced for Scheduled Caste, some of the villagers encouraged him to contest the election. Many of the villagers are supportive of him to contest the election. At the same time some of the villagers also had and threatened him. Despite the threat, Mr. M. Chelladurai had filed for his nomination and the 2006 panchayat contested the elections for the post of panchayat president. He won the elections defeating his nearest rival by a margin of 163 votes. He again contested the 2011 panchayat elections for the same post and won the same by a narrow margin of 87 votes. Since he had been very active in party politics it was not an issue for Mr. M. Chelladurai to handle the functions and responsibilities that comes along with the position that he was elected for. He had knowledge on the new Panchayat raj system, and selection process of the President, ward members, and indirect election of Vice-president. He is quite aware of his powers and functions. He conducted the Gram Shaba meetings regularly in which major issues like drinking water, transport, sanitation, and schools, and beneficiaries of various schemes were discussed on regular interval. He also explains the financial position of the Panchayat and decimated all necessary informations through circulation of notices, intimation to SHGs and village elders, through ward members, and through sticking of informations on notice board and wall posters in common place of the village. Megamalai Village Panchayat preserve 36 recorded documents that are regularly maintain and updated by the panchayat secretary. Mr. M. Chelladurai maintained good relationship with the vice-president and ward members. He frequently contact ward members

and vice president. He advised the ward members to visit office once in two days. The panchayat meetings are conducted on monthly basis. In these meetings all ward members and president sit together to discuss the major issues of the village panchayat. He also had good relationship with media partner with the help of Vice- president. The media relationship is Daily Thanthi news paper. The Megamalai Panchayat President, Mr. Chelladurai Muniyandi is known as a delegate leader. He was selected by the village elders and some of the dominant caste groups because of the reservation. He was initially threatened by some of the caste Hindus in the village. Therefore, even though he had full experience and knowledge about managing the affairs of the panchayat, yet he had to always consult with the vice-president, influential ward members from the dominant community, leaders of the dominant caste and traditional panchayat leader in every decision. He simply accepted whatever they said and he never opposed them.

Case 5: Rajathani Village Panchayat, Aundipatty Taluk, Theni district

The Rajathani Village Panchayat is situated 10 km away from Andipatti Block and 30 km away from the head quarters at Theni. The total population of Rajathani village panchayat is 4311 according to 2011 census including 2125 males and 2186 females, Scheduled Caste Population in the village stood at 1453 (33.7%) with 729 males and 724 females. Apart from Scheduled Caste, other Caste groups in living in the village include Piramalai kallars, Maravars, Nayakkars, Goudars, Muppers, and Asaris. Among these caste groups Piramalai Kallars are the dominant Caste. The Rajathani village panchayat has nine ward members of which, 5 are male and 4 are female. 6 ward members are from backward class and 3 ward members are from Scheduled caste. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people. They grow vegetables like bean, tomato, eggplant, broad beans, and drumstick. Very few villagers also planted mango and coconut trees as well. The village panchayat has 3 overhead tanks to provide drinking water facility to the villagers and each street of the village panchayat had street lights with minimum of 4 and maximum of 8 lights. There are 8 bore wells, 756 individual house tabs and 83 public tabs, three ration shops, one community hall, and 9 SHGs functioning in this Village Panchayat. There is one Government Kallar Higher Secondary School. Mrs. Velthai Ponnaiah, aged 56 is the President of Rajathani Village Panchayat. She had three sons and two of them are married and living separately, she lives with her husband and her youngest son. She never went to school. She is a Hindu and belongs to Pallar (SC) Community. She lives in pucca tiled house with fully

electrified, toilet facilities, and individual house water tap connections. Her family also had 3 acres of agricultural land and agriculture is the main occupation of her family. Her husband is the village secretary in of AIADMK. Not only her husband her father in law is also an active party member of AIADMK. In 2006, the panchayat raj election was announced by state election commission. At the time, the post of panchayat president in Rajthani village panchayat was reserved for Scheduled Caste women. The husband of Mrs. Velthai asked her to contest the elections. Initially she refused when her sons and relatives also requested her to contest the elections, she had accepted to enter into politics by contesting the 2006 panchayat elections. With the support of party members of the AIADMK of the village she won the elections defeating her nearest rival by a margin of 296 votes. She had also won the 2011 elections defeating her rivals by a margin of 208 votes. She won the 2011 elections by virtue of the hard work of her husband who fulfilled all the promises made during the 2006 election campaign. Most of the AIADMK political party members are from Piramalai Kallars, Maravars, and Goundars. So far, she got support from other caste Hindus also but they are dominating her and her husband. As far as her capacity building is concern she do not have much idea about Panchayat Raj system and nor was she aware of the powers and functions of the panchayat president. She merely continues in the chair because of her husband's persuasion. Even after being elected as the panchayat president for the second time in 2011 she had not shown any interest in power politics nor did she attended any leadership trainings. On her behalf, her husband, in consultation with the vice-president, ward members and leaders of the traditional panchayat, had circulated the provisions of the New Panchayat Raj Act 1994, to the people in the village. Her husband started mobilizing the people to attend Gram Sabha meetings. In the Gram Sabha meetings social audit are regularly conducted, audit reports were presented and gram expenditures on various schemes, and beneficiaries list of various schemes were presented. The Rajathani Village Panchayat maintains 36 record books and these books are regularly maintain and updated by the Panchayat Secretary. Record books for each and every fund and various activities of the Village Panchayat are maintained and are readily made accessible to the public. In every GS meetings and panchayat meetings the presidents' husband and vice – president plays vital role and also in all Panchayat activities. Her husband and Vice- President are the main actors of the village panchayat. She visited office at the time of Gram Sabha Meetings and Meetings with Officials. She was elected only for fulfilling the reservation policy. She was also

known as golden zero and she is only for name sake. She comes under the figurative leadership. The Rajathani village panchayat is working properly under the guidance and leadership of Mr. Ponnaiah, the husband of the panchayat president and the vice-president. Most of the villagers said that Mr. Ponnaiah and the Vice- President are maintaining the panchayat activities. Many of the villagers feel that the Vice – President is playing a major role in the village panchayat activities and he only is making important decisions in this village panchayat. To sum up, Mrs. Velthai Ponnaiah, has no interest in politics. She is a home maker. She contested the panchayat elections due to compulsion from her husband. She occasionally visited office at the time of Gram Sabha Meetings and meets with officials from the line departments. However, her husband and the vice – president are the two important players managing the affairs of the panchayat.

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