

Casteism rules roost in panchayats

2 Dalit Chiefs Killed Since 2006: Forum

Mahalingam Ponnusamy | TNN

Chennai: Grassroots democracy in the state is still plagued by casteism with 30% of the elected dalit panchayat presidents performing as mere rubber stamps and letting themselves to be dominated by non-dalits.

A study conducted by the Tamil Nadu Dalit Panchayat Presidents Forum (TNDPPF) said 150 panchayat presidents were attacked by non-dalits while they were performing their duties and two were killed since 2006. "What is ironical is that 15% of dalit panchayats never occupy their of-

ference since January 2008. "He was not allowed to sit in the chair of the panchayat president. He was killed after he lodged a police complaint against the vice-president," Bharathan said. M Krishnaveni, a dalit woman panchayat president belonging to the Arundathiyar community, was assaulted in August last for entering her office and sitting on her chair. "She escaped narrowly from the attack by the woman vice-president and her community members. But she is still facing threats," the study said.

In fact, nearly 80% of dalit panchayat presidents were elected only with the approval of non-dalits. Activists said most of the dalits contesting from the reserved panchayats are dummy candidates, selected by the upper caste people. Manamai Veerasamy (35), belonging to a dalit community and president of the Mamani panchayat in Kancheepuram district, is still struggling to overcome the caste prejudice. "I faced a lot of insults in the last five years. But I am contesting again to work for my people," Veerasamaya said. The district collector removed him from the post in 2008 for raising his voice against the illegal prawn farms that sprung up in his village. But despite a court order which faulted the collector's action, Veerasamy was never reinstated.

The study stated that even before the election, the dalit candidates were "purchased". "The upper caste members choose their servants as candidates. But after their victory they are forced to continue doing house chores and other menial jobs and never fulfill their functions as panchayat presidents," said N Dayalan, district adviser of TNDPPF's Kancheepuram unit.

M Chellammal, 50-year-old president of Appaneri panchayat in Kovilpatti block, still works as a sweeper in a private hospital. Chellammal has

THE BIG BARRIER

▶ Total number of panchayats: 12,524

▶ Reserved for scheduled castes: 3,136

▶ Reserved for scheduled tribes: 156

ficial chair fearing reprisals from the upper caste, mostly in the caste-sensitive southern parts," M Bharathan, state adviser of TNDPPF, told TOI. The forum was formed in 1996 with the help of some dalit IAS officers.

The study detailed two murders, including that of P Sakkaiyan (45) of the Arundathiyar community. Sakkaiyan, who was elected as president of Nakalamuthanpatti panchayat in Tirunelveli district in 2006, was hacked to death in November 2007.

"He refused to sign the cheque leaves as directed by the non-dalit vice-president. After five days of stand-off, he was hacked to death," said Bharathan.

In another incident, R Seravaaran (53), belonging to the dalit Pallar community and president of Maruthankinaru panchayat in Tirunelveli district, was murdered allegedly