



*In the state of Tamil Nadu, Christian World Service partner the Human Rights Foundation (HRF) is making sure the most vulnerable people can have a say in the affairs of their community. Through the elected panchayat or village councils that manage local affairs and the twice-yearly Gram Sabha made up of all village adults, the Foundation is resourcing people to participate in local democracy. CWS is the sole funder of HRF's training and support programme for women panchayat presidents. National Director Pauline McKay met Sujatha and her campaign team when she visited Tamil Nadu in February 2017.*

### **OUR STORY IN OUR OWN WORDS**

A few years into her term, Sujatha has proved women can be effective *panchayat* or village council presidents. Sujatha has taken on the task of improving the well-being of the whole community. Every day she talks with people keen to get her advice and to find out how to access government entitlements like food rations or the 100 days of paid work a year. Already she has won an award for implementing a health programme, something she was able to do successfully because she knows her community well. Sujatha says she learned organising and pastoral skills in her local church.

At times, she has found it difficult to deal with villagers from the dominant classes and men who challenge her authority as president. She has persevered and sought advice from HRF when necessary on critical matters like sand mining that has threatened the local supply of drinking water. One of the biggest challenges for those living near waterways or the coast in Tamil Nadu is the people taking local sand illegally. In coastal areas when too much sand is taken, holes fill up with saline water, polluting the ground water.

Sujatha is a Dalit officially known in India as one of the Scheduled Castes. Along with the Adivasi or Tribal people, they face daily discrimination and sometimes persecution.

After her husband the previous president died from cancer, she agreed to stand in his place. Her daughter and sister formed her campaign team, canvassing the village for votes. If she had not won, the Dalit community would have lost ground in their efforts to keep access to community lands.

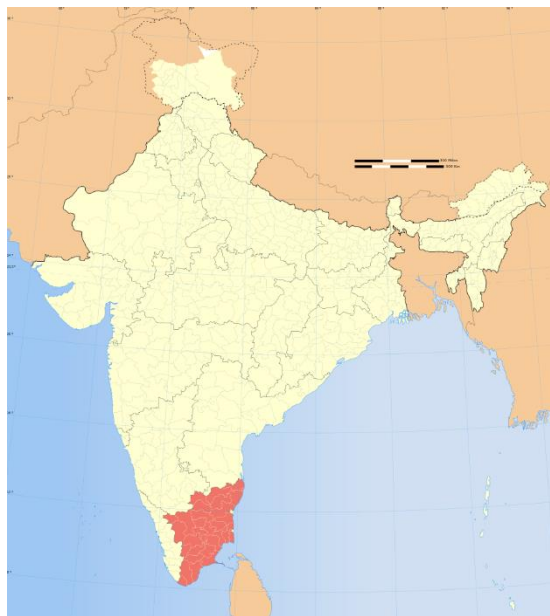
Sujatha is one of the women presidents who have benefitted from the training and support of our partner the Human Rights Foundation. Now confident, she is working with other panchayat presidents on how to further the interests of the poorest communities and stand up for their right to representation. This is not easy when women face double discrimination. The government officials and members of the dominant classes are inclined to make decisions without the involvement of Dalit and Adivasi women. Some face violence, intimidation, rape and murder if they speak out.

**Donations to the Christmas Appeal will train local people and give them the resources they need to improve their livelihoods and become more resilient.**

## **BACKGROUND ON DALITS**

Tamil Nadu state had a population of 72 million at the 2011 census. Around 20% are Dalit and just 1% Adivasi. With fewer opportunities for education, many survive as agricultural workers while others clean rubbish, take charge of sanitation or do other tasks deemed as “unclean”. Adivasi often live in or close to the forest areas.

Dalit is a Sanskrit term literally meaning “broken people” and is the name given to the people who are outside of India’s four main castes. Adivasi sometimes known as Tribals are the Indigenous people. Under Indian law both communities are recognized as Scheduled Castes. The 1994 Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act reserves seats for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes: 12,618 for village panchayat presidents. Many of those elected to take up these positions have few skills or networks.



The Panchayat Act says the panchayat has responsibility for common properties like ponds, quarries, trees and fishing tanks, putting power back to the local people. This Act following the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Indian constitution reserved one third, and now 50% of panchayat presidencies for women.

In practice, decentralisation has led to an increase in human rights violations. The dominant classes have pushed back against candidates and elected members have been intimidated, beaten and even murdered. If elected there is no guarantee that members of the Scheduled Classes will be able to sit at the table – there are examples when the powerful have forced them to literally sit on the ground. The women elected can be pressured to vote as their husbands or other family members direct – effectively holding proxy. The position is unpaid – most receive a travel allowance of NZ\$22-34 a month. Under the Panchayat Act, the district collector (government appointed administrator) can dismiss panchayat presidents. In the five years to 2016, 42.5% of presidents dismissed were women and 30% were Dalit women.

One of the major problems facing the panchayats is their limited power and the lack of resources: the state retains the power over village schools and health centres for example. Not all villages have schools or access to functioning medical services. Panchayat presidents can spend hours trying to lobby for expanded facilities or improvements from state sources – sometimes without success. The panchayats receive 10% of state revenue, which is enough for only routine maintenance. They raise their own money from business and other taxes but the base is small - panchayats may be responsible for 2,000 people in more isolated regions.

## HUMAN RIGHTS AND ADVOCACY FOUNDATION

HRF has taken up the challenge to make this relatively new localized democracy work for the people. Part of their work has been to develop networks of people who support its implementation and to encourage local people to stand for positions on the panchayat or take part in the Gram Sabha. Their approach is to build a critical mass of citizens to make the system fairer.



Since the first women presidents were elected, HRF has trained over 2,000 presidents on their roles and responsibilities (*pictured above*). This work has been funded entirely by CWS.

The training covers: women in governance, gender equity, child rights including monitoring the right to education, preventing child labour and trafficking, access to justice, access to social security/livelihood schemes, scholarships and pensions,

protecting natural resources, climate change, disaster preparedness, risk reduction and management, village resource mapping (*pictured below*), basic statistical information on available natural resources and the non-negotiable natural resources that must be protected.



Trained women presidents have implemented community wide improvements with lasting impact. A shared tap, liquor bans, street lighting or the reclaiming of community land taken over by the largest landlord have had immediate benefits in many communities.

HRF supports individual panchayat presidents when they are attacked or under threat.

Last year they undertook three fact-finding missions. In one panchayat, HRF intervened after the male president was brutally attacked for reclaiming a village pathway to the colony used by Dalits from an upper caste person. Presidents have been supported to take cases to the High Court with mixed success.

In 2002 HRF supported the establishment of the Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Panchayat presidents, which has strengthened their effectiveness. In 2016, HRF supported the panchayat campaign to prepare a people's manifesto. The manifesto was presented to key officials as part of lobbying efforts.

Promoting the panchayat and Gram Sabha as important instruments of local democracy is a central part of HRF's work. HRF lobbies for greater recognition of their roles and in support of free and fair election processes. It publishes handbooks, bulletins and posters.



*A delegation of presidents presented a copy of the manifesto to Dr Tamilsai Soundarajan (far right), state president of Tamil Nadu from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).*

**Working together with people from the communities, we can make the hope of Christmas our story.**