











amil Nadu

al ladder taller for

women

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By Nirupama Viswanathan

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CHENNAI: Although women like former Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa and Rajya Sabha MP Kanimozhi have been prominent names in Tamil Nadu politics, they have only been aberrations – equal representation within the party structure is still not the norm.

In the 2011 local body elections alone, a total of 51,810 women had been elected in various capacities, including in six mayoral posts. However, out of a total of 241 district secretaries and equivalent positions in the four major parties in the State – DMK, AIADMK, BJP and Congress – only three are women.

The post of district secretary, at least in the two Dravidian majors, have had an indisputable say in the selection of MLA and MP candidates for the constituencies under them, making them vital cogs in the party machine. However, out of its 53 districts, the AIADMK does not have a single woman in this post in the parent body. While the DMK has three women in this position – A Angayarkanni for Villupuram south, M Muthamil Selvi for Vellore West and Geetha Jeevan for Thoothukudi North, considering the total number of districts is 65 – the move seems more like tokenism, say women politicians.

Requesting anonymity, a DMK member said that it was not uncommon to see district secretaries use their power to 'hide' the good work by other members who they see as rivals. "This happens to women more often than men. In a party, like DMK, the top leaders would do well to listen to the voices at the ground level rather than to the district secretaries which they do most often," the party member said. As for women assuming power at the district level,

AIADMK's women's wing joint secretary at the State level, Keerthika Muniasamy said that watching her husband MA Muniasamy, the Ramanathapuram district secretary, go about his duties, there was nothing she felt she could not have done. However, it remains beyond her why parties are reluctant in posting women as district secretaries. "One reason could be that men outnumber women in the party in general. Then there is always the question of their prejudices coming into play," she said.

TN Mahila Congress president Jhansi Rani said she spends around `50,000 to `1 lakh out of her pocket every month for party-related activities. "Even for us, as a woman's wing, we have to spend so much. The expenditure for district secretaries in the parent body would be higher or the same even at the district level. They may think a woman might not be able to bear this financial burden," she said. "Other than that, we are doing good work for the Mahila wing, there is no reason that we cannot replicate it for the parent body," she added. The TN Congress Committee has no women at the post of district presidents, (equivalent to that of district secretaries) in its 72 districts. Neither does the BJP, in any of its 51 districts.

Resistance to reservation

It is only when women begin climbing the ladder from the local body level that the resistance begins to strengthen, said U Vasuki, CPI (M)'s Central Committee Member. "In an alliance, not all seats have winning possibilities. It is easy to award those seats for women just for the sake of showing numbers. Only when the women's reservation bill comes into effect, can we ensure that 181 of the total Lok Sabha seats indeed belong towomen," she added.

However, in the meantime, women should ensure they make their presence felt in the party, said Jothimani Sennimalai, former councillor of Gudalur West and press secretary of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee. "Apart from doing work at the ground level, for a woman, for instance, to be accepted by people from the party and otherwise as the candidate of a particular constituency, she also has to have a 'winnability' factor that comes with popularity," she said.

Family support

Without political influence of their families, the organic elevation of a woman cadre to the post of district secretary may also be a far cry. Angayarkanni's father, grandfather, father, uncle and husband have all been former DMK MLAs. Muthamil Selvi's father N Mani had been the town secretary of Jolarpettai for 35 years. However, the political backing does not necessarily spare them of character assassination and general hostility in the public eye, said Angayarkanni.

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