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A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF PANCHAYAT RAJ SYSTEM IN MEDIEVAL TAMILNADU

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The Local Self-Government in India of today owes very little to Local Self-Government that existed in Ancient and Medieval India. At the same time, it must be remembered that the conception of local Self-Government was not foreign to the genius of the people of India. Generations succeeded generation. Dynasties were over – thrown. Writing about the Services rendered by local Government institutions. Eliphinstone observed “though probably, not comparable with every good forms of government they are an excellent remedy, for the imperfections of a bad one. They prevent that bad effects of negligence and weaknesses and even present some barriers against its tyranny and rapacity. Again these communities contain, in miniature, all the materials of a state within themselves and are almost sufficient to protect their members, if all other forms of Government are withdrawn. In the stability and continuity of Indian Village life and organization is to be sought the Secret of the good things achieved by Indian in the past.

Various types of local government, institutions existed under the Chola, Pallava, Pandya and Vijayanagara Kingdoms. They were the *Sabhas Ur. Nagaram, Nadu* and *Mandalam*. Their meetings were attended by the officers of the Central Government where they transacted important business. Their administration was supervised by the officers of the Central Government.¹

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF PANCHAYAT

The Village was as has always been in India the fundamental units of administration. Generally the village managed its own affairs.

“*Ur*” might stand for “town” but was always larger than a “*Cheri*” as a *cheri* was but a suburb. In connection with the management of village affairs we come across the terms. *Manram, Podiyil, Ambalam, Avai*. The *manram* the *Podiyil* and the *Ambalam* seem to be synonymous terms: and one understand that small village assembly (*Avai*) met there to transact local business. But in Tirumuru-garrupadai *Manram* and *Ambalam* are mentioned Separately making it appear as if they are different; the commentator also say, “*Manram*” the foot of a tree in the Centre of the village for all people to come and sit down” and equals *Podiyil* with *Ambalam* meaning by *Ambalam* a small building on a slightly raised platform.²

Podiyil was cleaned with cow-dung Paste and captive women were made to look after the maintenance of the *Podiyil*. The word *Podiyil* is derived from *Podu il* meaning a common place.

So the *podiyil* was village site, generally outside it, usually under a tree where people Assembled, to constitute the forum for village opinion for politico-Judicial purposes.

Evidently, the village institutions of *Manram* and *Podiyil* were concerned mainly with the arbitration of petty disputes arising in the village and they had more powers than present day *Panchayats* for in those days there was no hierarchy of officials to whom appeals could be made and necessarily village elders exercised ample powers.³

That the shade of the banyan tree provided shelter not only to the Gods, but also to the village elders who treated the foot of the tree as a “Senate house” is borne out by

innumerable references to *Manram*, *Podiyil* and *Ambalam* Serving both the purposes.⁴

The origin of the village *Sabha* is shrouded in mystery. But it may be assumed that the term *Sabha* is the *Tamilied* form of the Sanskrit word *Sabha*. Which means an assembly and this term was used to denote an assembly even in the Vedic period. But it appears that only assemblies of the brahmadeya villages, i.e., villages granted to brahmins were called *Sabhas*. Side by side with the assembly of the brahmadeya villages was the assembly of the *Ur* and it was called the *Ur*.⁵ There seems to have been a good deal of difference between a *Sabha* and an *Ur*. While one was purely a Brahmin concern and obtained only in brahmadeya villages, the other was an assembly of persons in a non-brahmadeya villages or a village in which the proprietors of the soil were exclusively Brahmins. Though we find some reference to the *Ur* in the inscriptions of the Vijayanagar period yet the knowledge we have of its constitution and working is very limited.⁶

The term "*Panchayats*" literally means a Council of five. The Principle of *Panchayat* is "*Panch Parameshwar*" which means God speaking through the five. The institution of *Panchayat* has existed in India Since Ancient times. The Village was an Autonomous Republic and its affairs were Governed by the *Panchayat*. It was usually a democratically constituted body as its members were chosen by the people. Its members, being the elders of the village community commanded respect and their decision were obeyed.⁷ The villagers led a corporate life and the *Panchayats* not only looked after their needs but also settled their disputes, legal as well as Social. If functioned through committees which looked after different aspects of rural life. Such as the maintenance of tanks and gardens and enforcement of law and order. The life Practically remained undisturbed by the Political changes. Will Durant the American Thinker and

Historian, writer, "The village community in Ancient India, the *Panchayat* System is the proto type of all forms of Self Government and Democracy that have ever been evolved in various parts of the world."

UTTARAMERUR INSCRIPTIONS OF 919 AD AND 921 AD

The Uttaramerur inscription of AD 919 and 921 of the Chola Emperor, Parantaka – 1, laid down the regulations for the election of persons, for the several committees which administered the village. The members of the committees must be proficient in *Vedas* and *Vedangas*. They were selected by lot. They held office for a fixed term and were not eligible for re-election so that all might have an opportunity to serve the village.

The publications of the Uttaramerur inscription induced some scholar to jump to the conclusion that local self-government in ancient and medieval India was far more widespread, more real and more successful than in the days of British rule in India or even at present. They contend that almost every village in the country had a Self- Governing body of its own. A vast majority of the people live in villages. If every village had a self governing body, it meant that almost all people enjoyed the advantages of local self-government. But in the days of the British rule, *Panchayat* system was actually introduced in the present century and that too not in all the villages but in selected villages or for a group of villages. It is only after 1947 that attempts are being made to extend the *Panchayat* systems to all villages. Therefore it is said that local self-government was more wide spread in ancient India⁸.

The two inscriptions given below are from the Vaikunda Perumal (Lord Vishnu) temple at Uttaramerur, in Chengalpat district of Tamilnadu, a Brahmin brahmadeya village in the Chola empire. They belong to the period of the illustrious Chola Emperor Parantaka – I (AD

907 – 948). In the twelfth year of Parantaka – I (AD 919), the *Sabha* adopted a resolution fixing the method of appointing to its variyams (executive committees) of which five were named. This resolution was taken in the presence a royal official specially deputed for the purpose by a srimukham (royal order).

The attempt was to secure a fair representation on committee both for the thirty Kudumbus (wards) of the village and for its twelve *Seris* (streets). Their being thirty Kudumbus (wards), in (each of those) thirty words, the people of the word concerned shall assemble, and shall write down for pot tickets (Kuda olai) the names of those who (a) own more than one-fourth nilam of taxable land (b) reside in houses built on their own sites (c) are below sixty and above thirty years of age, (d) have a reputation for proficiency in Veda, Sastra and (general) affairs, (e) Proficiency Material and Spiritual Purity, (f) Have not done Variyam this side of three years, and (g) Are not close relations to the Perumakkal (members) who have done variyam and refined.

THE ELECTION SYSTEM OF KUDA OLAI

The mode of selection by lot (Kuda olai) a pure and simple method, was a consciously adopted democratic system by the village assembly. i.e., it has the final assertion of the numerical equality of all individual and of the principle of equal representations. It was never the claim of majority to rule, but it was the demand that every one whether highly rich or a small land owner an influential or ordinary man shall be equally represented in the village assembly. By this system every citizens had an equal chance to hold political office and to take part in the conduct of village affairs⁹.

Government by means of primary assemblies comprising the adult males of each village was the central feature of rural organization. Besides these assemblies, there

were in existence many other groups and corporation of a social, religious or economic character, each interested in looking after some definite local institution or function. The relation between these groups which are found in almost every village. Of the village assemblies proper, we notice two types distinguished by the name, *Ur* and *Sabha*. A third kind of local assembly was the *Nagaram* confined to mercantile towns. All of them were primary assemblies of the residents of the localities concerned, and generally speaking, regulated all the common concerns. They were subject to general supervision, in particular a periodical audit of the financial transaction, by the officials of the king's government¹⁰.

The *Ur* was the simplest type of this assemblies. This word means 'Village' or 'town'. The *Ur* functioned in several places alongside of the *sabha*. Acting by itself or jointly with the *Sabha* according as the business on hand required. On the other hand, the *Ur* was the only assembly in other places.

The *sabha* and the *Ur* co-existed in places where a new settlement of brahmins was superimposed. Some times one village was organized as two *Ur*-assembly for similar reasons. About A.D. 1227, the village of Sattamangalam had two assembly one of them made up of the resident of the Hindu devadana part of the village, and the other of person in the Jaina pallicandam, both assemblies were called *Ur*. The *Ur* had an executive body called 'alunganm' the ruling group, a term which is the some times shortened into 'ganam', or expanded into 'myyalunganam¹¹'. An inscription of A.D 1220 from muniyur mentions the *tandal* and *niyayattar* of the *Ur* besides nine person whose names are preceded by the phrase.¹²

THE PALLAVA PERIOD

The Local Self-Governing institutions such as the village *Sabhas* do not figure in the

Pallava inscription till about the middle of 8th century AD. The village was the smallest government unit under the Pallavas and had its *Sabhas* and Committees. In addition, the *Nadu* which was a larger administrative unit and smaller than the *Kottam* had its assembly called *Nattar*, *Urar*, *Alvar*. The *nadu* Separately Corresponded to the Janapada of the *Sanskrits* and formed a Vital constituent of the state. In studying the inscriptions of the Pallava. It come across with the term *Urar*, (i.e) the Assembly of the Ur. It Known variously as *Sabha* and *Mahasabha*, its members were known as *Perumakkal*.

The Pallava inscriptions refer to nearly five *Sabhas*.¹³ Village *Sabhas* were functioning in the Pallava period in Uttaramerur, Kuram, Tiruttani, *Adambakkam* and *Ukkal* etc. Each of these *Sabhas* was entrusted with and handled several kinds of works.

The village *Sabha* and its committees as administrative authorities were entrusted with the work of irrigation. In order to relieve the distress caused by famine extensive measures were put through by later Pallava kings K.A. Nilakanta Sastri says that view a new tax (or) levy called *Panchavara* was introduced to relive famine condition.

The word *Variyam* is derived according to scholars from the word *Varam* which means Share or *Pangu*. The term *Variyar* will thus mean a Share holder and *Variyam*, a committee of *Variyar*. Since the *Variyam* carried out the executive functions of the village assembly.¹⁴

THE PANDYA PERIOD

The form of Government as Monarchy. The chief king reigned Supreme over his counterparts in the various parts of the Empire. Local divisions were the *Pandyas Country*, the name "*Pandi mandalam*" came into use only from the beginning or the 13th AD. Formerly it had been known as *Pandinadu*,

Rajaraja valanadu, *Rajaraja Mandalam*, *Rajarajapandinadu* etc.¹⁵

Thus while, *Mandalam* denoted a larger territorial or administrative unit, *Valanadus* or *Kottams* were their Sub-divisions. *Valanadus* are said to have existed even before the reign of *Rajaraja – I* in *Pandi Mandalam*. Some of the *Valanadus*, for instance are *Kerala Singa Valanadu*, etc.

A *Kurram* or *Nadu* consisted of several *Urs*. and *Chaturvedimangalams* or *Brahamade--yams*. The *Ur* or *Village* constituted the basic unit of the local administration and was peopled primarily by *vallan – vagai* settlers. The *Nagaram* denotes both the town of the merchants and their assembly, as district from the *Urar* (village Assembly) or the *Nattar* (the bigger territorial assembly *Nadaisainda Nattom*)¹⁶

The village assembly system of the *Pandya* could be ante-dated to that of the *cholas* and the functioning of the system appears to be vigorous and active, close contact being maintained with the king's administration.

THE VIJAYANAGAR PERIOD

The Ancient institutions of village assemblies or *Sabha* constituted during *Vijayanagar* times. The village *Sabhas* had the right to acquire or dispose of lands in the name and on behalf of the village community. It also collected taxes on behalf of the state, if asked to do so and had the right to levy local cesses or to remit old ones. But these assemblies could also protest if new taxes were imposed by the state. These *Sabhas* had certain judicial powers.¹⁷ They could try and punish the offenders in certain cases. Their jurisdiction also extended to the temples and acted as guardians of Public endowments and charties and trusts.

It may be assumed that in the *Vijayanagar* period also the *Sabhas* continued work on the old lines and discharged their old functions regularly. In same places of the *Mahasabha* or

Sabha was called she *Mahajana*. The assembly of Agaramputhur alias, Madhavacatur Vedimangalam was called the Mahajana.¹⁸

The village assembly possessed the right of acquiring or disposing of lands or other kinds of property in the name and on behalf of the village.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude, it is the earnest hope of the Government that the ideas of democracy which in ancient times ruled the hearts of the People even in the smallest village will be revived in the mass of the people in India, which is a Land of village. In a short time, the village people will be able to actively participate in administrative and in other aspects of

Community life Social economic and political. Panchayats will inevitably commit mistakes during the transitional period. They should be allowed to stand on their own legs and grow to maturity. What they need is greater authority, larger autonomy and ample resources to tackle the numerous duties amoned to them.

It propose to Survey here the general features of the administration of South Indian Kingdoms like the Pallava, Pandiya Chola, Kerala, chalukya, Hoysala and Vijayanagar, Neither the literary nor the epigraphical data ample except for he treatment of Local Government.

Village Administration was a basic improve and maintained the welfare of the people. so rural Communities developed in Socio-economic and Culturally also improved.

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