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LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNDER CHOLA DYNASTY



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ABSTRACT:

Local Governments were formed for decentralization of administration and local governance. The history of local government goes back to Chola rulers, who governed South India including few parts of Sri Lanka, Maldives, etc. The chola empire was vast as such, they were given importance to local government, so that there will be development from villages, towns to State. The present paper described the structure and administration of local government under Chola rulers.

KEYWORDS

Local Government , decentralization of administration and local governance.

INTRODUCTION

Local government is one form of a decentralized system which is affected by the transfer of authority or responsibility for decision making, management or resources allocation from higher level of government to its subordinate units¹. In India, Local Government is the third stratum of the Government, the first two being the Central and State Governments. The Local Government's jurisdiction is limited to a specific area and it functions within the provisions of the statute which has created it. It is subordinate to the state or provincial government which exercises control and supervision over it. But the activities of the Local Government are not less numerous.

The history of local government goes back to Chola era, as the Chola rulers were divided their empire into local government. The Chola dynasty was one of the longest-ruling dynasties in the history of Southern India. The earliest datable references to this Tamil dynasty are in inscriptions from the 3rd century BCE left by Ashoka of the Maurya Empire. The Chola rulers were ambitious to extend their territories across their region and even few rulers extended their Empire to present foreign lands such as Maldives, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, etc. Further, it is highlighted that Chola dynasty had ruled for long time in South India and it shows that they were popular rulers in South India.

FUNCTIONING OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNDER CHOLA RULERS:

The Chola administration was of a high standard and well organized. In the words of Dr. V.A. Smith, "The administration of the Chola Kingdom was highly systematized and evidently had been organized in ancient times"². The kings personally appear very rarely in the Chola-period inscriptions. In a few records pious donors instituted rituals producing merit for the well-being or success of the king, indicating that some localities were officially concerned over the ruler's illnesses or military adventures³.

As the supreme head of administration the Chola kings used to assume high-sounding titles glorifying their achievements. The king was virtually deified in the Chola administration. They started the practice of giving royal names to idols. Sometimes images of living kings were also installed in temples alongside other deities. Images of the deceased rulers were worshipped. Temples were also built as monuments to dead kings. They made liberal donations to various religious institutions, temples and learned Brahmins. He was head of army and judiciary.

The royal order was called the *tirumukam*, or 'sacred face' of the king; when the written form of a royal order reached local villages for implementation, village leaders greeted and revered it as if it were the king himself'. Descriptions of court procedures show that, in keeping with the quasi-sacred character of the royal order, careful transcription and checking of the written forms was standard procedure. It seems certain that even those inscriptions beginning with the simple phrase 'according to the royal order' (*tirumukattup pati*) reflect the final, locally inscribed versions of a decision making process revolving around the king personally. It is doubtful whether the ceremonial issuance of the royal order indicated in all cases royal control over local resources, since in many instances the official request by local leaders may have marked local initiatives with the simple acquiescence of the king.

The donation of lands to temples, and the verification in inscriptions of the particular rights enjoyed by all participating parties, were thus the signs of an increasing flight from royal control and the creation of tax shelters in religious institutions. The greater implementation of a centralized Chola state

thus led to ever greater alienation of officially individual rights to temples, and the progressive starvation of the central state at its time of greatest need. In this view the local leaders were major actors in the growth of religious institutions, especially temples, and their need for differentiated and specified property rights spurred on a widespread terminological change that mirrored renewed political localism. But as the central state fell apart, temple endowments expanded until the temples themselves became the greatest institutions in South India, major landlords and political forces in themselves.

It is evident from the inscription of the Chola rulers that it was very efficient. King was the axis of the administration who conducted all the State activities. He took the help of many ministers and advisers in his work. The Tiruvakya-Kelvi, oral orders of the king were written by a personal secretary. It is believed that in times of Raja Raja Chola-I and Rajendra-I, the Chief Secretary (Olepanayamak) and other officers (Perunderm) confirmed their draft with the king before sending it to the related persons. The clerk who sent these orders was called "Vidyadhikari"⁴.

The king also used to appoint his ministers and high officials of the state to run the government smoothly and efficiently. The absolutism of monarchy was tempered by a ministerial council and by an organized administrative staff. There were five great assemblies of persons, which consisted ministers, priests, general envoys and spies. The Council of Ministers was to advise the king in the regular administrative work and also at the time of critical junctures. However, it was not compulsory on the part of the king to accept their proposal or act according to the advice of the council of ministers. The royal tours contributed to the efficiency of the administration. The officers were paid by land assignments. They were honoured and encouraged by titles. However, the officials did not unduly interfere with the initiative of local authorities and associations. On the whole the administration was carried out by a well-integrated body of officials and it had superior executive strength.

The uniqueness of the administration of Cholas lies in its autonomy and self-sufficiency in the field of village administration. The two inscriptions of Uttaramerur (situated in Chingalpet district of Tamil Nadu) issued by the Chola monarch Parantaka I constitute a great landmark in the history of the Local Self-Government of the period. The inscriptions were issued by Parantaka in different dates viz., on AD 919 and AD 921 at his 12th and 14th regnal years. These are engraved on the wall of Vaikunta temple of Uttaramerur. These inscriptions give us detailed description of the Local Self-Government of the period.

There was remarkable autonomy at the village level. Chola officials participated in village administration more as observers than as administrators. The Cholas are best known for their local self government at the village level. There were three assemblies called the Ur, Sabha or Mahasabha and Nagaram⁵. The Ur was a general assembly of the village. The ur consisted of all the tax-paying residents of an ordinary village. The Alunganattar was the executive committee and the ruling group of the Ur. The ur open to all male adults but was dominated by the older members. The Sabha was apparently an exclusively Brahmin assembly of the Brahmadeya villages. The Sabha had more complex machinery, which functioned largely through its committees called the varyams⁶.

It is the village administration which is mentioned specially and in great detail by Chola epigraphs. The two Uttaramerur inscriptions of the days of Parantaka-I have given detailed information regarding the functioning of the Sabha, a Brahmin village. There were two kinds of autonomous villages known to Chola times, One was the village exclusively inhabited by Brahmins and called a Sabha and the other was either mixed village of a completely non-Brahminical village. That was called an Ur.

The Ur was evidently the commoner type of assembly of the normal villages where the land was held by all classes of people who were entitled to membership in the local assembly. The Ur consisted of the taxpaying residents of an ordinary village. Of the Constitution and functions of the Ur assembly, we are not as well informed as of the Sabha. But we may presume that the role of Ur in local administration was similar to that of Sabha. In a large township like Uttaramerur where the Ur and the Sabha existed side by side, these arose a natural tendency for the Sabha to guide and control the activities of the Ur, and for the Ur to submit willingly to such guidance. The Ur had an executive committee of its own which has called 'Alunganattar', the ruling group.

Hence, the Chola administration was based upon democratic principles. Major official activities were executed through Sabhas (Meetings). The members of Sabhas were elected from the people. The Sabhas were mainly of four types which played major role in administration. The district or Nadu Sabhas were called Nattar. The Sabha of traders and shopkeepers was known as Naga-rattar and it dealt with trade and commerce. The General Sabha of the village was called Ur in which the villagers solved their internal problems without any law or method. The fourth was Mahasabha or Sabha in which some prominent people of the village participated. They worked under rules and regulations and worked mainly for village administration. Through these Sabhas the Chola administration remained democratic.

The Nagaram was an assembly of merchants and belonged to localities where traders and merchants were in a dominant position. It was created almost entirely to mercantile interests. These types of assemblies often existed side by side in the same locality together with other associations.

The regional or provincial administration was also played significant role during Chola rule. The Chola empire was divided into 6 parts for the sake of good administration. Each part was called Mandalam. Every Mandalam was divided into group of districts or Kottam. It was like the modern Commissioner, Kottam was divided into Tehsils or Gram Samuh or Kurram. In every Kurram there were five villages. The Subedar looked after the administration of Mandalam who was generally related to the royal family. He ever kept in touch with the king. To help him were the officials and clerks.

All the inscriptions of Chola period revealed that village autonomous institutions happen to be Brahmin villages; it may be that the Brahmins alone were interested in leaving permanent record of their public activities; or it may be that the Ur also was governed exactly like the Sabhas. The details of village administration one gets in the Uttaramerur inscriptions are anticipated in an earlier record found in the Pandyan country and known as the Manur inscription. The Brahmin settlements were called Agraharas or Chaturvedimangalams and they were ruled by a general assembly called the Sabha. The Uttaramerur inscriptions record the resolutions of the Sabha regarding the Constitution of the Variams or the Committees.

Election to the executive body and other committees of the Ur and Sabha appears to have been conducted by draw of lots from among those who were eligible⁵. The Nagaram was an assembly of merchants and were found more commonly in the trading centers. The Uttaramerur inscriptions of the Chola monarch Parantaka I of 919 A.D. and 921 A.D may be said to constitute a great landmark in the history of the Chola village assemblies. It gives details about the functioning and constitution of the local sabha.

The 919 A.D. inscriptions framed the rules for election and 921 A.D. inscriptions amended them. There were 30 wards (kudumbus) each nominating members for selections of people with the prescribed qualifications. Elections from each ward were by lot (kudavolai, literally means pot-ticket)

for a period of one year. Of the thirty so selected, twelve members who had earlier served in the garden and tank committee and were advanced in age, were assigned to the samvatsarvariyaam or annual committee, twelve to the Tottavariyaam or the garden committee and 6 members to the Eri-variyaam or tank committee Pancha-variyaam (a standing committee) and Pon-variyaam (gold committee) were the other two committees.

Variyapparumakal were the members of the committee, Perunguri were the members of the Mahasabha; Nyayaffarwas the Judicial committee and Madhyasthas, a small staff of paid servants in the village assisted the committees and maintained village records. The Assembly generally met in the temple, or under a tree or near a tank. The Sabha possessed proprietary rights over communal lands. It also controlled private lands of the villages. It reclaimed forest and waste land. It aided in the assessment of the produce and land revenue. It collected land revenue and had the power to sell the land in question, in cases of default. Each village head also had the powers of taxation for purposes connected with the village and of remission of taxation for specific reasons.

The village was divided into wards known as Kudumbus. In a certain case, the village consisted of 30 Wards. Representatives of Kudumbus made up the Assembly. Several qualifications were prescribed for membership of the Committees. The qualifications related to ownership of property, residence in the locality, age between 35 and 70 and knowledge of the Vedas.

As such, this was not election by ballot, but selection by lot. The strip was called Kudavolai. After the committees were so formed duties were assigned to them. Different committees were called the Variyapperumakkal.

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From among the chosen or nominated members one each was chosen by Kudavolai from every ward or Kumbus for a period of only one year. In all the 30 members, 12 were to be from the senior who had worked in Garden and Tank Committees for Samvatsar Variyaam or the Annual Committees. The other twelve members were for the Tota Variyaam or Garden Committee and the remaining 6 were for Tank Committee or Eri Variyaam. Like this, two other Committees were Panchavar Variyaam or the Standing Committee or Pon Variyaam or Standing Committee. The selection process for the members of these committees was simple. The names of all the candidates were written on the palm leaves. They were covered in a case and were moved. A child was asked to draw as many palm leaves as the number of members were required. Besides, Ultramerur, the inscriptions found from other places, refer to Justice, Kutumbus, Kshetra, Udasin Committees. Udasin means the foreign committee. The number of the committees and its member differed from place to place. The members did not get any salary. The members of the committees were called Variyapperumakkal and Mahasabha was called as Peruguri. The members of Mahasabha were called Perumakkal⁷. In the Sabhas, the common things were discussed. The resolutions were passed and were collected in written form. It was necessary to run the Sabha successfully because people of the village were honest, truthful, scholarly, worthy and experienced. Otherwise, there remained possibility of the end of Sabhas.

The functions of the Sabhas proved the fact that the villages were governed on a local self level. The Sabha possessed the right to property. The public land belonged to the sabha. All the individual

land fell in its jurisdiction and control. The Sabha worked to turn the waste-land and forest into land suitable for agriculture. It helped the government officials in measuring the production of agricultural item and in fixing the revenue in villages under some conditions, they too collected the land tax. The quarrels regarding land and irrigation were solved by the Sabhas. If the problem was complex the help of the Sabha of the adjacent village was sought so that a decision could be made. The central government surveyed the land. It sought the permission of the local Sabha for classifying the land. The Sabha could levy the tax. It met the expenditure of the village from the money so collected. But it had to tell the reason before levying the tax and justify it. It was allowed only to enable the Sabha to make construction. The Committees conducted the village administration with the help of some salaried employees. These employees worked to find out the Criminals. The Judicial Committee called Nayayottar solved the disputes.

The scope of functioning of the Sabha was too extensive. The Mahasabha held the ownership of public land. Besides, personal property also came under its jurisdiction. Elementary treatments were exercised in the Sabha in respect of the transfer of land sought for central government's approval. These assemblies, subject to supervision and general control of imperial officers designed as Adhikarnis, enjoyed almost full powers in the management of rural affairs. The Sabha collected all the taxes, made payments, maintained charitable institutions and performed works of public utility.

The Sabha was also responsible for the maintenance of peace and order and the administration of justice. It could even pass the highest sentence on criminals. The death sentence was however, subject to the sanction of the higher authorities.

Two main divisions of land cesses existed during the Chola period in relation to the processes of production and distribution of agrarian produce; (1) At the local level, a variety of duties were incumbent on the controllers of lands to pay for the annual expenses associated with maintenance of irrigation facilities and local processes of self-government within the villages. (2) Beyond the local level there were demands from superior agencies for proportions of agrarian produce, in turn entailing several kinds of exactions. Land taxes called kadamai were generally paid in kind, according to schedules that were, at least in the central area of the Chola heartland, determinable by the land revenue department. Additional payments in cash or kind were necessary to defray the expenses arising from the collection of land taxes, especially for the temporary maintenance of collection agents. The two main divisions of agricultural cesses found expression in the categories of the 'upper share' (melviram) due to the superior agents and comprising land taxes in kind and collection expenses, and the 'lower share' (kijvaram) retained by the controllers of the land and used to pay all cultivating expenses⁸.

The identification of 'officials' working for the Chola kings is a continuing problem that revolves around the interpretation of personal names in the inscriptions. As they appear in the surviving records, personal names follow a typical south Indian format: first comes a place intimately associated with the person, perhaps his/her native place or a village where property is owned, then comes the father's/husband's name, then the personal name. Additional names and terms usually follow the personal name as aliases, including a variety of honorific terms denoting high status (arayan) or modelled after the epithets of the Chola overlords (e.g. Rajaraja chola muventavelän) and a separate series of titles that seem to denote functions⁹.

CONCLUSION:

It is observed that due to their extended territory over vast South India and few territories from foreign countries such as Malaysia, Sri Lanka, etc, the Chola emperors were thought to decentralize the administration. It is found that the democratic principles were honoured by Chola rulers. They were thought for local government at the early 9th century. As such, villages and towns were having autonomous administration by elections. Further, it is noted that paying of taxes and local development was given due emphasis during those days. It shows that the conception of State development through local development was idea of Chola rulers. Further, the judicial system was systematic as locally the problems of the people were solved by local governments. Still there were division by castes such as Brahmins, traders, merchants, etc in society and separate Sabhas were prevailed. It is against the democratic principles. The hierarchy based administration from king to local Sabhas was efficient and as such, there was overall development in Chola Empire. It is highlighted that the present day panchayats in India also have considerable impact from the ancient Chola administration.

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