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HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF PANCHAYATS IN KANYAKUMAKI DISTRICT



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ABSTRACT

Local institutions constitute the strength of free nations. The local bodies are considered as the cradles of administration. Village is the basic administrative unit of India. Most of the Indian rulers respected and encouraged the local administration. The villagers are the chief instruments for the expansion and consolidation of governmental power in India. This system helped to link every village with the national economy and ultimately the world economy, for the benefit of India and the welfare of her people. Panchayats render a commendable job in implementing various socio - economic schemes of the central and state governments for the development and welfare of the people.

RESEARCH PAPER

The present Kanyakumari district was the southern part of Travancore which was ruled by the Ays, the Pandyas, the Cholas, the Nayaks and the Venad rulers. In 1956, with the reorganization of States on linguistic basis Kanyakumari district emerged. Monarchy was the form of Government in Travancore until independence. To begin with, there are evidences of *gramasabha* which functioned in Travancore. The Sangam literature mentions about '*Manram*' and '*Potlhiyl*' which were *gramasabhas* of those times. There were '*mahasabhas*' in the *Bhamadeva* villages with enormous administrative powers. There are evidences of those *sabhaseven* during Rig Veda period.

Apart from developmental activities the duty of the *sabhas* was to administer justice. During the Chola regime local body functioned as autonomous rural institutions with vigor efficiency. In order to help the administration a highly developed committee system called '*vaariam*' was established. Time to time elections were conducted in the system called '*Kudaivolaimurai*'. The members thus elected would constitute themselves into various '*vaariams*' such as *erivaariam* (Lake Committee) *thottavaariam* (garden committee) and *ponvaariam* (gold committee or Treasury finance Committee). They duly discharged their respective functions. The duration of membership was one year. A big banyan tree in the village or the village *mandapam* served as venue for the meeting. The accounts were maintained by an officer designated as '*Karanathan*' who read out and submitted the accounts in the Panchayat Committee.¹

After the Chola rule, the Pandyas, and the Nayaks also encouraged the system and the Panchayat system existed with slight changes. After the Nayak rule, Kaniyakulam District, a part of Travancore came under Venad rulers' upto September 1949. During their rule, there were three types of assemblies at the village level there was a village assembly called *Tarakoolam*, *Nadukootam* was the assembly containing representatives of villages and the *Perumkootam* was the National Assembly represented by the whole kingdom.

Development of Panchayat system in Modern Travancore

Establishment of Town Panchayats

In 1894, the Travancore Government constituted Town Panchayat Committee with certain powers to improve the conservancy and sanitation of the respective towns. Duties such as sanitation, maintenance of wells, public convenience, street lights and provision of public health were arranged by Town Panchayat Committees. They were authorized to levy and collect certain taxes such as house tax and vehicle tax.

Municipalities

In 1920, the Municipalities Act of Travancore State was passed. Infrastructure arrangements were made for providing better education, health and other facilities to the public. The maximum and minimum number of official and non-official members in the municipal committees, the obligatory and discretionary powers of the committees were designed in the Act. According to the Act, maintenance of roads, street lighting, public health, registration of birth and death, public parks and recreation centers came under the purview of Municipalities. As per the act, the form action of Town Panchayat Committees of Nagercoil, Padmanabhapuram, Colache⁴ and Kuzhithurai were reconstituted as Municipalities. In 1946 the official heads of the Municipalities were designated as 'Commissioners'. They were appointed by the government.⁴

Village Panchayats

On 13 August 1925, the Travancore Village Panchayat Act was passed for fostering and developing self-government in the rural areas of the state. Maharani regent Sethu Lakshmi Bai took steps to implement the Village Panchayat Act. The Travancore Government was keen to make the rural people involving in local bodies. According to this Act the Government had powers to declare any village or cluster of villages as village panchayat. The village panchayat, thus declared had members less than five and not more than eleven. The obligatory and discretionary powers of the panchayats were identical to that of the Municipalities. The Government extended matching grants of the village panchayats. Grants from the Government together with the local taxes levied and collected from the people were to be spent by the village panchayat itself for the benefit of the villages.

Formation of Village Union

The Travancore Village Union Act was passed in 1940. By this Act the village unions had the status of corporate bodies and had perpetual succession and common zeal. They could also acquire, hold and transfer property and enter into contract. The term of office bearers was three years. These village unions attended to public utility services such as cleaning of streets, constructions, maintenance of public well, sand tanks for the supply of drinking water, burial ground and cremation shed, court hall and management of cattle and other items of local importance.

Emergence of Kanyakumari District

Travancore was integrated with the princely state of Cochin on 1 July 1949. After Indian independence, on linguistic basis, the present Kerala State was formed on 1 November 1956 with Malabar, Cochin and northern part of Travancore. The southern part of Travancore

became Kanyakumari District in April 1962, nine panchayat unions were inaugurated in the District. At the State level, the Director of Rural Development is the head of the Department. At the District level the Collector is the chief. He is assisted by the project officer, District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) and Divisional Development officers at Nagercoil and Panchayats Divisions and Panchayat Union Commissioners, besides the elected non-official members. The Panchayat Union Commissioners are assisted by technical and non-technical staff such as union Engineers, Agricultural officers and Extension officer. They are deputed to Panchayat union from their parent departments.

The main function of the Panchayat union is the implementation of various development programs of the State and Central governments. They include the National Rural Employment Program, Self Sufficiency Scheme and Rural landless Employees Guarantee program. They have to carry out repairs to lands of minor irrigation, maintain rural dispensaries, maternity and child welfare centers and execute rural works. Construction of roads, school buildings, rural water supply scheme and primary health centers are also entrusted to them.

The income to the Panchayat union is derived from local cess levied at a uniform rate of 45% of the land revenue, local cess surcharged and entertainment tax. There are full time bill collectors in the panchayats to collect taxes. Initially the grants extended to the Panchayat union were not on uniform basis. Those lagging behind in development activities were given more grants. This was done on the basis of per capita income and land revenues.

Three tier system of Panchayat Raj

The three- tier system of Panchayat Raj was first adopted in Rajasthan on October 2nd 1959. Panchayat Raj system was proposed by the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee in 1959. Panchayat Raj is the three tier system of the local Government at the village, taluk and district level for the purpose of planning and implementation of community development programme. In South India, especially in Tamil Nadu, the Panchayats had their roots in the past

1. Village Panchayats

In Kanyakumari district there were 88 Village panchayats. Eleven Town Panchayats were converted into village Panchayats in 1999 leading to 99 village Panchayats. There are many wards in each Panchayat and Ward Members and Presidents are directly elected by the people. The term of office for the Panchayat elected members is five years. The Panchayat President is the executive authority of the village Panchayat. All the expenditure of the Panchayat are made through the bank by a joint account of the President and Vice- President.

All accounts related to the Panchayats are maintained by the President. The expenditures are to be approved by the Panchayat Committee. The Executive officer (Panchayats) and the Additional Block development Officer of the concerned Panchayat Union will conduct timely audit and verify the records and send reports to the Government. The Village Panchayat derives a permanent income through collection of various taxes.¹¹

2. Town Panchayats

Of all the districts in Tamilnadu, Kanyakumari, comparatively a smaller District has the highest number of fifty-six Town Panchayats acted as per the Travancore Cochin Panchayat Act 1950. All the forty six Panchayats, which existed then, were manned by full time officials. When Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act 1958 came to practice, the existed system changed. Town Panchayat officers were designated as Executive Officers. In order to overcome the administrative inconveniences, the forty-six Panchayats were split into sixty four Town Panchayats and Two hundred and twenty four Village Panchayats on 2 August 1960.¹²

Then in 1981 certain Village Panchayats were amalgamated and two more Town Panchayats were formed. Town and village Panchayats were formed according to the population and income. For Town Panchayats the income must exceed Rs. 10,000 and for Village Panchayats it is Rs. 5,000 Later, in 1972, for Town Panchayats the amount was raised to Rs. 40,000/- Then Town Panchayats were classified as second grade, first grade and selection grade on the basis of their annual income.

Till 1981 Town Panchayats were under the administration of Director Rural Development and Local Administration. From May 7, 1981 a separate Directorate for Town Panchayats was constituted. In 1982 a District Town Panchayat Officer was appointed. He assisted the collector in Town Panchayat administration. In the absence of elected body the Panchayat Union Commissioner will act as Special Officer. From 1984, District Panchayat, officer himself acted as special officer. For a District Panchayat, the members were duly elected by the people. Nearly Fifty thousand unions were formed each union is represented by a District Panchayat ward member except Thuckalayand Thiruvattar. Both together form one District Panchayat ward. The chairperson will be elected by the ward members. The Chief executive officer is the Secretary to the District Panchayat (DP). He is an officer at the grade of Joint Director.¹⁴

3. Panchayat Union

The third tier is the Panchayat Union. Previously, all the elected Panchayat Presidents of the particular Panchayat Union were the Union Council members. Now in the new setup the

Town Panchayats have nothing to do with the Panchayat Unions in Us rural areas, that is, the Village Panchayat areas. Five thousand votes constitute one union ward. Ward members elect the Union Chairman. The term of office of the chairman and ward members is five years. As it was earlier, there are nine Panchayat Unions in Kanyakumari District. The panchayat Unions have an administrative setup of offices, other staff, technical staff and extension officers of various departments. The block development officer is the head of the administrative setup. All income and expenditure of the Panchayat Union have to be approved by the Union Council.¹⁵

The Executive officer and the Additional Block development officer of the concerned Panchayat Union will conduct timely audit and verify the records and send reports to the government. One assistant is in charge of matters directly related to the administration of panchayats and another Assistant Director deals with matters related to audit of accounts.¹⁶ District Panchayat was introduced in the year 1996 T. Mano Thankaraj was the first President of District Panchayat in Kanyakumari District. After his tenure Mrs. Ajitha Thankaraj is the present District Panchayat President in Kanyakumari district.

Conclusion

The Panchayats contribute much to the effective functioning of local administration. It helps the people at the grass root level to settle their problems locally. The central government and state government schemes can be implemented in the village in a systematic way. The Panchayat Raj Institutions serve more effectively as instruments of rural development and social justice. The three-tier system has been working in different parts of the country. The government aimed at granting constitutional status to Panchayat Raj Institutions, reservation of seats for women and weaker sections. The 73rd Amendment of our constitution has listed out various Government departments, which may come under Panchayat Raj Institutions so that they will provide better service to the people.

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