



Mahasabha Village Assembly Administration Gleaned By Incriptions

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Abstract

Medieval administration refers to the system of governance and organization during the middle ages, a period that roughly spans from the 6th Century to the 16th century. It was a time of monarchy, where power was decentralized and held by local assemblies. The administration during this period was characterized by a hierarchical structure and a combination of centralization and local autonomy. Most medieval states were monarchies, with Kings and Udankuttathars, Ministers as an advisory body of the central authority. However, the power of the monarchs varied across different regions and kingdoms. The Tamil monarchs had more decentralized authority.

Keywords: *Nadus, mandalas, Vala nadus, nagarams, ur, kanakku, Brahmadeya sabha, sabhaiyar, devadanans, Stanattar, ma, kani, araikanni and muntrigal*

Introduction

The administration at the local level was mainly the responsibility of administrative local assemblies. They held significant power in their local regions and managed their own administration, collected taxes, and provided justice and protection to their subjects. Inscriptions played a crucial role in medieval administration. The deeds and their administrative activities were recorded on the walls of the temples, pillars, and on open rocks. It is important to note that medieval administration varied significantly across different regions, kingdoms, and time periods.

First Author: Mr. S. Kannadasan, Ph.D., Research Scholar, (Part Time) External, Dept. of History, Annamalai University. Corresponding Author: Dr. G. Indirajith, Assistant Professor, Dept. of History, Govt. Arts & Science College, Kovilpatti. The structure and efficiency of governance evolved over the centuries, and the term "medieval administration" encompasses a wide range of practices and systems that were in place during this complex historical era. Through proper administration temples also proved to be the centre of all administration, its activities namely landlord, employer, consumer of goods, bank, educational centre, feeding centre, museum, hospital and public gathering. Among the administration this paper through light on Mahasabha village assembly and its administration in details manner.

Role of Mahasabha assemblies

The village assemblies or assemblies mahasabha were the lowest unit of local administration. The village mahasabha during the medieval period played a significant role in the local administration including temples. For the administrative convenience, the extensive Cholas empire was divided into several *mandalas* or provinces, *Vala nadus* or districts, *Nadus* or taluks and finally *gramas* or villages.

The head of a *mandala* was the Viceroy or Governor, who was either a close relative of the King or a descendant of its dispossessed royal house, had a large number of officials under him to look after the administration in each manadalas. In the reign of Aditya I Chola, there was only one *mandalam* called *Cholamandalam*. Later on, Thoindaimandalam was added to chola kingdom. These *mandalams* were again divided into *Vala nadus* during the period of Rajaraja I Chola. The head of the Valanadu was the official who was close official to the King had officials under him. The *Vala nadus* were sub divided into *nadus*. The head of the Nadu was the official who was close the King. The Nadu again subdivided into several *nagarams* cum or *ur* the non-Brahmin village several Chaturvethimangalam and each Chaturvethimangalam was under the control of *Kilan* or *Kilavan*.¹

While Local administration was carried out by local bodies variously called as the *ur*, village assembly *sabha*, and the Chaturvethimangalam While the *ur sabha* or village assembly was agrarian units,² the nagaram assembly was an assembly of merchant guilds. Local bodies, village assemblies met in a common place, mostly in the *mandapas* of temples.³ As the temples were the sanctified preserves,⁴ meetings of village assemblies were preferred to held in the *mandapas* of the local temples. Several records refer the effective functioning of such mahasabha in cooperation with one another record dated in the fifteenth regnal year of parantaka I Chola states that the *ur* and the village *sabha* of Thiruvamattur were asked to administration the gifts of this temple.

Roll of Mahasabha Assemblies

For illustration an inscription⁵ also mention a gift of perpetual lamps with lamp stand and 96 sheep. This gift of sheep for lighting the perpetual lamp to the primal deity Tiruvirattana Nattu Maha Deva of Adhiraja Mangalaya Puram by one Vellikettan Piramalai, a resident of the place encrusted Nagarattar. The Nagarattar received the gift of sheep and agreed to light the lamp to the principle daily. The *sabha*, of Chaturvethimangalam the administration authority of this temple also authorized to maintain the daily *Pujas* and maintained the gift.

For illustration a inscription⁶ of Vikrama Chola issued in his 6th regnal year found on another pillar of the *Mandapa* in front of the Saranarayana Perumal temple registers a gift of 750 *kuli* land for conducting Ardhajama *Pujas* for Govinda Vinnagar at Adhiraja Mangalya Puram in Kilammur nadu. The record also refers decision of Mahasabha of Akkalanenomati Chaturvedimangalam, which sold a land to meet out the shortage of taxes to the paid to the temple.

Another inscription⁷ of Vikrama Chola issued in his 7th regnal year found on a pillar of the Mandapa in front of the Saranarayana Perumal temple registers a gift of a land to meet this spiritual offering on a permanent basis. The record also refers to the convening of the *Mahasabha* of Ranadhira Chaturvedimangalam in the Nyayaparipalana Vinnagar Alar temple for taking a decision to sell a portion of the land to meet the shortage of the taxes of the previous year. The record also refers the purchase of a land by a merchant community of Adhiraja Mangalya Puram.

Collective Responsibility and Cooperative Endurance of Mahasabha

The co-operative endeavours of *ur* mahasabha and temple servants in temple affairs is mentioned in a record⁸ of Parantaka I Chola. Therefore, it becomes obvious that all the local bodies namely *ur* mahasabha *Mahasabha*, Brahmadeya *sabha* and the servants of the temples cooperated in common matters. This shows their collective responsibility and cooperative endurance of the temple servants.

Wide Range of Function of the Mahasabha

The local bodies paid special attention to temple administration. Regarding the issues of temple administration, the Kings issued orders to these bodies. Local bodies administrated local affairs. They discharged a wide range of administration functions. They included regulation, supervision and cultivation of lands, management of irrigation works, collections remission of taxes, maintained law and order render, justice,⁹ conduct trade, Supervise weight and measures and management of charities and temples. The inscriptions of this temple bear evidence to the involvement of these local bodies in the administration of this temple.

The Mahasabha Village Assembly

The term *ur* literally means a village or town. During the medieval period, the mahasabha of the village was also known as *ur*. Here, the expression *ur* refers to the mahasabha of a non-Brahmin village. In those days, each non-brahmin village had an mahasabha of its own. In origin of *ur* was anterior to the *sabha*¹⁰. It is said that *ur* was the simplest type of mahasabha¹¹ which was the lowest and basic unit of local administration. Its members were known as *urar*. Generally, meetings of the *ur* were held in the *mandapas* of the temples¹². It is known that all the people of the village including agriculturists and professionals were its members. Perhaps, all the residents of the locality used to attend the meetings of the *ur*¹³. As a local administrative body, the *ur* paid much attention to the welfare of the temples of the area. The deliberations of the *ur* related to temple affairs are well attested to by their records. The *ur* accountant, the *ur kanakku* helped the mahasabha in carrying out the orders of the *urar*. The deeds of the various transactions were written by the *ur* accountant¹⁴.

The mahasabha of Chaturvedimangalam, on behalf of the temples, received the various gifts donated to the temples and undertook to protect them. The evidence is provided by an inscription¹⁵ of Parantaka I Chola dated in his fifteenth regnal year. It records the gift of 96 sheep for a perpetual lamp to God Mahadevar. The mahasabha of Chaturvedimangalam received the sheep and agreed to arrange for supplying the stipulated quantity of ghee for the lamp. Another inscription¹⁶ of the same King states that Adan Kannan had endowed 10 *kalanju of gold* for lighting a lamp to the temple of Mahadevar in Thiruvamattur. This was to be protected by the *mahasabha* of Thiruvamattur and Kattimapattinattar. From this it is inferred that, in most cases, such endowments were left under the care of a single village mahasabha and in rare instances, two or more villages jointly undertook to look after these gifts. It shows their collective endeavors and responsibility.

Powers and Functions of Local Body Mahasabha

They were responsible to the people of the village in dealing with anything affecting them. Ultimately, they were responsible to the King also. In the temple administration, the local bodies of the *urar* enjoyed certain powers, performed certain functions and had certain responsibilities too. They had a wide range of functions with regard to lands, their cultivation, disposal, sale and purchase, levy and collection of taxes and even the remission of dues. Though their influence in temple administration was unlimited. They had also to give certain undertakings, which gave some restrictions on their enjoyment of various powers. They were held responsible for some of the difficulties in the temple affairs.

The Mahasabha Members its Functions and Responsibilities

As the *Brahmadeya sabha* was a Brahmin mahasabha, its membership was restricted to Brahmins only. Each *brahmadeya* village had a *sabha* of its own. Next to the *ur sabha*, the mahasabhas of Chaturvedimangalam enjoyed a pre-eminent place in the hierarchy of local administration was brahmin a mahasabha of the *brahmadeya* or Brahmin village. The administration of that particular Brahmin village was carried out by the particular *Brahmadeya sabha*. It's functioned as an administrative body and also as a governmental institution of the village¹⁷. The members of the *Brahmadeya sabha* were commonly known as *sabhaiyar*.

A *sabha* had various committees or *variyaams* to carry out its functions. The Uttiramerur inscription¹⁸ of Parantaka I Chola elaborates the rules and regulations observed in the composition of the mahasabha and the constitution of its various committees. It stipulates the qualifications required for its members. It states that persons, who did not possess certain required qualifications, were not entrusted with any work in the *variyaams*. The learned Brahmins, who possessed certain area of land alone were eligible to become the elected members of the *sabha* and its committees. Only such Brahmins got membership and voting power in the *sabhas* and its sub-committees.¹⁹ Membership in the *sabha* varied from place to place and time to time²⁰. The *sabha* was summoned by the beating of a drum. Usually, its meetings were held in the temples²¹. As a mahasabha of the Brahmin village, the *sabha* had various functions to discharge. Looking after the temples and their affairs was the pre occupation of the *sabha*. All royal grants and orders were addressed to the *sabha*. It is evident from a record²² of A.D. 1242 of Maravarman Sundara Pandya that the oral order of the King sanctioning the grant of lands as tax-free *devadanas* to the temple was addressed to the *sabha*. The accountant of the *sabha*, known as the *sabha kanakku* assisted in all of its deliberations and used to sign in the transactions²³.

Powers and Functions of Mahasabha

The *sabhas* enjoyed unlimited powers with regard to the day-to-day life of the villages and the temple administration. One such sphere of its influence was the management of charitable endowments of the temples, which were entrusted to the respective *sabhas* of the villages. The *sabha* was either directly in charge of them or left under its supervision. Endowments were left under the safe custody of the *sabha*. another record²⁴ of the fifteenth regnal year of Parantaka I Chola registers the gift of 96 sheep, which was left under the custody of the *sabha* of Thiruvamattur for conducting certain services in the temples, the gift of gold was left under the care of the *sabha*. Another record²⁵ of the 41st regnal year of Parantaka I Chola found at Thiruvamattur informs a donation of 20 *kajanju of gold* by Chilaiyan Vadugan and Chettangai to the *sabha* of Thiruvamattur for lamps to be burnt in this temple. The *sabha* received the charity and accepted to measure out the stipulated quantity of ghee.

Sheep gifted to the temples for burning lamps were also left under the custody of the *sabha*²⁶. Those, who protected the charity, were instructed to follow the stipulated conditions strictly. Obstruction to charity was severely dealt with. Thus, the *sabha* played a unique role in the administration of temples. Thus, it is the duty of the *sabha* to keep the amount as a permanent investment, so that the capital remained intact always. The interest accruing from the capital amount alone could be diverted for various offerings.

The Chaturvethimangalam

The Chaturvethimangalam was an important limb of the administrative system.²⁷ These nucleating habitation zones, with a viable agricultural community, became the various Chaturvethimangalam. *Nadu*, a bigger habitation area, was one of the local administrative divisions under the Cholas and the Pandyas.

Like the *ur* and *sabha*, the Chaturvethimangalam also accepted the endowments given in the name of temples. They were required to conduct the services based on the purpose of the endowment 20 *kalanju of gold* was placed under the custody of *nattars* for 2 lamps to be kept burning in the temple. This is revealed by an inscription²⁸ dated in the third regnal year of Parantaka I Chola.

The welfare measure taken by the *nattars* did not stop with the temples alone. The *nattars* lent a helping hand to the public too. A record²⁹ of Srirangadeva Maharaya dated 1632-33 A.D. states that the *nattar* of the place gave an undertaking to the official committee of management the *rajaikarya bhandara* that they would hence forth allow certain privilege to the three classes of artisans, namely blacksmiths, goldsmiths and carpenters of the locality in accordance with the practice in a few other places and that if ever they should violate their promise, they would pay a fine of 12 *pons* and suffer the twelve *kurrams*, disgraces in consequence. From this, it is clear. That this local body does not seem to have been left uncontrolled by the state.

Another important administrative division, which had greater share in the temple administration was Chaturvethimangalam. The Chaturvethimangalam was the local mahasabha of merchant guilds. It functioned in every major trading centre of any importance. Located in market towns³⁰, the Chaturvethimangalam, appears to have functioned effectively in coordination with the *Ur*, the *sabha* and the Chaturvethimangalam. Membership to this mahasabha was open to people of different castes. For, many people of diverse castes including the Brahmins engaged themselves in commerce. Therefore, it is said that caste was not a barrier to the admission of members in the Chaturvethimangalam.³¹

For instance, Mani Sankaranarayanan, a Brahmana is mentioned as a *nagarattan* in an inscription of Maranjadaiyan found in the Ayyanar Temple at Kalugumalai.³²

The Mahasabha had keen interest in the Construction and Expansion of Temples.

The Chaturvethimangalam had various committees to look after the business. To implement the decisions and record their transactions, the Chaturvethimangalam had accountants known as Chaturvethimangalam *kanakku*³³. From the multifarious functions discharged, it is possible to suggest that Chaturvethimangalam was an influential body. It even enjoyed delegated rights of administrative autonomy.³⁴ Records portray the rule of Chaturvethimangalam in the local administration including the affairs of temples. The mercantile people made lavish endowments and gifts of various kinds. Gift of land by them was a common feature. A record³⁵ dated in the 25th regnal year of Rajaraja III Chola states a gift of land by a merchant Vannakkan Malaiyan of Thiruvamattur for burning perpetual lamp. The attention of the trading guild was drawn in the construction of temples also. These instances show their keen interest in the construction and expansion of temples.

The Chaturvethimangalam of different trading centers had undertaken the management of temples and their charities. They had received the gifts intended for temple service. Money and gold were entrusted with them for different purposes. Land was also endowed with the Chaturvethimangalam for the same purpose.³⁶ With the gift under the supervision of the Chaturvethimangalam, various temple services were performed. Gold was gifted by them to provide lamp services in the temples. It records the various measures taken by the Chaturvethimangalam for temple services. To meet these obligations, the proceeds of impost on certain export articles of merchandise were gifted to the temples.

It further elaborates that in years of drought or flood, a share based on crop assessment should be paid. From this, it is known that the Chaturvethimangalam got the right to regulate the share from the produce to the temples. In addition, the Chaturvethimangalam engaged in leasing out temple lands. Unoccupied temple lands were converted into arable lands by the Chaturvethimangalam. For this, in certain areas, waste lands, overgrown with shrubs and trees, were sold out.³⁷ The vendees were to reclaim the land and to pay the specified quantity of grain to the temple. Thus, the above instances furnish the proper care bestowed on the temple administration by the Chaturvethimangalam.

Another inscription³⁸ of Kopperunjinga deva II Kadavarya dated to his 16th regnal year found on the north wall of the Madappali registers a gift of land in Chiruvakur in Chendamangalapattu. The record also mentioned land measurements namely *ma, kani, araikani, muntrigal* etc in detailed manner. This record also refers the donnar, the chief of the *Stanattar* of the Temple. Another inscription³⁹ of Jatavarman alias Vira Pandya I deva dated to his 6th regnal year found on the west wall of the in front of the Nataraja shrine of this Temple registers a gift of land in the village kilai Arumbakkam by purchase. From one Varadaraja Vilupparaiyar by one Manrirkkunikum Perumal alias Dipattaraiyan, the headman of Cholakula Vallinallur in Pattanpakka Chaturvethimangalam, Rajaraja vala nadu offering cooked dough, the Kali to the Gods of the Temple of Tiruvadigai.

Another inscription⁴⁰ of Jatavarman alias Vira Pandya deva I dated to his 8th regnal year found on the southern entrance of the Mandapa of this Temple. Register a gift of land Tirunamattukkani by Anumanulan Suriyadevar alias Kongarayar. The land originally belonged to a Pullali Velan Manattukkiniyan alias Kanakarayan of Chola Kulavallinallur, who was administering Naduvil Mandalam during the reign of Sundara Pandya. Then it was taken charge by the *Stanattar* from the month of *Tai* in the eighth year of King Perumal Vira Pandya.

In the concluding part from the above study, it is evident that the day-to-day affairs of the different region and localities were entrusted to various local self-governing bodies. As the whole social order was centered around a spiritual axis, which was represented by the temple, the King was very much interested in their maintenance. An orderly maintenance of temple was a reflection of an orderliness of the society. The many lands, village, gold and other gifts donated to the temples were naturally left under the charge of these village mahasabha. Besides, this, the village mahasabha cooperated in looking after the needs and necessities of the temples. Under their guardianship and protection, the temples flourished greatly.

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