



Indigenous Village Administration Among The Pachamalai Hills Tribes: A Historical Study

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Abstract

The indigenous system of village administration among the Pachamalai Hills tribes represents a distinctive form of traditional governance that evolved through centuries of interaction with the natural environment and community-based social organization. The Malayali tribes inhabiting the Pachamalai Hills developed an administrative structure founded on customary laws, collective decision-making, and the authority of respected village elders. Unlike formal administrative institutions established during the colonial and post-colonial periods, indigenous governance functioned through consensus, kinship relations, and unwritten customary practices that regulated social, economic, and religious life. Village assemblies played a significant role in resolving disputes, maintaining social harmony, managing common resources, organizing religious ceremonies, and preserving community traditions. The British colonial administration gradually introduced forest regulations and revenue policies that altered traditional governance by reducing the autonomy of tribal institutions. After Independence, constitutional provisions, Panchayati Raj institutions, and tribal welfare programmes further transformed indigenous administration while expanding access to education, healthcare, and development initiatives. Despite these changes, several traditional administrative practices continue to survive, particularly in matters concerning customary law, cultural ceremonies, and community leadership. This study adopts a historical approach to examine the evolution, structure, and transformation of indigenous village administration among the Pachamalai Hills tribes. It argues that traditional governance systems remain valuable components of tribal heritage and continue to contribute to social cohesion, conflict resolution, and cultural continuity. Understanding these indigenous institutions is essential for designing development policies that respect tribal identity while promoting inclusive governance and sustainable rural development.

Key Words: Pachamalai Hills, Malayali Tribes, Indigenous Administration, Tribal Governance, Village Council, Customary Law, Traditional Leadership, Tamil Nadu.

Introduction

India is home to a rich diversity of tribal communities, each possessing unique systems of governance that have evolved according to their ecological environment, social organization, and cultural traditions. Long before the establishment of modern administrative institutions, tribal societies developed indigenous mechanisms for regulating community life, resolving disputes, managing natural resources, and maintaining social order. These traditional systems of governance were based on customary laws, collective responsibility, and the authority of respected elders rather than written legislation or centralized political structures. Consequently, indigenous administration became an integral part of tribal identity and ensured the continuity of social institutions across generations. Among the Scheduled Tribes of Tamil Nadu, the Malayali tribes of the Pachamalai Hills have preserved a distinctive tradition of village administration rooted in customary practices and collective decision-making. Situated in the Eastern Ghats, the Pachamalai Hills provided geographical isolation that enabled tribal communities to maintain considerable autonomy over their internal affairs for centuries. Leadership was exercised through village elders and community councils that regulated agricultural activities, settled disputes, supervised religious ceremonies, and safeguarded customary traditions. These institutions reflected democratic participation, consensus-building, and collective welfare rather than hierarchical political authority. The colonial administration introduced significant changes through forest legislation, revenue administration, and centralized governance, which gradually reduced the autonomy of indigenous institutions. Following Indian Independence, Panchayati Raj institutions, tribal development programmes, and constitutional safeguards further transformed the traditional administrative system. Although modern governance has become increasingly prominent, many indigenous administrative practices continue to survive, particularly in matters relating to customary law, cultural traditions, and village-level conflict resolution. This study examines the historical development of indigenous village administration among the Pachamalai Hills tribes, highlighting its organizational structure, leadership patterns, judicial functions, and historical transformation. It also explores the continuing relevance of customary institutions in preserving tribal identity and promoting community participation within the framework of contemporary rural governance.

Historical Background of the Pachamalai Hills Tribes

The Pachamalai Hills form an important segment of the Eastern Ghats in Tamil Nadu and are located predominantly in the present Tiruchirappalli district, extending into neighboring regions of Perambalur and Salem. The term *Pachamalai*, meaning "Green Hills," reflects the dense forests and fertile valleys that have historically supported the livelihood of indigenous communities. Owing to their difficult terrain and relative geographical isolation, these hills remained largely outside the direct control of successive political powers for many centuries, allowing tribal societies to preserve their traditional institutions with minimal external interference. The Malayali tribes constitute the principal indigenous community inhabiting the Pachamalai Hills. Although their exact historical origin remains a subject of scholarly debate, oral traditions suggest that their ancestors migrated from the neighbouring plains several centuries ago and gradually established permanent settlements in the hill regions. Over time, they adapted to the ecological conditions of the mountains and developed a distinctive socio-economic system based on agriculture, forest resources, livestock rearing, and communal cooperation. Their close relationship with nature shaped every aspect of village life, including religious beliefs, customary laws, and administrative institutions. Historically, each village functioned as an independent social unit governed by customary norms rather than external political authority. Leadership emerged from within the community, with experienced elders assuming responsibility for maintaining order, settling disputes, and organizing communal activities. These traditional institutions evolved according to local needs and reflected the collective interests of the community. Since tribal villages were relatively small and socially homogeneous, administration depended largely on mutual trust, consensus, and shared customary values. During the medieval period, the Pachamalai Hills experienced only indirect influence from the Cholas, Pandyas, Vijayanagara rulers, and Nayaks. Their administrative structures primarily affected the plains, while the hill communities retained substantial autonomy in managing their internal affairs. This autonomy enabled indigenous governance systems to develop independently and ensured the continuity of traditional leadership for several generations.

The arrival of British colonial administration during the nineteenth century marked a significant turning point in the political history of the Pachamalai Hills. Colonial forest policies, revenue administration, and legal reforms gradually integrated the tribal regions into the formal administrative framework of British India. Restrictions on forest access and increasing governmental supervision affected the authority of traditional village leaders, although customary institutions continued to function in many aspects of community life. Following Independence, democratic decentralization and tribal welfare policies further reshaped local governance while simultaneously recognizing the need to protect tribal customs under constitutional provisions. The historical evolution of the Pachamalai Hills tribes demonstrates that indigenous village administration developed not merely as a political institution but as an integral component of tribal society. It regulated social relations, economic activities, religious ceremonies, and community welfare through customs that had evolved over centuries. Even today, many of these traditional practices continue to coexist with modern administrative institutions, illustrating the resilience and adaptability of indigenous governance.

Evolution of Indigenous Village Administration

The indigenous system of village administration among the Pachamalai Hills tribes evolved gradually in response to the geographical conditions, economic activities, and social organization of the Malayali tribal community. Before the introduction of formal governmental institutions, every tribal settlement functioned as a largely self-governing unit where customary laws regulated community life. The absence of centralized political authority encouraged the development of a decentralized administrative system based on collective responsibility and consensus. Governance was closely associated with the everyday needs of the people, including agricultural management, distribution of common resources, settlement of disputes, organization of religious ceremonies, and maintenance of social harmony. These administrative practices were not codified in written documents but were preserved through oral traditions and transmitted from one generation to another. The evolution of indigenous administration was closely linked to the ecological environment of the Pachamalai Hills. Since tribal communities depended primarily on agriculture and forest resources, administrative decisions were often concerned with the proper utilization of land, protection of water sources, cultivation practices, and conservation of forests. Community leaders ensured that agricultural activities followed traditional seasonal patterns and that common resources were utilized equitably by all families. Such practices reflected the collective ownership of natural resources rather than individual control, thereby promoting cooperation and environmental sustainability. Unlike modern bureaucratic administration, indigenous governance emphasized moral authority instead of legal enforcement. Respect for tradition and the collective opinion of the village served as the principal mechanisms for maintaining discipline. Community members voluntarily accepted the authority of village leaders because leadership was based upon experience, wisdom, integrity, and social acceptance rather than hereditary privilege or political power. Decisions were generally reached after extensive discussion among elders and representatives of different families, thereby ensuring that administrative actions reflected the interests of the entire community. The administrative system also evolved as a mechanism for preserving social solidarity. Tribal society attached considerable importance to collective welfare, and village leaders were expected to safeguard not only law and order but also cultural traditions, religious practices, and kinship relations. Administrative institutions therefore performed multiple functions that extended far beyond governance, serving as centres of social integration and cultural continuity. Through these institutions, customary practices governing marriage, inheritance, festivals, and communal labour were preserved for generations. The arrival of colonial administration gradually transformed this indigenous system by introducing formal legal institutions and revenue administration. Nevertheless, the traditional administrative framework continued to function alongside colonial authority,

particularly in matters concerning customary law and internal community affairs. This coexistence demonstrates the remarkable adaptability of indigenous governance and its continued relevance in tribal society.

Administrative Structure and Traditional Leadership

The administrative structure of the Pachamalai Hills tribes was founded upon community participation and collective decision-making. Every village possessed its own traditional leadership, which functioned as the primary institution responsible for maintaining social order and coordinating communal activities. Leadership was generally vested in respected elders who possessed extensive knowledge of customary laws, religious traditions, and community history. Their authority derived from social recognition rather than political appointment, and they exercised leadership through consultation and consensus rather than coercion. The Mooppan or village headman occupied the highest position in the traditional administrative hierarchy. The Mooppan was regarded as the custodian of customary law and the representative of the community in both internal and external affairs. His responsibilities included convening village meetings, presiding over dispute settlement, supervising agricultural activities, organizing religious festivals, and ensuring adherence to customary norms. The office demanded impartiality, wisdom, and practical experience, qualities that earned the confidence and respect of the entire village. Although leadership often remained within influential families, the acceptance of the community was essential for the effective functioning of the office. Supporting the Mooppan was the Council of Elders, consisting of senior members of the village who were recognized for their knowledge and experience. This council acted as an advisory body and participated in all important administrative decisions. Matters relating to land use, marriage disputes, inheritance, community festivals, and conflicts between families were discussed collectively before a final decision was reached. The council emphasized reconciliation and restoration of social harmony rather than punishment, reflecting the humanitarian principles embedded in tribal customary law. Village assemblies constituted another important feature of indigenous administration. Meetings were convened whenever issues affecting the collective welfare of the community required discussion. Adult members of the village often participated in these assemblies, expressing their opinions before decisions were finalized through consensus. Such participatory governance strengthened democratic values within the community and encouraged collective responsibility in implementing administrative decisions. Traditional leadership also extended to the management of religious institutions. Village leaders coordinated annual festivals, supervised rituals associated with agriculture, and ensured the protection of sacred groves and places of worship. Since religion and administration were closely interconnected, leaders possessed both social and ritual authority. Their role in maintaining cultural traditions reinforced the legitimacy of indigenous governance and strengthened community identity. Women, although not always occupying formal leadership positions, exercised considerable influence within the administrative process through family networks, ritual activities, and collective labour organizations. Elderly women, in particular, contributed to discussions concerning marriage customs, family disputes, and ceremonial arrangements. Their knowledge of traditional medicine, food security, and agricultural practices enhanced the effectiveness of community administration and reflected the complementary nature of gender roles in tribal society. The effectiveness of the indigenous administrative structure depended largely upon mutual trust and social cooperation. Since villages were relatively small and socially homogeneous, leaders possessed intimate knowledge of the circumstances affecting individual families. This familiarity enabled them to resolve disputes fairly and maintain close communication with community members. Administrative decisions therefore reflected local realities rather than external regulations, making governance more responsive to the needs of the people. The traditional leadership system also played a significant role in preserving oral traditions and customary laws. Elders transmitted historical narratives, ethical values, and administrative practices to younger generations through observation, participation, and storytelling. In this manner, indigenous administration functioned not only as a political institution but also as a mechanism for safeguarding the historical memory and cultural heritage of the Pachamalai Hills tribes.

Role of Village Assemblies in Social and Economic Administration

Village assemblies formed the foundation of indigenous administration among the Pachamalai Hills tribes. These assemblies functioned as the principal decision-making institutions through which the community collectively addressed matters relating to governance, social welfare, and economic activities. Unlike formal administrative bodies established under statutory law, the village assembly derived its authority from customary traditions and the voluntary participation of community members. Decisions were generally taken after open discussions in which elders, family heads, and other respected members expressed their opinions. The emphasis on consensus rather than majority voting reflected the tribal philosophy that community harmony was more important than individual interests. The village assembly exercised considerable authority over the regulation of agricultural activities. Since agriculture constituted the primary occupation of the Malayali tribes, the timing of cultivation, preparation of fields, sowing, irrigation, and harvesting often required collective planning. The assembly determined suitable periods for agricultural operations based on traditional ecological knowledge and seasonal conditions. Community cooperation during cultivation ensured that labour was shared among families, thereby strengthening social solidarity and reducing economic inequalities. Such cooperative labour practices enabled even economically weaker households to cultivate their lands successfully. The management of common resources also formed an important responsibility of the village assembly. Forests, grazing lands, water sources, and pathways were regarded as community resources essential for collective survival. Village leaders supervised the utilization of these resources to prevent overexploitation and ensure equitable access for all households. Traditional regulations prohibited the unnecessary destruction of forests, protected sacred groves, and encouraged sustainable use of natural resources. These indigenous conservation practices reflected the intimate relationship between tribal society and

the natural environment and contributed significantly to ecological sustainability. Village assemblies further played an important role in organizing communal labour for public welfare. Construction and maintenance of footpaths, water channels, community meeting places, and religious sites were generally undertaken through collective participation. Every household contributed labour according to its capacity, thereby reinforcing the principle of mutual responsibility. Such cooperative efforts reduced dependence on external agencies and strengthened the collective identity of the community. Religious and cultural activities were also coordinated through village assemblies. Annual festivals, agricultural ceremonies, ancestor worship, and village deity festivals required collective planning and participation. The assembly determined the dates of ceremonies, allocated responsibilities, and ensured that customary rituals were performed according to traditional practices. These religious gatherings not only strengthened spiritual beliefs but also reinforced social unity by bringing together members of different families and neighbouring settlements. Economically, village assemblies acted as institutions that promoted social security within the community. Families facing crop failure, illness, or other hardships often received assistance through collective labour, sharing of agricultural produce, or community support. This informal system of mutual aid minimized economic vulnerability and demonstrated the humanitarian values embedded in indigenous administration. Thus, the village assembly functioned simultaneously as an administrative, economic, social, and cultural institution that safeguarded the collective welfare of the Pachamalai Hills tribes.

Customary Law and Conflict Resolution

Customary law constituted the legal foundation of indigenous administration among the Pachamalai Hills tribes. Unlike modern legal systems based upon written legislation, tribal customary law evolved through long-established traditions, social experience, and collective acceptance. These unwritten norms regulated almost every aspect of community life, including marriage, inheritance, land use, agricultural practices, family relationships, and religious obligations. Since customary laws reflected the moral values and collective wisdom of the community, they commanded widespread respect and voluntary compliance. Conflict resolution was one of the principal responsibilities of traditional village leaders and the council of elders. Disputes relating to land boundaries, agricultural activities, marital disagreements, inheritance, and interpersonal conflicts were generally brought before the village assembly rather than external authorities. Proceedings were conducted publicly, allowing both parties to present their views before the elders. Decisions were based upon customary precedents, community welfare, and principles of fairness rather than rigid legal procedures. This participatory process enhanced public confidence in indigenous justice and reduced the possibility of prolonged disputes. The objective of customary justice was reconciliation rather than punishment. Tribal society considered social harmony essential for collective survival, and therefore efforts were directed toward restoring peaceful relationships between conflicting parties. Penalties usually consisted of public apology, ritual reconciliation, community service, or modest compensation instead of severe punishment. Such restorative practices strengthened interpersonal relationships and prevented long-term divisions within the community. The emphasis on compromise reflected the collective values of tribal society, where cooperation was indispensable for agricultural production and community welfare. Customary law also regulated marriage and family relations. Traditional norms governed acceptable marriage alliances, inheritance rights, responsibilities toward elders, and obligations between families. Village leaders ensured that these customs were observed, thereby preserving social stability and cultural continuity. Similarly, disputes concerning family matters were settled through mediation rather than adversarial procedures, reflecting the humanitarian character of indigenous governance. The effectiveness of customary law depended largely upon the moral authority of village leaders and the collective support of the community. Since decisions were implemented through social consensus rather than coercive force, individuals generally complied with judgments to preserve their social reputation and maintain harmonious relations with fellow villagers. Even after the establishment of formal judicial institutions, customary law continued to influence dispute resolution in many tribal settlements, particularly in matters involving cultural practices and community traditions.

Colonial Intervention and Changes in Indigenous Administration

The arrival of British colonial rule during the nineteenth century marked a significant turning point in the administrative history of the Pachamalai Hills tribes. Prior to colonial intervention, indigenous village administration functioned with considerable autonomy under the authority of traditional leaders and customary institutions. The introduction of British revenue administration, forest legislation, and judicial reforms gradually altered the structure and functioning of these indigenous systems by incorporating tribal regions into the colonial administrative framework. One of the most significant changes resulted from the implementation of colonial forest policies. The British administration declared extensive forest areas as reserved forests and introduced regulations governing access to forest resources. These policies substantially restricted the customary rights of tribal communities over forests, which had previously formed the basis of their economy and administration. Traditional leaders gradually lost their authority over the management of forest resources as government officials assumed responsibility for regulating land use and forest conservation. Consequently, indigenous administration became increasingly dependent upon colonial regulations rather than customary practices. Colonial revenue policies also transformed the traditional relationship between tribal communities and land. The introduction of systematic land surveys, taxation, and property records replaced many customary arrangements relating to land ownership and cultivation. Village leaders who had previously supervised agricultural activities according to customary principles found their authority reduced as colonial officials exercised greater administrative control. Although many tribal villages

continued to follow traditional agricultural practices, external intervention gradually weakened indigenous institutions. The establishment of formal courts and police administration further affected customary justice. Disputes that had traditionally been settled through village councils increasingly came under the jurisdiction of colonial legal institutions. Nevertheless, because of the remoteness of the Pachamalai Hills and the limited reach of colonial administration, village assemblies continued to resolve many local disputes according to customary law. Indigenous administration therefore coexisted with colonial institutions, particularly in matters concerning family relationships, religious practices, and community customs. Missionary activities and the expansion of formal education during the colonial period also contributed to social transformation within the Pachamalai Hills. Although educational opportunities remained limited, increased contact with the outside world gradually introduced new administrative ideas and social values. Traditional leadership adapted to these changes while continuing to preserve essential aspects of indigenous governance. This ability to accommodate external influences without completely abandoning customary institutions demonstrates the resilience of tribal administration. Despite the profound changes introduced during the colonial period, indigenous governance did not disappear. Instead, it evolved by incorporating selected elements of the new administrative system while retaining its customary foundations. The survival of village councils, traditional leadership, and customary law into the post-independence period illustrates the enduring strength of indigenous administrative institutions among the Pachamalai Hills tribes.

Post-Independence Transformation of Tribal Governance

The attainment of Indian Independence in 1947 marked a new phase in the governance of tribal communities throughout the country, including the Malayali tribes of the Pachamalai Hills. The Constitution of India recognized the need to protect the socio-economic interests of Scheduled Tribes by introducing various constitutional safeguards, welfare programmes, and administrative reforms. These measures sought to integrate tribal communities into the broader framework of democratic governance while preserving their distinct cultural identity. Consequently, the indigenous administrative institutions of the Pachamalai Hills began to interact with formal governmental structures, leading to a gradual transformation of traditional governance. The introduction of the Panchayati Raj system significantly altered village administration in the Pachamalai region. Elected Gram Panchayats gradually assumed responsibility for local development, public welfare, infrastructure, sanitation, education, and implementation of government schemes. Administrative authority that had once rested exclusively with traditional leaders increasingly became shared with elected representatives and government officials. This transition introduced democratic elections and statutory procedures into village administration, replacing many informal customary practices with legally recognized institutions. Government welfare programmes further accelerated administrative transformation. Tribal development initiatives focusing on education, healthcare, housing, drinking water, road connectivity, agriculture, and employment generated new opportunities for socio-economic advancement. Various departments, including the Tribal Welfare Department, Rural Development Department, Forest Department, and Revenue Administration, became directly involved in village affairs. As government agencies expanded their presence, indigenous leaders increasingly performed advisory and cultural roles rather than exercising exclusive administrative authority. Education emerged as another important factor influencing tribal governance. Increasing literacy enabled younger generations to participate more actively in formal administrative institutions and democratic processes. Many educated tribal youths entered public service, local administration, and elected bodies, thereby bridging the gap between traditional leadership and modern governance. This transition contributed to greater awareness of constitutional rights, government welfare schemes, and legal procedures among tribal communities. Despite these developments, traditional institutions continued to retain considerable influence in matters relating to customary law, marriage, religious ceremonies, and community disputes. Village elders remained highly respected for their knowledge of tribal customs and often mediated conflicts before they reached formal administrative authorities. Thus, post-independence governance in the Pachamalai Hills evolved as a combination of constitutional administration and indigenous customary institutions. Rather than completely replacing traditional governance, democratic decentralization encouraged a gradual adaptation in which both systems coexisted and complemented one another in addressing the needs of the community.

Contemporary Relevance of Indigenous Administration

Although modern administrative institutions now govern most aspects of rural development, indigenous village administration continues to possess considerable relevance among the Pachamalai Hills tribes. Traditional governance remains an effective mechanism for preserving community solidarity, cultural identity, and customary values. Village elders continue to provide leadership during religious festivals, family ceremonies, agricultural activities, and community meetings, thereby maintaining continuity with the historical traditions of the community. One of the most significant strengths of indigenous administration lies in its participatory character. Unlike formal bureaucratic institutions that often operate through complex legal procedures, traditional governance encourages direct community participation in decision-making. Issues affecting village life are generally discussed openly, allowing community members to express their views before consensus is reached. Such participatory practices strengthen social cohesion and enhance public confidence in local leadership. Indigenous administration also contributes significantly to the preservation of customary law and traditional knowledge. Village elders continue to transmit oral traditions, ethical principles, ecological knowledge, and conflict-resolution practices to younger generations. These customary institutions play an essential role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, particularly in an era characterized by rapid modernization and globalization. Their continued

existence demonstrates the resilience of tribal institutions despite increasing external influences. Environmental conservation represents another area in which indigenous administration remains highly relevant. Traditional leaders have historically regulated the use of forests, water sources, grazing lands, and sacred groves through customary practices emphasizing sustainable utilization of natural resources. Contemporary environmental policies increasingly recognize the importance of indigenous ecological knowledge in promoting biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management. The experience of the Pachamalai Hills tribes illustrates that community-based governance can contribute effectively to environmental protection while supporting local livelihoods. Nevertheless, indigenous administration also faces several contemporary challenges. Migration, urbanization, formal education, changing occupations, and increasing dependence on governmental institutions have reduced the authority of traditional leaders in certain areas. Younger generations often possess limited knowledge of customary laws and indigenous governance practices. Unless systematic efforts are undertaken to document and preserve these traditions, valuable aspects of tribal administrative heritage may gradually disappear. Collaborative approaches involving tribal communities, researchers, and government agencies are therefore essential for ensuring that indigenous governance continues to complement modern democratic institutions.

Conclusion

The indigenous village administration of the Pachamalai Hills tribes represents one of the oldest and most effective systems of community governance in Tamil Nadu. Developed over centuries through collective experience and adaptation to the hill environment, this administrative system was founded upon customary law, consensus-based decision-making, and the moral authority of respected elders. Traditional institutions regulated every aspect of village life, including social relationships, agricultural production, religious practices, resource management, and conflict resolution, thereby ensuring stability and cohesion within the community. Historical developments, particularly British colonial intervention and post-independence administrative reforms, transformed the structure and functioning of indigenous governance. Forest legislation, revenue administration, Panchayati Raj institutions, and tribal welfare programmes introduced new administrative mechanisms that gradually reduced the exclusive authority of traditional leaders. However, indigenous institutions demonstrated remarkable resilience by adapting to changing political and social conditions while preserving their essential cultural functions. Even today, customary leadership continues to play an important role in maintaining community harmony, protecting tribal traditions, and preserving indigenous knowledge systems. The coexistence of traditional administration with democratic governance illustrates that indigenous institutions remain relevant within contemporary rural society. Their participatory character, emphasis on reconciliation, and commitment to collective welfare provide valuable lessons for inclusive and sustainable local governance. The historical study of indigenous village administration among the Pachamalai Hills tribes demonstrates that tribal governance should not be viewed merely as a relic of the past but as a living institution capable of contributing to modern development. Recognizing and strengthening these traditional systems can promote culturally sensitive governance while preserving the rich historical heritage of the tribal communities of Tamil Nadu.

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