



DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE IN THE CHOLA EMPIRE: A STUDY ON LOCAL ADMINISTRATION AND ITS IMPACT ON SOUTH INDIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The expression *brahmadeya* literally means “Land endowments to Brahmins”. Mostly this kind of endowments consisted of land, originally as rights to a share in the crops of the donated land and, as the institution developed, in administrative rights over the land endowment. The *Brahmadeya* grant was regularly recorded and inscribed on an open rock, or on the walls of the temples, on the pillars and on the copper plates. Along with the land gift, other privileges namely, on water resources, exemptions of taxes and other duties were also given in addition to the beneficiaries. The expression *brahmadeya*, popularly known under several variants, literally means “endowment to Brahmins.” The endowment was transmission by a monarch, the more so when the donors enjoyed the share normally imparted to the Ruler. This land endowment was often made at the request of a local official, who also gave parts of his share of crops. This paper portrays *Brahmadeya*, a land grant to one or several Brahmin house holders, spiritual and Vedic scriptural experts of this settlement.

Key words: *devadana, chaturve dimangalam, agrahara, sabhaiyar and sabha*

Introduction

The institution of a *brahmadeya* could lead to their location of the donors earth edonated land *chaturvedimangalam* an “auspicious splace for Brahmins experts in the four Vedas,” who were responsible for the dispersal and interpretation of the four Vedas and the performance of rituals derived from them. The *brahmadeya* can be analysed with the *devadana*, “gift to god,” somewhat like, except that there sapient was no at Brahminor Brahmins, but the God of a specific temple. Usually, the suffix *chaturvedimangalam* was led by the name of the donor King, who issued the grant. They were also apolitical act as, by agreeing to the request of a local magnate, the King made him an ally or complete his loyalty. Various reasons motivated such gifts. They were an act of piety, behind the socio cosmic order (*dharma*) and generating religious merit (*punya*) for the donor. Furthermore, such land grant endowed to the agricultural Development of the kingdom Grants, such as *brahmadevas bramadeyas* and *devadanas* both attested with devedana becoming more common have been considered by historians as one of the chief actors. As royal prerogatives and administrative power were



typically moved the recipients, leading to a supposed segmentation of state power. Such local assemblies have gone numerous inscriptions on temple walls recording their administrative decisions concerning their lands. In Tamil Country, as the institution developed and the rights conferred expanded, the donor organized themselves in a local corporate body, an assembly of Brahminssabha managing the locality's states. This view, however, has been contested. Brahmadeya villages were villages granted to Brahmins and inhabited entirely by Brahmins. Brahmadeya often it was donated by such names, *mangalam*, *agaram*, *brahmapuram*, *agrahara*, *agrabrahmadeya*, *brahmadesam* and *brahmamangalam*.

The Structure of Chola Local Administration

The Chola Empire (circa 9th–13th century CE) was one of the most formidable and enduring dynasties in South Indian history. Renowned for its military prowess, cultural achievements, and temple architecture, the Chola administration was also notable for its highly efficient decentralized governance system. This study explores the structure and impact of Chola local administration, analyzing its influence on South Indian society and governance. The Chola polity was characterized by a well-organized administrative structure, which included central, provincial, and local governance. The king was the supreme authority, but significant powers were delegated to local institutions. The Cholas perfected a decentralized system of administration by establishing autonomous local governance bodies known as *ur*, *sabha*, and *nadu*.

The Ur

The *ur* was the administrative assembly of villages with non-Brahmin populations. It consisted of representatives from the local community who managed daily affairs, such as revenue collection, law enforcement, and land distribution. The *ur* played a crucial role in rural governance, reflecting the participatory nature of Chola administration.

The Sabha

The *sabha* was an elite council exclusive to Brahmin settlements, known as *agraharas*. Members of the *sabha* were often learned individuals chosen through a rigorous selection process called *variya*, which ensured competence and accountability. The *sabha*



managed temple endowments, taxation, irrigation, and judicial matters, contributing to the socio-economic development of Brahmin-dominated villages.

The Nadu

The *nadu* functioned as an administrative unit above the village level, overseeing multiple settlements. It was governed by local chieftains and landlords, who ensured the implementation of royal decrees and facilitated economic transactions.

The Role of the Uttaramerur Inscriptions

A significant source of information on Chola local administration comes from the Uttaramerur inscriptions (circa 10th century CE). These inscriptions detail the democratic selection process of *sabha* members, highlighting principles such as eligibility criteria, rotational governance, and strict accountability. The Chola administrative model, as documented in these inscriptions, demonstrated remarkable foresight in ensuring transparency and inclusivity.

- ❖ **Economic Growth:** The structured revenue system and effective irrigation projects facilitated agricultural prosperity. Local institutions played a vital role in land assessments, tax collection, and surplus distribution.
- ❖ **Judicial Administration:** Local assemblies resolved disputes and maintained law and order, reducing the need for royal intervention in minor matters.
- ❖ **Social Cohesion:** By incorporating diverse local bodies into governance, the Cholas ensured harmony among different social and economic groups.
- ❖ **Cultural and Religious Developments:** Temples served as centers of administration, education, and economic activity, strengthening religious and cultural life.
- ❖ **Enduring Legacy:** The principles of self-governance established by the Cholas influenced later South Indian kingdoms and continue to be relevant in discussions on democratic traditions in India.

The decentralized governance model of the Chola Empire was a hallmark of administrative efficiency, fostering economic, social, and cultural progress in South India. The integration of local bodies into the broader political framework ensured participatory governance, which played a crucial role in the stability and longevity of the Chola dynasty.



This study reaffirms the significance of local administration in shaping the history and governance of South India.

Chaturvedimangalam

In the early medieval period Kings and royal people donated lot of land to the Brahmins. It was also called as Chaturvedimangalam, as the term suggests it was inhabited by Brahmins who professed the four Vedas. The Brahmin community which was a landlord body over a class of tenants collected certain shares of the yield. The noteworthy features of the Brahmin Settlements were it was a settlement of a non-cultivating caste; it was in general a settlement of a landlord class placed over a body of cultivating tenants; and there were some elements of common ownership of land in the community. It is not opposed that a Brahmin village included only those who belonged to the community of Brahmins; on the other hand we have clear evidence to show that it quartered other classes as well-potters, black smiths, goldsmiths, washer men and village servants also lived there, though in separate quarters close to the Brahmin quarter of the village. Brahmadeya settlements were shaped by the Kings.

The Brahmadeya villages were not created by the Kings, but evolved out of the agricultural villages in a Nadu. They were enjoying socio-religious, economic, educational, political, administrative and judicial powers. The Brahmadeya villages were independent administrative units in the segmentary level of the State Socially, they were the centers of learning of Vedic, Brahmanic, Itihasic and Puranic commentaries. In recognition of their services to the state and society they were fixed brahmadeyas for their maintenance. They were the settlements meant for the Brahmanas, who 'as repositories of wisdom' represented the intellectual serenity of the day. They, as 'keepers of conscience', functioned as a cohesive force of the state and society in one way or the other. During the Chola period temples were an important social institution. They employed an important place in the life of the people-whether political or social; economic or cultural.

The Brahmadeyas were not exclusively a brahman settlement. The only social group, which was explicitly forbidden residence in a brahmadeya was the Ilava. There were two types of land grants given to the temples Brahmadeyas and *devadana*. Brahmadeya means gift to brahmins specifically, a grant of village income, and its management to brahmins and



devadana means gift to Gods; specifically, the endowment of income from land or a village to a temple. The temples had different secular functions both in their internal and external activities. These were primarily attentive round land and hence the importance of temples depended largely on land grants. Brahmadeyas were the major center of temple activities of the Cholas. It was through temples that the Brahman temple functionaries used to exercise their ritualistic authority. There are many inscriptions dealing with bramadeya villages. Quite a few refer to the locality with its numerous settlements of non- Brahman cultivators. Nowhere in the Indian subcontinent had such powerful Brahman village, such as brahmadeyas, existed as they did in the Coromandel and in many parts of the contiguous tableland during the period. Similarly nowhere in the Indian sub-continent there were so many vedic temples with substantial control over endowed villages as *devadana*, in South India. However, in respect of a Brahman locality power was associated with land control. This appears to be a unique feature of South Indian society. South Indian temples of the medievell period had peculiar functions as compared to the temples in the north.

The Brahmadeya Sabha

The *sabha* was summoned by the beating of a drum. Usually, its meetings were held in the temples. As an assembly of the Brahmina village, the *sabha* had various functions to discharge. Looking after the temples and their affairs was the preoccupation of the *sabha*. All royal grants and orders were addressed to the *sabha*. It is evident from a record 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 *sabhakanakku* assisted in all of its deliberations and used to sign in the transactions. Only such Brahmins got membership and voting power in the *sabhas* and its sub-committees. Membership in the *sabha* varied from place to place and time to time. 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 *variya*ms. The learned Brahmins, who possessed certain area of land alone were eligible to become the elected members of the *sabha* and its committees. A *sabha* had various committees or *variya*ms to carry out its functions.

The Uttiramerur inscription of Parantaka I Chola elaborates the rules and regulations observed in the composition of the *mahasabha* and the constitution of its various committees. As the Brahmadeya *sabha* was a Brahmin assembly, its membership was restricted



to Brahmins only. Each Brahmadeya village had a sabha of its own. Next to the ur, the sabhas enjoyed a pre- eminent place in the hierarchy of local administration. It was an assembly of the Brahmadeya or Brahmin village. The administration of that particular village was carried out by the particular Brahmadeyasabha. It's functioned as an administrative body and also as a governmental institution of the village. The members of the *Brahmadeyasabha* were commonly known as *Sabhaiyar*. 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 record of the fifteenth regnal year of Parantaka I chola registers the gift of 96 sheep, which



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*. 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 the capital amount alone could be diverted for various offerings.

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, 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. 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 concluding part reveals that the gift was broadcast by aruler, the more so when the donors enjoyed the share normally imparted to the King. Alongwith the land, privileges namely, on water resources and exemptions of taxes and other duties were also conferred to the beneficiaries. The institution of a *brahmadeya* could lead to the relocation of the donors near the donated land. As royal prerogatives and administrative power were typically moved the recipients, leading to a supposed segmentation of state power. Brahmadeya villages were villages granted to Brahmins and inhabited entirely by Brahmins. Brahmadeya often it was donated by various names, mangalam, agaram, brahmapuram, agrahara, agrabrahmadeya, brahmadeyam and brahmanagaram. The Brahmadeya villages were independent administrative units in the segmentary level of the state. Brahmadeya settlements were shaped by the Kings. They were enjoying socio-religious, economic, educational, political, administrative and judicial powers.



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