



Local Administration In Tamilnadu With Special Reference To The Formation Of Municipalities In Virudhunagar District

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Abstract

Virudhunagar District, located in southern Tamil Nadu, spans about 4,288 square kilometers and is bordered by Madurai, Sivaganga, Ramanathapuram, and Thoothukudi districts. Its administrative center is the town of Virudhunagar, the largest in the district. Known for its cultural heritage, historical importance, natural beauty, and industrial development, the district played a notable role during British rule. The Zamindari System, introduced during colonial times, significantly influenced the region's socio-economic structure. This article explores the system's administration in Virudhunagar, highlighting its background, main features, and regional impact. Administrative reforms included the establishment of Circle Boards between taluk and district levels. In the Tirunelveli and Madurai circles—areas now within Virudhunagar—duties like road maintenance, education, and public health were assigned to local fund boards, supported by local revenues. These boards managed infrastructure development, including schools, hospitals, and roads. By 1950, the area that is now Virudhunagar district had six municipalities.

Key Words

Virudhunagar, zamindari system, circle boards, municipalities and taluk

Introduction

Local administration in Tamil Nadu has the tradition of decentralized governance from the times of later Cholas. The Chola local administration characterized by assemblies at village, town, and district levels was invested with power of land revenue collection, dispute resolution, and financial management. The temples and religious institutions wielded enormous influence in administering local regions. This model of local administration continued until the British took over. The gram panchayat system with village elders constituting Board of Five and managing the village affairs originated even in ancient Tamilakam. But the later Cholas were pioneers in introducing a comprehensive system of governance at the village level.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this research work are the synthesization of old data with new historical facts, reinterpretation of historical data from the gazateers and analytical and descriptive methods have been used for the betterment of the article.

Findings

In this study an analytical and descriptive approach had been done on the origin and evolution of local self government in Tamilnadu with the formation of panchayat unions, union boards, taluk boards, district boards and village panchayats in Virudhunagar district.

Local Administration during Pre-Colonial Era

The Cholas built up a highly centralized empire, with efficient bureaucracy, supported by a strong army with numerous regiments and a navy. Their centralized bureaucratic machinery looked after the day-to-day administration of the state. The officials in hierarchical order, as representatives of the central government, were posted in different administrative units of the Chola Empire with autonomy granted to village assemblies during this period. The village administration of Cholas is widely celebrated as we find evidence of the practice of democracy in their local governance. The writings in Uttaramerur inscription belonging to the reign of Chola king Parantaka I (907-953 CE) informs about the composition of *gram sabha* (village assembly), and how it should be managed, what should be the qualification of members, what should be the process to elect the members, and how a member would be disqualified.

The *ur* (village council) or *sabha* (assembly) was the foundational unit of administration. The *ur* composed of landowners and prominent citizens. In urban areas, there were *sabhas* to manage more complex administrative tasks. The whole system reflected a relatively democratic approach to governance. The *sabha* was responsible for managing village affairs, including public works,

maintenance of local roads, tanks, and irrigation systems, as well as dealing with social and religious matters. They were also entrusted with tax collection, maintenance of law and order, organizing festivals, and dispensing justice. The main taxes included land tax (on agriculture), water tax (for irrigation), and sometimes a tax on trade. Local bodies were responsible for assessing and collecting taxes.

Local government included the panchayat, the Board of Five. They were the heads of dominant families with the rules of caste and heredity as the regulating factor. The panchayat would sit and resolve disputes. It would also handle minor judicial matters and supervise the maintenance of public utilities like wells, temples, and tanks. The Chola Empire had a clear territorial organization with several administrative divisions. The *nadu* was the largest territorial unit, roughly equivalent to a district or province. Each Nadu was divided into small villages called *Kurram*. In larger towns, the local administration operated through municipal bodies responsible for regulating markets, collecting taxes, managing public infrastructure and maintaining law and order. Temples during the Chola period were not only religious institutions, but also significant economic and administrative centers. The temple committees managed their large landholdings. The temples became the centre of agrarian control and the centralization of agrarian activities. In times of Vijayanagar Empire and Muslim rulers, the authority vested not in representative body of inhabitants, but in the police officers, tax gatherers and other officials of the Sovereign. However, in other aspects the village life continued to remain the same.

Colonial Period

The East India Company on assuming control of the Madras Presidency divided the Presidency into districts for administrative convenience. In Tamil Nadu there were eleven districts namely Madras, Chengalpattu, North Arcot, South Arcot, Salem, Coimbatore, Nilgiris, Tiruchirappalli, Thanjavur, Madurai and Tirunelveli. Ramanathapuram district was formed only in the next century (1910). Since land revenue was the mainstay of government finance, the Company government concentrated first on land revenue collection. The old palayams were abolished and in their place, zamins were created. The zamindars were required to function as revenue farmers under the permanent settlement system that was earlier introduced in Bengal. Pandalkudi, Palayampatti, Senoalkudi, Kollapatti, Elayirampennai, Chinnavadi, Sevalpatti, Mannarkottai, Pavali, Seithur and Kollamkondan were the zamins of the present Virudhunagar district. In non-zamindari, areas after making several experiments the Company government settled for Ryotwari system.

Local self-government in modern India evolved only in the last quarter of nineteenth century. During the course of this period its evolution was based on the recognition of local needs and interests among which included were education, sanitation, public health and roads. The municipal councils, the district and taluk boards, and the village panchayats were organized for dispensing and managing the local services. The bodies established to look after local interests were to be representative. However, this principle came to be accepted only in the second decade of twentieth century. In early days, Collectors of districts or some other members of the permanent civil services were ex-officio presidents.

Genesis of Local government

English pattern of local governance first came into existence owing to the efforts of Sir Josiah Child, the then Governor of Madras. He insisted on it in order to manage the problem of the conservancy of that town. In response, James II, King of England, conferred on the East India Company, the power of establishing a Corporation and Mayor's court in Madras, by a charter (1687). This new civil government was established with a Mayor, aldermen and burgesses, who were empowered to levy taxes for the building of a Guild hall, a jail and a school building and for other maintenance works of public utility and for paying the salaries of municipal officers, including a schoolmaster. The people stoutly opposed the imposition of a direct tax, and so the work of the new corporation could not be undertaken till permission was obtained by the Mayor to levy an Octroi (a tax on goods entering into the city or town) to provide the funds for street-cleaning. The Royal Charter of 1796, established a Mayor's Court, with aldermen (modern Magistrate), in each of the three Presidency towns of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay to exercise judicial power. However, no attempt at establishing municipalities was made outside the Presidency towns. Some form of self-government as the ultimate goal is said to have developed only in 1861, when legislative bodies were created to give representation to the stakeholders. The two important steps taken by the Viceroys, Lord Mayo and Lord Ripon, in the subsequent decade afforded a great encouragement to local self- government.

Lord Mayo's Resolution

The Resolution of Lord Mayo's Government introduced the system of provincial finance, which distinctly aimed at affording opportunities for the development of self-government and for the association of Indians and Europeans in taking a share in the administration of local affairs. To carry out this policy new Acts were passed for almost all the Provinces. The Acts widened the sphere of municipal activities and extended the principle of election. The elective principle, however, could not be successfully introduced into any province.

Lord Ripon and Local Administration

In 1881-82, the Government of Lord Ripon issued orders, encouraging the development of local self-government. Ripon believed that local self-government was a means of political education. The Acts passed in 1883-84, greatly altered the constitution of the municipal bodies, empowering them with more power and functions. Some towns were allowed to have elected chairpersons in the place of the executive officials. There was also a great change made by Lord Ripon by releasing the municipalities from the burden of paying the costs of the town police over which they had no control. In the place of such costs, the municipalities were called upon to support education, medical aid, and local public works. Some parts of the provincial revenues were also allocated to local self-government. The principles laid down by Lord Ripon paved the way for the local self-government in force today.

The Municipal government, as a body corporate, comprised members who were partly elected from the taxpayers and partly nominated by the government. The Municipal funds and properties were vested in these bodies. There was a chairman of the municipality under the Act. Elections were to be held every three years, and the Provincial Government framed the rules for elections. Voters were required to have a certain property or status as qualification. Though it was the policy of Ripon to preempt outside control in municipal matters, this did not happen for about a third of a century after Lord Ripon's time, as this control was exercised through the District Collector or the District Magistrate.

Madras District Municipalities Act, 1884

The Madras District Municipalities Act, 1884 was a step forward. It fixed the strength of Municipal Council and the term of office bearers. The Act also enhanced the powers of the non-official representatives in the local bodies. The New Act of 1884 constituted new local bodies, abolishing the old system of circle boards and district boards. Each revenue district board consisted of a president and not less than 24 members. Taluk boards were created consisting of a President and 12 members.¹ Another change brought about by the Act of 1884 was the creation of union of villages. The duties and responsibilities of the Union Boards were declared the lighting of the public roads, the cleaning of public roads and drains, the constructing and repairing of tanks and wells.

During Diarchy

The Royal Commission on Decentralization (1908) highlighted the lack of financial resources hindering local bodies' effective functioning. It suggested that the municipalities undertake responsibilities for primary education and a few other subjects, relieving the government of certain charges. According to the Government of India Act, 1919, the local self-government became a 'transferred' subject under Dyarchy introduced in the Madras Presidency. However, the finance being with the reserved-half, the independent functioning of the local bodies was not possible.

The Madras District Local Boards Act V of 1920 superseded the District Municipalities Act of 1884. The Madras Local Boards Act 1920 was subsequently amended as Madras District Boards Act. Two-tier structure of village panchayats at the grass root level and district boards at the district level came into existence. The Act provided for powers to Government to declare any town as a municipality or abolish any municipality. The Madras Village Panchayat Act passed in 1920 was repealed in 1930 and village panchayats were brought under the purview of Madras Local Boards Act of 1920. The Taluk Boards introduced in 1884 were abolished in 1934.

The Simon Commission (1930), taking cognizance of the lack of progress in village panchayat system, suggested provincial control for efficiency. The Government of India Act, 1935 brought provincial autonomy, enhancing the scope for development of local self-governing institutions. Popular ministries controlled finance portfolio that facilitated funds for local bodies' development.

Local Administration in Virudhunagar Region

Under the Local Funds Act (1871), Circle Boards were created in each district. Circle Boards were bigger than a taluk but smaller than a district board. Both in the Tirunelveli and Madurai circle, certain parts of which now form Virudhunagar district roads, education, sanitation and public health were transferred to the local fund boards and were charged upon local funds. It was the responsibility of the board to construct, maintain and repair schools, hospitals and roads. Until 1950, the present Virudhunagar district had only six Municipalities.

Srivilliputtur Municipality

Srivilliputhur Municipality was the first to be constituted in the Ramanathapuram District in 1885. But the municipality was abolished in 1886. The town then continued to be a Union. Its Municipality status was restored on 1 October 1894. The privilege of electing the Vice-Chairman was granted to the Council in 1904. The town has 26 wards now, each one represented by a councillor. The Municipality is maintaining a tourist bungalow. The Council maintains 4 junior and 4 senior basic schools. This town gets protected water supply. This Municipality by collecting taxes cent per cent won rolling shield during the years 1963-64, 1968-69 and 1969-70.

Virudhunagar Municipality

The Virudhunagar Municipality was constituted on 1 October 1915 and raised to the status of a Grade I Municipality in 1956. The town is divided into 29 electoral wards. The Council maintains a tourist bungalow adjoining the trunk road, which passes through the town. There are six suites of rooms. The Municipality maintains a well-equipped choultry near the Railway Station. There are ten rooms in the choultry. There is also a poor man's choultry within its compound mainly intended for the pilgrims from the north India. The Municipality also maintains an orphan Home and runs two high schools. It also maintains a Siddha dispensary. There are five Municipal Maternity Centres located in different parts of the town. The town has protected water supply from Arjuna River.

Sivakasi Municipality

This town was declared a Municipality with effect from October 1st 1920. The town is divided into 22 wards. The Municipality maintains three elementary schools and one high school, one tourist bungalow and one rest house. Protected water supply is sourced from the Vaippar River and stored in a reservoir. From there water is carried through pumping stations at Vembakottai and distributed to the public. In addition to property and other taxes, the town derives income from markets, bus stand, slaughterhouses and avenue trees.

Rajapalayam Municipality

Rajapalayam attained the status of a Municipality on 1 October 1940. The town has 29 wards. The Municipality maintains one higher elementary school and two elementary schools. Out of the three schools that are maintained by the Municipality one is housed in a building owned by the Municipality. The Municipality maintains 5 Maternity Centres and a Maternity Home with 6 beds. There is also a

Siddha Dispensary run by the Municipality. Until early nineteen sixties, there was no protected water supply system in the town and the needs of the inhabitants were met with by the 42 wells that were dug in the town.

Aruppukottai Municipality

Aruppukottai became a Municipality on 1 April 1948. The Municipality was upgraded from Grade III to Grade II in February 1953. It also maintains a tourist bungalow, six elementary schools. One school among these six is a higher elementary school. A high school was started only in 1958. The Municipality maintains a Siddha Vaidhya Dispensary.

Sattur Municipality

Sattur municipality with 15 electoral wards was constituted with effect from 17 January 1970. The Municipality has no school of its own. There are 4 higher elementary schools and 5 primary schools under the management of private agencies. There are two choultries, Nenmeni Chatram and L.F Chatram, under the control of this Municipality,. The town is getting protected water supply thanks to Vaippar River.

Village Panchayats

The origin of the panchayat system is traced back to the Regulation No.25 of 1802 Act. In 1816, the village headman was declared the village munsif and thus a new office was created at the village level. In 1920, the Government of India agreeing with the Decentralization Commission advised the State Governments to increase the scope of functions of the panchayats. In 1930, the Madras Local Boards Act was amended bringing within its scope the panchayats constituted under the Village Panchayats Act thus placing the panchayats on a same footing with the Unions.

During 1930-1940, there were 26 major panchayats and 168 minor panchayats. The functions of the panchayats were the maintenance of village roads, culverts and bridges, the lighting of streets and public places, construction of drains, cleaning of streets, removal of garbage, provision of public latrines, maintenance of burial and burning grounds, maintenance of wells, ponds and tanks, control of threshing floors and other *poramboke* lands, enforcement of vaccination and the registration of births and deaths. In 1948, there were 27 major panchayat boards in Ramanathanapuram District. Now there are 450 village panchayats in Virudhunagar district.

Conclusion

Though a system of village government has been in place for ages, neither the Hindu emperors nor the succeeding Muslim rulers evolved a local administration such as that which grew up in Europe. The British with a view to reducing the burden of the colonial state gradually transformed the powers to the people's representatives as the demand for Indian participation in the governance of the country became more pronounced since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Madras government was constrained to pass legislation granting more authority to local bodies in view of the mounting pressure from Nationalists. Despite autonomy, financial resources and the taxation power of local institutions, the representation in the local bodies remained the preserve of the privileged as the right to vote and contest in electoral politics was restricted to property holders with social status. Only in the post-independent India, with the introduction of adult franchise the local governance became truly democratic. The Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution (Article 40), provided scope for organizing effective village panchayats. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 made it a reality.

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