History of Local Self Government in Ancient India and Under the British Rule.

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Abstract: There is sufficient evidence to establish the institution of local self-government is almost prehistoric, and the conception is indigenous to the Indian soil. It has originated since the Vedic Period. Municipal governments have flourished in India since time immemorial. While kings rose and fell, Village Panchayats which formed an essential part of the local as well as the national life, helped to preserve democratic traditions in social, economic, political and cultural life. We get numerous references about local self-government Manuscript, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Kautillya’s Arthashastra.Sabha and Samiti in the ancient Hindu period and Village panchayats in the Mughal periods, flourished as an autonomous bodies like panchayats.But during the British rule, the autonomy of village panchayats gradually declined with the establishment of local civil and criminal courts; revenue system and police organizations, increase of communications, and the spread of western education and culture etc.

Keywords: Origin, numerous references, expansion, declined and conclusion.

Introduction: The local self-government is the best school of local and national democracy. The local government of the village or the municipality intimately touches the lives of the people. It creates in small areas among the citizens or real sense of their corporate interest in public affairs. Local self-government is a perfect institution, where people participate directly in local function. Participation in government functions people demands him as an integral part of society.1 Local bodies are institutions of the local self-governance, which look after the administrative of an area or small community such as village, towns, or cities. The idea of local self-government is nothing new to the people of India. Since the ancient period the system has been applied anyhow in different parts of India. Since the Vedic age various effective forms of self-governments are found. It was introduced mainly for permanent settlement and nourishment of self-supported village administration.2 These ancient institutions compared to the self-governing institutions that existed in the British period and even in some respects compared to the institutions now obtaining in India were more widespread, more real and successful.

Origin and Proofs of Local Self-Government:--

We get numerous references about local self-government in MANUSMRITI, RAMAYANA, MAHABHARATA and KAUTILLYA’S ARTHASAstra which testify village has been a basic unit of administration. On the basis of historical records, excavation and archaeological investigations, it is believed that some of local self-government did exist in the remote past. Sabha and Samiti in the ancient Hindu period and the village panchayats in the Mughal periods, all flourished and worked as autonomous bodies as they did almost all the functions of modern local bodies like Panchayats, District Boards and the Corporations.3 Ancient Self-Supported Local Self-Government:--- The absence of well communication system, the local self government performed isolatable but self-supported in the past. They held a lot of powers. During the period the interference of the state was minimum, through the participation of all rural people then the village institutions performed their activities.Inspite of existence of casteism, ‘COMMUNITY’ was intact and real. People realized that they had some duties and liability to the society. Welfare institutions are conducted either by individual effort or any trust. Some of them were –School, Pond, Charitable Clinic, Temple, Religious Institutions etc.Ancient institutions were always maintained with self-effort without any government aid. It cannot ignore that the valuable recorded scripts of historically famous writers- Manu, Kautillya and Shukracharya, Some important proves of books of historical importance, Ruins or Relics, Embassadors sent specially for spying, Preserved accounts and Results of famous Scholars. The clear hints from all those proofs that organized local self-government prevailed in the past. We shall find out a short history of existing institutions of Indian history in different periods. From that information it will be realized whether there was any existence of self-government system in the past. The Vedas and Historical essays presents with clear information in the past, Indian people were organized in village community, where all inhabitants assembled together in village conference and performed all administrative activities.

According to Dr.R.C.Majumder, “the Rajan [King] though Lord of the people did not govern without their consent. The business of the tribe was carried out in a popular assembly styled ‘Samiti’ [Assembly] at which Princes and people were alike present. We have also reference to another body termed sabha which some regard as a ‘Council of
Elders’. Others think, it was a ‘Village Assembly’ or the place of meeting which also served as a centre for social gatherings. The Sabha gave decisions regarding matters of public moment and in latter literature, figures prominently in connection with the administration of justice’.

It can be cited that, the existence of the ‘Village Assembly’ and ‘Elders’ Council’ is found in Maurya and Gupta periods. From the 4th century village councils started to perform their activities as permanent institution in Bihar, Middle India of Rajputana, since the Maurya period in Karnataka. It is surprising that when the strong empire had been organizing since Maurya period and the tendency was for stronger central government those village institutions especially rural equal justice were more or less free from interference. Now one by one we shall mention the record of existence of local self-government system in different period.

Expansion of Local Self-Government in Ancient Period:

The Vedic Period: -- Since the Vedic period, local village people participated in the collective decision making and Sabhas [gatherings] were the popular platforms through which the people had a direct say and control over the local affairs. The village was always a more or less self-dependent unit and generated its own resources, functionaries and functional domain. Village and state functions were supplementary and rarely conflicted; the state performed only those functions which the village could not perform itself. This naturally evolved system persisted in the Maurya and the Gupta period. In the time of the Rig-Veda [1700 BC] evidences suggest that self-governing village bodies called ‘Sabhas’ existed with the passage of time, these bodies became Panchayats[Council of five persons]. Panchayats were functional institution of grassroots governance in almost every village. The village panchayat or elected council had large powers, both executive and judicial. Local Self-government has originated since the Vedic Period, when the village assembly known as Samiti and Sabha and the Gramani, the village headman existed. These assemblies represented the King’s authority in civil and military administration and collected dues on behalf of the King. These assemblies acted as effective checks on the power of the King and also as the mouth piece of the people. The local bodies comprised of Gramyavadin or Village Judge, Dasagrami, Vimasapati, Satgrami etc. They represented officials at the head of ten, twenty or a hundred villages respectively. Gradually there was the prominence of Nagaradhyaksha or city perfects that dealt with the affairs of urban life and enforced respect for law and order in the minds of the people. There were village republics in the Vedic age and Sabha and Samiti were not only elected bodies but also representative with full voting rights to women. These institutions could probe into the conduct of Kings, the misdeeds of the ministers, and the abuse of power by the powerful. An ancient Indian republic was a state where the strong were just and weak secure. The Vedic King was the protector of the people i.e., Janaya along with that the self-governing institutions of ancient India ran parallel in the villages. They were the backbone of the true Indian democracy.

The Mauryan Era: — Local self-government system existed in the Mauryan period; every village during Chandragupta’s tenure was completely independent. Every village had ‘Sabha’ or ‘Samiti’ i.e., village assembly consisted of family representatives, Elders and experienced persons gathered there. A renowned experienced person as the village head called ‘Gramik’, though a government official, Gramiks appointment depends on the village people. During Pratihar reign the village head, usually called as ‘Gramapati’, ruled the village with the help of village council of which Elders were the member. There were many sub-committees of the village council for various rural activities. Even in the Chalukya period the smallest unit of administration was village, where village assembly or village panchayat was head. This period there were Gamas or villages, Nigamas or small towns and bhojka. This proves that considerable autonomy was enjoyed by the local institution. Municipal government as a form of local governments has been administering in India since the time of the Mauryan period.

Shukracharya Nitisara and Self-Government System: -- There is an old book of the 10th century; this is the Nitisara, the science of polity, by Shukracharya. It deals with the organization of the central government as well as of town and village life; of the king’s council of state and various departments of government. The village panchayat or elected council has large powers, both executive and judicial, and its members were treated with the greatest respect by the king’s officers. Land was distributed by this panchayat, which also collected taxes out of the produce and paid government’s share on behalf of the village. A member of these village councils there was a larger panchayat or council to supervise and interfere if necessary. Some old inscriptions further tell us how the members of the village council were elected and various committees were forms, elected annually and women could serve on them. In case of misbehavior, a member could be removed and a member could be disqualified if he failed to render accounts of public funds. An interesting rule to prevent nepotism is mentioned; near relatives of members were not to be appointed to public office.

These village councils were very jealous of their liberties and it was laid down that no soldier could enter the village unless he had a royal permit. If the people complained of an official, the Nitisara says that the king ‘should take the side, not of his officers, but of his subjects’. If many complained
then the official was to be dismissed, ‘for who does not get intoxicated by drinking of the vanity of office’. The king was to act in accordance with the opinion of the majority of the people. Public opinion is more powerful than the king as the rope made of many fibres is strong enough to drag a lion. In making official appointments work, character and merit are to be regarded neither caste nor family, and neither through colour nor through ancestors can the spirit worthy of a Brahmin be generated. In the larger towns there were many artisans and merchants, and craft guilds, mercantile associations, and banking corporations were formed. Each of these controlled its own domestic affairs. All this information is very fragmentary but it does appear from this and many other sources that there was a widespread system of self-governments in towns and villages and the central government seldom interfered, so long as its quota of taxes was paid. Customary law was strong and the political or military power seldom interfered with rights based on custom. Originally the agrarian system was based on a co-operative or collective village. Individuals and families had certain rights as well as certain obligations, both of which were determined and protected by customary law. The Chola Dynasty:— The Chola government during the imperial period [850-1200 AD] was marked for its uniqueness and innovativeness. Chola was the 1st dynasty who brought the entire South India under a common rule and to a great extent succeeded in their efforts. Although the form and protocols of that government cannot be compared to a contemporary form of government, the history of the Chola Empire belongs to a happy age in their history and great things were achieved by the government and the people. There was a higher developed committee [Vasiyaams] to supervise the local administrative activities. Justice was conducted by the Royal Courts along with rural court and caste panchayat. Every village was a self-governing unit. A number of such villages constituted a larger entity known as a kurram or nadu or kottam in different parts of the country. Taniyur was a large village big enough to be a kurram by itself. A number of kurrams constituted a valanadu. Several valanadus made up one mandalam, a province. At the height of the Chola Empire there were 8th or 9th of these provinces including Sri Lanka. This structure underwent constant change and refinement throughout the chola period. Village assemblies exercised large power in deciding local disputes. Small committees called Nyayattar heard matters that did not come under the jurisdiction of the voluntary village committees. The punishments in most cases were in the form of donations to the temples. The convicted person would remit their fines at a place called Dharmaasaana. There is little information available on the judicial procedures or court records. Justice was a local matter in the Chola Empire; minor disputes were settled at the village level. Punishment for minor crimes was in the form of fines or a direction for the offender to donate to some charitable endowment. Even crimes such as manslaughter or murder were punished with fines. Crimes of the state, such as treason, were heard and decided by the king himself, the typical punishment in these cases were either execution or confiscation of property. There was no distinction between civil and criminal offences. Sometimes civil disputes were allowed to drag on until time offered the solution. Crimes such as the theft, adultery and forgery were considered serious offences. In most cases the punishment was in the order of the offender having to maintain a perpetual lamp at a temple. Capital punishment was uncommon even in the cases of 1st degree murder. Only one solitary instance of capital punishment is found in all the records available so far. The Mughal Era: — The era of Mughals was having despotism to great extent and the will of king (sultan) was the law; as a result local self-governing institutions were become deprived. Their roles were confined towards managing their own local affairs. With the arrival of Muslims after conquering Sindh and Multan in 712 A.D., the situation of village assemblies became pathetic and their independence began to decrease. The Mughal emperors were keenly interested in revenue collection by various ways and they have encouraged Indian as well as foreign investors for establishment and span of their business.

Western Writers Description: — some of the western writers have praised such institutions. Lord Metcalf has described such institutions as ‘little republics’. Those rural institutions could maintain their existence even during the foreign invasion. Their effort activities continued up to the end of the Mughal era. Elphinstone’s Report: — Elphinstone’s Report contains a vivid picture of rural administration of the 18th century of the South India. The Report says—in whatever point of view we examine the native government in the Deccan, the 1st and most important feature is the division into villages or townships. These communities contain in miniature all the materials of state within themselves and are almost sufficient to protect their members; if all other governments are withdrawn. From this Report we get some descriptions of ‘rural system ’of the Pre-British period. A definite part of the village land was earmarked for the use of the villagers. The plots of land were demarcated as the deference of their quality and they were cultivated under the rural administration. Traders and Artisans lived in village to supply necessary goods. ‘Patil’, the village head, was also the head of police, justice and rural administration. As the village head ‘Patil’ distributed land among all rural farmers. He fixed up land revenue and collected on behalf of the
government. He supervised the prosperity and the development of cultivation of the village.

**The Maratha Age:** --- As per the study of Cambridge History, the rural self-government existed in the Maratha Age. In this era, the panchayat was very popular in spite of its primitive nature. Any decision taken in the absence of the panchayat was reconsidered and the peasants’ class got justice from the gram panchayat.15

Local Self-Government under the British Rule: -- The institutions of urban local self-government originated and developed in India during the British rule. In 1687, the 1st municipal corporation in India was set up at Madras by a charter. The corporation’s mayor possessed minimal powers of levying and collecting taxes on buildings etc.16 The charter Act 1793 was the 1st legislative enactment for regulating municipal administration in presidency towns - Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The Bengal Act 1842 was the 1st attempt to formulate municipal government in Bengal & outside the presidency town.17 Viceroy Lord Mayo’s government passed a Resolution in 1870 on financial decentralization and the development of local self-government institutions with the objective of involving Indians in administration as well as strengthening municipalities. Lord Ripon, in his famous Resolution, on May 18, 1882 has been hailed as the ‘Magna Carta’ of local self-government in India.18 He applied it not only in big cities and town but also in rural areas. The Ripon resolution focused on towns, provided for local bodies consisting of a large majority of elected non-official members and presided over by a non-official chairperson. This resolution met with resistance from colonial administrators, the progress of local self-government was half-hearted steps and rural decentralization remained a neglected, there was no link between government & villages. To overcome this problem, in 1907, a Royal Commission under the chairmanship of Sir Charles Hobhouse was appointed to survey & report in 1909, on the progress of local self-government. To remove these anomalies the commission emphasized on formulation of a genuine electorate comprises of village body.

Under the Indian Councils Act 1919, the Dyarchical scheme of government was set up; local self-government was transferred into the hands of Indian Ministers who were responsible for the Provincial legislature. The provincial autonomy under the Government of India Act, 1935, marked the evolution of self-government in India. Popularly elected governments in provinces enacted legislations to further democratize institutions of local self-government. But the system of responsible government at the grassroots level was least responsible.19 India got freedom on 15th August 1947 and at time India was having only three municipal corporations at Madras, Calcutta & Bombay with plenty of municipalities, town area committees, cantonment boards for cities & district boards for rural areas.

Inspire of various committees such as the Royal commission on Decentralization (1907), the Government of India Resolution (1919), etc, a hierarchical administrative structure based on supervision & control evolved. The administrator became the focal point of rural government. The British were not concerned with decentralized democracy but were aiming for colonial objectives.

The self-government institutions began to abolish gradually with the British Empire expansion its root in India. These village bodies got a setback under the Muslim rule and almost disappeared in their old form under the British, confining their authority only to the social life of the village community. The inclusion of territory and over centralization of administration during the early British period brought about total extinction of traditional institutions of local self-government in India. During the British rule, the autonomy of panchayats gradually declined with the establishment of local civil and criminal courts, revenue and police organizations, the increase in communications, the growth of individualism and the operation of the individual Ryotwari [land holder-wise] system as against the village tenure system.20

**The Causes of Decline of the Rural Republics:** -- The revenue system by the British raj was destroyed of the ancient rural republics. Suitable industry could not grow in the 18th century for which the naked colonial system was responsible. Rural and cottage industry got neglected and the cultivation was also gradually degrading. Thus the self-dependent rural economy was being ruined. Rural people were becoming dependent gradually on government administrative system and rural life was very unhappy and bitter. Its influence was mostly found in Bengal. The majority of the ‘Rural Elite’ class migrated to the town for getting service, leaving native village. It was a terrible blow to the rural people. The rural health and hygienic system was also neglected. The landlord lived in the urban area. They were eager to get annual booty and their rural wealth went to the town and nothing was left for the rural development. As a result, the population gathered in these cities unusually. Because of the flow of population from the villages to the cities, the villages became deserted. For these various reasons the ancient rural system was mainly destroyed.

**Conclusion:** --- Village administration was a significant part of the Ancient Indian political system. It has been playing a prominent role in implementing development programs since ancient times. It develops plans and programs based on local needs and resources and implements on social and political respects at the village level. The importance of local self-government has been
emphasized by administrators and political thinkers of all ages. Local self-government is the management of local affairs by local bodies, elected by the local people. The local self-government originated in Ancient & references are found in the age of Mahabharata. These local self-governments perform administrative & judicial function. This village system used to serve since ancient times & at present it has become an integral part of Indian Administration. Local self-government, in its present structure and style of functioning; it owes existence to the British rule in India. Ancient Indian village system underwent a change with the coming of the British. The British took over the whole administration into their own hands. The establishment of East India Company made India a colony. The British Raj prevailed in the India subcontinent, the local self-governing bodies were taken over & panchayat Raj begun.

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