



Empowering the Margins: A History of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu

Dr.G. Sathiyadevi

M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., DCS., Ph.D.,

Associate Professor And Head, Department Of History,

M.R. Govt. Arts College, Mannargudi, (Affiliated To Bharathidasan University)

Tiruvarur District, Tamil Nadu.

E-MAIL: sathiyadevi72@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Panchayati Raj system in Tamil Nadu has a long and dynamic history, rooted in ancient governance traditions and evolving through colonial and post-independence reforms. This paper explores the trajectory of local self-governance in Tamil Nadu, from its origins in ancient village assemblies to the contemporary decentralized framework established by constitutional amendments. It analyzes the structural and functional changes in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) over time, the impact of legislative reforms, and the challenges faced in achieving effective local governance. The study also highlights the socio-political and economic implications of these changes and suggests pathways for enhancing the effectiveness of PRIs in Tamil Nadu.

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Introduction

The concept of Panchayati Raj, a system of local self-governance, is deeply ingrained in the socio-political fabric of India. In Tamil Nadu, this tradition can be traced back to ancient times, where village assemblies (Sabhas and Samitis) played a pivotal role in community administration. Over the centuries, these local bodies evolved, influenced by the socio-political and economic contexts of different eras. The formal establishment of the Panchayati Raj system in its current form was shaped by the



recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) and later the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), which sought to create a three-tier governance structure for rural areas. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive historical overview of the Panchayati Raj system in Tamil Nadu, focusing on its evolution, reforms, challenges, and future prospects.

Historical Evolution of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu

Ancient Period: Village Assemblies as Local Governance Units

The origins of the Panchayati Raj system in Tamil Nadu can be traced back to the Chola period (9th-13th century CE). The Chola kings are credited with establishing well-organized local self-government systems, particularly the Sabhas (village assemblies) and Ur (assemblies in non-Brahmin villages). These assemblies had significant autonomy and were responsible for local administration, including management of resources, dispute resolution, and implementation of welfare activities. Inscriptions from the Chola era provide evidence of the intricate election processes for village assemblies, showcasing the democratic nature of local governance.

Key features of the ancient system include:

Kudavolai System: A unique method of electing members for the village assembly using palm leaf ballots.

Autonomy in Decision-Making: The assemblies had control over local resources and could implement decisions without interference from the central rulers.

Participation of Villagers: Adult males in the village actively participated in meetings, ensuring community involvement in decision-making.

Medieval and Colonial Periods: Changes in Local Governance

During the medieval period, the autonomy of village assemblies declined due to increasing centralization of power by various dynasties. By the time of British colonial rule, the traditional system of self-governance had weakened significantly. The British administration introduced new revenue and administrative systems, replacing the local governance structures with a more centralized approach.



Notable changes during this period include:

Introduction of Local Boards (1884): The Madras Local Boards Act of 1884 was one of the first attempts to introduce formal local self-governance structures, albeit with limited powers.

Formation of District Boards: The British established District Boards to oversee local administration, focusing primarily on revenue collection and infrastructure development.

Limited Local Participation: The colonial system restricted local participation, with members of local boards often appointed rather than elected, reducing the democratic nature of governance.

Post-Independence Era: Towards Decentralized Governance

Following India's independence in 1947, the emphasis shifted towards re-establishing local self-governance. The early efforts included the Community Development Program (1952) and the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), which highlighted the need for a three-tier Panchayati Raj system.

Introduction of the Three-Tier System: The Panchayati Raj system was structured into three levels: Gram Panchayat (village level), Panchayat Union (block level), and District Panchayat (district level).

Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1958: This act was a significant step in formalizing the Panchayati Raj institutions in the state, providing a framework for their functioning and empowering them with certain administrative responsibilities.

Reforms of the 1990s: Impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment

The most transformative change in the Panchayati Raj system occurred with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), which provided a constitutional status to PRIs across India. Tamil Nadu, in compliance with this amendment, enacted the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994.

Key features of the 1994 Act include:

Three-Tier Structure: The act reinforced the three-tier structure with clear roles and responsibilities for each level of governance.

Regular Elections: The act mandated regular elections every five years, ensuring the democratic functioning of PRIs.



Reservation for Women and Marginalized Groups: Provisions were made for the reservation of seats for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, promoting inclusive participation.

Empowerment of Gram Sabha: The act recognized the importance of the Gram Sabha, enhancing its role in decision-making and accountability.

Contemporary Issues and Challenges

Despite the constitutional backing and legislative reforms, the Panchayati Raj system in Tamil Nadu faces several challenges:

Lack of Financial Autonomy: PRIs often rely heavily on state government funds, limiting their capacity to implement local development projects effectively.

Political Interference: Local governance bodies are sometimes influenced by state-level politics, undermining their independence.

Inadequate Capacity Building: Elected representatives often lack the necessary training and resources to fulfill their roles effectively.

Limited Public Participation: Although the Gram Sabha is a key element of the Panchayati Raj system, attendance and active participation in meetings remain low.

Conclusion

The evolution of the Panchayati Raj system in Tamil Nadu reflects a journey towards greater decentralization and local empowerment. From ancient village assemblies to the modern three-tier structure, the system has undergone significant changes, shaped by historical, political, and social factors. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment was a milestone in strengthening local self-governance, but the effectiveness of PRIs in Tamil Nadu still depends on overcoming challenges related to financial autonomy, capacity building, and public participation. Going forward, policy reforms aimed at enhancing the autonomy and capabilities of PRIs, combined with efforts to increase community engagement, are crucial for realizing the full potential of local self-governance in Tamil Nadu.



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