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**UR, THE NON BRAHMIN ADMINISTRATIVE BODY, THE LOWEST UNIT OF THE LOCAL ADMINISTRATION OF THE TAMILS GLEANED BY TEMPLE INCERPTIONS****Mr. V. Paramasivam**

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**Abstract**

Temples were the pivots of all human activities in ancient and middle ages. The temples occupied a very important place in the social, economic, religious and cultural and administrative life of the people. The monarchs of Tamil Country the Pallavas, the Pandyas, the Cholas, the Vijayanagar rulers, the chieftains and so on followed the art of erecting structural temples from seventh and eighth century onwards. Apart from the members of the royal families, queens, administrative officials, with administrative body, the lowest unit of the local administration. The local village people, the urar also played a prominent role in temple constructions, renovations, enlargement, patronisation and administration. This paper portrays ur assembly, the non-Brahmin common men administrative body or ur assembly, its responsibility, powers and functions in a detailed manner.

**Keywords:** *Mandalas, vala nadus, kottams, gramas, ur, nagaram, ur sabha, Pujas, vagisan, kuli, urar, ur kanakku, Mahasabha, Ur Nattar, madappalli and chaturvedimangalam.*

The Cholas were a dynasty that ruled over a significant part of South India from the 9th to the 13th centuries. Their administration was highly organized and efficient, and they had a well-defined system of local administration. In local level, the Chola Empire

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was divided into several administrative units known as Nadus. The Nadus were the smallest administrative divisions and comprised several villages. The village was the basic unit of administration in the Chola Empire. Each village had its own administrative body known as the Ur Sabha. The Ur was responsible for maintaining law and order, collecting taxes, and resolving local disputes. The members of the Ur were elected by the villagers and were responsible for the overall welfare of the community. The head of the Ur was called the Ur Nattar or Urar, who acted as the village chief. The Urar was assisted by a council of elders known as Perungudi, which consisted of respected individuals from the village. The council played a crucial role in decision-making and resolving disputes.

In this connection the gifts were offered to all temples from all the irrespective of local village mass. Gift of villages, gift of gold, gift of lands, ornaments, money and livestock were common endowments of the village people. In addition to the rulers, the chieftains, the administrative officials, the merchants, the trade guides, and common men particularly the village people through village assembly made local administration and protected the liberal contributions to the temples.

The lands donated to the temples were either exempted from tax or made tax free. In short, as a nucleus, they gathered round themselves all that was best in the arts of civilised existence, and regulated them with humanness borne of the spirit of Dharma. Through proper administration. Temples also proved to be the centre of all administration, its activities namely landlord, employer, consumer of goods, bank, educational centre, feeding centre, museum, hospital and public gathering.

For the administrative convenience, the extensive Cholas empire was divided into several *mandalas* or provinces, *vala nadus* or districts, *kottams* or taluks and finally *gramas* or villages. The same system of provincial administration was also followed by the Pandyas.<sup>1</sup> the provincial administration underwent a change under the Vijayanagara rulers. During the Vijayanagar period all these subdivisions disappeared and only the *mandalams alone existed*. The chief of these divisions were referred to as Mahamandaleswarar.<sup>2</sup> by them.

The village assemblies were the lowest unit of administration. The village assemblies during the medieval period played a significant role in the administration of temples. The Cholas divided their kingdom into *vala nadus*, *nadus*, and *urs* for administrative convenience. Of them, the *ur* village, assembly the lowest unit of administration.

Local administration was carried out by local bodies variously called namely the village assembly, the *ur sabha*, the *nadu* and the *nagaram*. While the first three were agrarian units,<sup>3</sup> the latter was a merchant guild. Local bodies met in a common place, mostly in the *mandapas* of temples.<sup>4</sup> As the temples were the sanctified preserves,<sup>5</sup> meetings were preferred to be held in the *mandapas of the* local temples. Several records refer to the effective functioning of such assemblies in cooperation with one another record dated in the fifteenth regnal year of parantaka I Chola states that the *ur* and the *sabha* of Thiruvamattur were asked to administration the gifts of this temple.

For illustration an inscription<sup>5</sup> of Rajendra I Chola issued in his 23<sup>rd</sup> regnal year refers a gift of one veli of land for food offerings and provision for garlands to the primal deity by *ur Sabha* of Kattupakkam in Ananu nadu of Panaiyur nadu to Narayanan Rajaraja of Vanjivur in Puliur nadu of Arulmolideva Valanadu in CholaMandalam for conducting daily *Pujas*. Another inscription<sup>6</sup> of Kulothunga I Chola issued in his 32<sup>nd</sup> regnal year found on a pillar in the Arthamandapa in front of the central shrine Thiruvadigai veerattaneswarar temple registers a gift of a 96 sheep for two perpetual lamp to be burnt the perpetual lamp to the primal deity of this temple. This inscription also refers that the Tiruvannaligai *ur* sabha under took to burn the light.

The donor was a merchant of the Gangaikonda Chola puram Perunderu in Mudikonda Chola puram. Another inscription<sup>7</sup> of Kulothunga I Chola issued in his 44<sup>th</sup> regnal year found on the west wall of the Madappalli Thiruvadigai veerattaneswarar temple registers a gift of 96 sheep for a lighting a perpetual lamp for the main deity Udaiyar **Tiruvirattanam** Udaiyar of Adiraja Mangalya Puram of Anmur Nadu in Tirumunippadi of Gangaikonda Chola Vala nadu by one Pichchan Tiruvekadudaiyan of Kalathtur, the Kalathtur Kottam of Jayankonda chola Mandalam. The gift was entrusted to Tiruvannaligai ur Sabha for the maintenance of the regular lightening of the perpetual lamp.

Another inscription<sup>8</sup> of Kulothunga I Chola issued in his 44<sup>th</sup> regnal year found on the southwall of the first prakara of the Thiruvadigai temple registers a gift of 200 **kuli** of land for establishment of Madapuram for the **vagisan** mutt attached to the temple. The gift of land was endowed by the ur Sabha of Kanichchapakkam of Kilammur Nadu in Tirumunaipadi of Gangaikonda Chola Mandalam. In addition to that the Ur sabha of Panaippakkam also donated half **veli** of land to the same mutt of this temple. The ur sabha of Panaippakkam is none other than the present Patam Pakkam. Thus the ur sabhas also made liberal endowments to development of the Temple administration. Another inscription<sup>9</sup> of Kulothunga I Chola issued in his 48<sup>th</sup> regnal year dated to his unknown regnal year found on the west wall of the madappalli of this temple registers a gift of 96 cows for lighting a perpetual lamp. This livestock endowment was given by one Kerla Raja alias Kiliyur Udaiyar Velananga of Arur Kurram of Nittavinodha Vala nadu. The gift was entrusted to the Tirulnaligai Ur Sabha of this temple.

Another inscription<sup>10</sup> of Vikrama Chola issued in his 4<sup>th</sup> regnal year found on the third pillar of the mandapa in front of the Saranarayana Perumal temple registers a gift of 750 **kuli** land as tax free for conducting Ardhajama **Pujas** to Govinda Vinnagar temple at Adhiraja Mangalya Puram in perpetuity. The record also refers sale of a piece of land by the Perunkuri ur Sabha of the Brahmadiyam of Chiruputtur to meet out the shortage of Sabha Viniyogam. It reveals that the Ur sabha manage the shortage of sabha vinoyogam the duty. For illusion a inscription<sup>11</sup> of Vikrama Chola issued in his 6<sup>th</sup> regnal year found on another pillar of the **Mandapa** in front of the Saranarayana Perumal temple registers a gift of 750 **kuli** land for conducting Ardhajama **Pujas** for Govinda Vinnagar at Adhiraja Mangalya Puram in Kilammur nadu. The record also refers decision of **Mahasabha** of Akkalanenomati **chaturvedimangalam**, which sold a land to meet out the shortage of taxes to the paid to the temple. Another inscription<sup>12</sup> of Vikrama Chola issued in his 7<sup>th</sup> regnal year found on a pillar of the Mandapa in front of the Saranayayana Perumal temple registers a gift of a land to meet this spiritual offering on a permanent basis. The record also refers to the convening of the **Mahasabha** of Ranadhira **Chaturvedimangalam** in the Nyayaparipalana Vinnagar Alar temple for taking a decision to sell a portion of the land to meet the shortage of the taxes of the previous year. The record also refers the purchase of a land by a merchant community of Adhiraja Mangalya Puram.

The co-operative endeavors of *ur assembly* and temple servants in temple affairs is mentioned in a record<sup>12</sup> of Parantaka I Chola. Therefore, it becomes obvious that all the local

bodies namely *ur* assembly, *Mahasabha*, Brahmadeya *sabha* and the servants of the temples cooperated in common matters. This shows their collective responsibility and cooperative endurance of the temple servants.

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,<sup>13</sup> 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.

The term *ur* literally means a non-Brahmin village or town. During the medieval period, the assembly of the non-Brahmin village was also known as *ur*. Here, the expression *ur* refers to the assembly of a non-Brahmin village. In those days, each non-brahmin village had an assembly of its own. In origin of *ur* was anterior to the *sabha*.<sup>14</sup> It is said that *ur* was the simplest type of non-Brahmin assemblies<sup>15</sup> which was the lowest and basic unit of local administration. Its members were known as *urar*. Generally, meetings of the *ur Sabha* were held in the *mandapas* of the temples.<sup>16</sup> It is known that all the people of the Ur, the non-Brahmin village or town including agriculturists and professionals were its members.' Perhaps, all the residents of the locality used to attend the meetings of the *ur*.<sup>17</sup> As a local administrative body, the *ur* paid much attention to the welfare of the temples of the area. The deliberations of the *ur* related to temple affairs are well attested to by their records. The *ur* accountant, the *ur kanakku* helped the assembly in carrying out the orders of the *urar*. The deeds of the various transactions were registered by the *ur* accountant.<sup>18</sup>

The *ur Sabha*, on behalf of the temples, sometimes received the various gifts donated to the temples undertook to protect them and conducted the rituals without fails. The evidence is provided by an inscription<sup>19</sup> of Parantaka I Chola dated in his fifteenth regnal year. It records the gift of 96 sheep for a perpetual lamp to God Mahadevar. The *urar* received the sheep and agreed to arrange for supplying the stipulated quantity of ghee for the highlighting perpetual lamp. Another inscription<sup>20</sup> of Parantaka I Chola states that one Adan Kannan had endowed 10 *kalanju of gold* for lighting a perpetual lamp to the temple of Mahadevar in Thiruvamattur. This endowment was to be protected by the *urar* or the members of *Ur sabha* of Thiruvamattur and Kattimappattinattar. From this it is inferred that, in most cases, such lavish endowments were left under the care of ur a village assembly or ur Sabha and in rare instances, two or more urs (villages) jointly undertook to look after these gifts. It shows their collective endeavors and responsibility.

They were responsible to the members of the Ur Sabha 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.

Local assemblies were responsible for the administration of their respective areas. They had the power to collect taxes, maintain law and order, and settle disputes among the local population. They played a crucial role in ensuring the smooth functioning of the local administration. Local assemblies served as judicial bodies at the local level. They had the authority to hear and decide civil and criminal cases within their jurisdiction. The assembly members, known as Sabhapatis or Sabha judges, acted as judges and provided justice based on the prevailing legal principles. Local assemblies were involved in revenue collection. They levied and collected taxes from the local population, including land taxes, commercial taxes, and tolls. The revenue generated was used for local infrastructure development, maintenance of public facilities, and administration.

Local assemblies had the power to grant lands to individuals or institutions. These land grants were often made to temples, religious institutions, or Brahmins as a form of patronage. The assemblies ensured proper utilization and management of the granted lands. Local assemblies played a crucial role in promoting public welfare. They undertook various measures to improve the quality of life in their areas, such as constructing irrigation tanks, maintaining roads, building community halls, and organizing festivals and cultural events. Local assemblies had the authority to regulate trade and commerce activities within their jurisdiction. They ensured fair practices, resolved trade disputes, and monitored the functioning of local markets and trading activities.

Local assemblies provided a platform for public participation in decision-making and policy formulation. The assembly members represented the interests of the local community and voiced their concerns. Important local issues were discussed, and decisions were made collectively. Local assemblies were actively involved in promoting social welfare and charitable activities. They allocated resources and funds for the welfare of the disadvantaged sections of society, including providing aid to the poor, supporting educational institutions, and assisting in healthcare facilities. Local assemblies were responsible for maintaining public order and safety. They appointed and supervised local law enforcement officials, such as village watchmen and guards, to ensure the security of the community. They also dealt with matters related to public safety, such as prevention and management of emergencies and disasters.

Local assemblies undertook the development and maintenance of public infrastructure. They constructed and repaired public buildings, such as temples, schools, granaries, and community centers. They also focused on the construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, and water management systems, including tanks and canals. The local assemblies served as platforms for the representation of local interests and concerns to the higher authorities. They acted as intermediaries between the local population and the central Chola administration, conveying grievances, suggestions, and requests. Local assemblies actively supported and patronized art, culture, and education. They encouraged the establishment of educational institutions, such as schools and centers of learning. They also sponsored and organized cultural events, including

music, dance, and drama performances, which helped preserve and promote the rich cultural heritage of the region.

Local assemblies maintained records and documentation related to governance, land transactions, legal proceedings, and other administrative matters. These records were essential for record-keeping, reference, and future administrative purposes. Local assemblies were involved in the election of their own members and leaders. The selection process varied, but it often involved a combination of hereditary succession, nomination by previous assembly members, or popular voting. The elected members formed the governing body of the local assembly and collectively made decisions on various matters.

The concluding part states that overall, the local assemblies during the Chola dynasty were decentralized institutions that played a significant role in governance, administration, justice, and the overall welfare of the local population. They served as important pillars of the Chola administrative system, fostering local participation and empowerment. The ur assembly has its own power to grant lands, maintained records and documentation, development and maintenance of public infrastructure including temple and maintain religious management namely, regular *Pujas and annual festivals*.

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