

Panchayat Raj System in Kalugumalai – A Study

SHEEBA@PARVATHI, B.

RESEARCH SCHOLAR

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

MANONMANIAM SUNDARANAR UNIVERSITY,

TIRUNELVELI, TAMILNADU.

Abstract : Prior to India's Independence, community development works were neglected by the British. After independence, the people who were began to show keen interest in the issues which affected the rural masses. Economic emancipation was given priority. As a result, measures were initiated to find solutions to the problems faced by the rural masses. Thus the concept of Panchayat Raj was emerged by the Tamilnadu Panchayats Act in 1948. As a result The Town Panchayat of Kalugumalai which was constituted as a village panchayat on 15th July 1952 was upgraded into Selection Grade Town Panchayat on 26th June 1969. This Act had many innovative features, the prime objective this act to improving the economic condition of the rural poor people. The panchayats performs a very effective and educative role in a democracy. The local bodies like the panchayats serve as a training ground in the art of self-Government. The panchayat has taken all the possible steps for the effective implementation of social welfare measures of the Government. The nutritious meals scheme is implemented with all care. Further, the panchayat is spending quite a good sum of money to promote public welfare. Thus Kalugumalai town panchayat regarded as a model panchayat by administrators in Thoothukudi district, Tamilnadu.

Key words: Panchayat Raj system, Tamilnadu Panchayat Act, Constitutions of Panchayat, Administrative structure, Unique features of Panchayat Raj, Implementation of Social Welfare Measures, Model Panchayat.

I. INTRODUCTION

India is a land of villages. Hence the focus of planning should aim at the economic emancipation of the villages. As a result, majority of the programmes and schemes formulated by the Central as well as State Governments, aim at the improvement of the socio-economic life in the villages. The main aim and purpose of the community projects are to secure social and economic justice for the people of the villages.

Prior to India's Independence, community development works were neglected by the British, as they never thought themselves to be one with the native population. They were mainly concerned with the economic drain of the country. Hence they paid little attention and attached scant importance to problems like illiteracy, health hazards, economic maladies and social evils which produced a demoralising impact on the Indians. This indifferent attitude of the British impelled the native to fight against the imperialists with determination. After independence, the people who were at the helm of affairs began to show keen interest in the issues which affected the rural masses. Economic emancipation was given priority. As a result, measures were initiated to find solutions to the problems faced by the rural masses.

The concept of 'Panchayat Raj' which expects to produce the fruitful results, the year 1948 is regarded as a land mark in the history of rural development in Tamil Nadu, for that year witnessed the adoption of the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act.¹ This Act had many innovative features. As per this act, panchayats were constituted at village level and panchayat union at Block level, with the prime objective of improving the economic condition of the rural poor. For it was rightly felt that the development of the rural economy alone would solve problems such as unemployment, social inequality and provision of basic necessities to the poor.

The panchayats plays a vital role in the development of rural economy. Hence the research scholar is rather tempted to work on a theme pertaining to the panchayats which serves as the backbone of rural administration.

II. Historical Background:

Even from time immemorial, this hill town is known by the name Kalugumalai situated in Kovilpatti Taluk, Thoothukudi District. There is no authentic record to prove how this place came to be called Kalugumalai. It is said that a vulture named Sampathe, a devotee of Lord Rama, visited the shrine at this place, worshipped Lord Murugan the presiding deity,² and got his sins absolved. Hence this place was named as Kalugumalai. Apart from this account mentioned above, it is said that several hundred years ago on the tall trees that had grown up on the slopes of this hill vultures might have had their nest for breeding. So people in those days might have called this hill as Kalugumalai.

The temple located in this town is of great historical importance. It is contended by the archaeologists that this temple must have originated in the 8th century B.C. the temple is on the south west slopes of the hill. This is a fine cave temple. The presiding deity, that is, Lord Muruga is seated along with his spouses, Valli and Deivanai.³ Another noteworthy feature of this temple is that the peacock, the vakanam of the Lord Muruga is found on his left side whereas in all other temples, peacock appears on his right side.⁴

¹ Krishnaswami Pillai, M. Administration of Panchayat, Coimbatore, 1959, p, 19.

² Bhaktavatsalam, G., Kalugumalai Talavaralaru, Kovilpatti, 1972. P.12.

³ Velmani, K.S.K. Gazetteers of Tamilnadu. Tirunelveli District, Chennai, 2002, p.480.

⁴ Ibid, p.481.

Kalugumalai has a rich political background which is evident from the fact that there are plenty of inscriptions belonging to the first and second Pandyan Empires.⁵ In 1557, Ettayapuram was founded as a Palayam by the Nayaks of Madurai with Jagavira Kumara Ettappa as the Palayakara. When Krishnappa Nayak was the Madurai Nayak, he gifted away Kalugumalai to the successor of Ettappa in appreciation of the services rendered by the later to the former. From that period onwards it has been under the control of Ettayapuram. Most of the rulers like Jagavira Vama Venkateswara Ettappa, Jagavira Kumara Ettappa (1830-1850) and Muthukumara Swami, Jagavira Venkatesuvara Ettappa⁶ (1856-1869) of Ettayapuram have granted substantial donations for the development of Kalugumalai. This shows the sustained efforts on the part of the Ettayapuram poligars to develop Kalugumalai.

Even now the administration of the temple is looked after by the family members of the former zamindar of Ettayapuram. A manager appointed by the zamindar looks after the affairs of the temple. Annual festivals like Kandasashti, Thaipooasam, Pankuniuttaram and Vaisakam are celebrated with great religious fervour. People used to throng Kalugumalai from far and wide and offer their worship to Lord Murugan.⁷

The area of Kalugumalai town panchayat is nearly 12sq.kilometres the total population of this town panchayat is 10151. Out of this, male population accounts for 6503 and the rest are females.⁸ 56.5% out of the total population are literates. Administration of the Panchayat is looked after by an Executive Officer. There is a healthy understanding between the people belonging to different castes and creeds.⁸

There are two higher secondary Schools and two High Schools to cater to the academic requirements of the students. There is also a library for the benefit of the general public. A branch of the Central Bank of India, a District Co-operative Bank takes care of the commercial transactions of the public.⁹ There is a Government dispensary to take care of the medical requirements of the public. Apart from this, there are many private clinics. Out of the total extent of land only 3sq.kilometres of land is suitable for cultivation. Cotton, Maize and Cambu are cultivated during rainy seasons. Due to the nature of the soil, tamarind and margoza trees grow in abundance in this area.

⁵ Albert, C. Moor, Iconography of Religions: An Inscription, London, 1977.p.86.

⁶ Bhaktavatsalam,G.,op.cit,Pp.24-25

⁷ Dinamalar, Deepavali Malar issued dated, 13th November 1993.p.156.

⁸ Information gleaned from the Kalugumalai Town Panchayat Population Record for the year, 1990.

⁹ Bhaktavatchalam Illasai, op.cit.p.29.

Kalugumalai was accorded the status of a panchayat on 25th May 1948 with the addition of Kumarapuram village with Kalugumalai. It became a Second Grade Panchayat on 15th July 1952 this town panchayat was further upgraded into First Grade Town Panchayat in 1969. It attained the status of selection Grade Town Panchayat on 21st August 1948.¹⁰ The Government of Tamilnadu superseded the Kalugumalai Panchayat Council on 20th October 1986. Thereafter an Executive Officer appointed by the Government is entrusted with the task of managing the affairs of this panchayat.

III. Panchayat System: Origin and Growth:

The village is the basic unit of social life in India. For the village plays a pivotal role in the socio-economic development of the country. This situation has prompted the Central as well as the state Governments to formulate schemes taking into consideration the requirements of the Indian villages. The economic and political developments from the days of freedom struggle till the introduction of planned economy and the adoption of socialism as the national objective have contributed much to the growth of the democratic spirit in the entire nation. Panchayat are the only viable and possible media for the mobilisation of this spirit and for the reconstruction of India on modern lines.¹¹ This is because of the fact that about eighty percent of the Indian population live in the village.

The report dealing with the Panchayat Raj state that the present panchayats are not able to function effectively because of paucity of resources and that the present panchayats are not viable units. Lord Ripon's resolution though very much revolutionary in character made one significant mission. It was silent with regard to the establishment of the village panchayats.¹² The major portion of the report confined its suggestions to the district and the taluk levels the defunct village bodies could be revived only at a later date.

Since time immemorial, the village played a pivotal role in the administration of India. It is a historical fact that the panchayat or village council is more ancient and its origin can be traced to the remote times of antiquity. During the Hindu period of rule, the village council played a significant role. The rulers did not interfere in their working and hence the panchayat remind as powerful bodies. The panchayat served as a democratic device to enthuse the common man to actively participate not only in executing the

¹⁰ Krishnaswami Pillai, M. op.cit.p.20.

¹¹ Who is who of freedom fighters, Government of Tamilnadu, Vol-III, 1937, p,17.

¹² Ram Reddy, G., Patterns of Panchayat Raj in India, Madras, 1977.p.261.

development programme of his village block and district but also in taking vital decisions himself. Panchayats thus symbolised a unique form of political democracy.¹³

Kautilya's Arthashastra¹⁴ refers to the system of village and urban administration. In the Nitisara of Shukracharya are found references to the existence of village council. This type of local government persisted during the Mauryan and the Guptan periods and even in later stages.

The village was the smallest administrative unit largely looking after its own affairs through the wisdom of local elders whose competence was beyond dispute. Revenue and judicial matters were resolved mostly at the local level and taken to the royal court only when necessary. These institutions seem to have had most power than the panchayat of to-days for the single reason that in those days there was no hierarchy of officials to who appeals could be made and necessarily village elders exercise ample powers. These elder were elected but the lineage and status in the society played a role in the selection of these persons.¹⁵ These elders attended to the civil duties of the village and acted as mediators and resolved local disputes. Customs, traditions and common sense guided them in the discharge of official functions. The Muslim Kings did not disturb the ancient local institutions of the people of the land. The village with its self governing institutions remained untouched. The village republics were left undisturbed and independent in the management of their own affairs. Local administration was left discretely to the village panchayats.¹⁶

The Chola administrative divisions namely **mandalam**, **nadu** and **ur** were retained. During the Chola period the villages continued to enjoy a large measure of autonomy. No other dynasty can be credited with operating such a unique system of village administration as the one which became famous under the Imperial Cholas. A highly developed committee system for the administration of local affairs was evolved and the **Sabha** of Uttiramerur which revised its constitutional arrangements twice at short intervals in the reign of Parantaka I is only the leading example of a number of similar attempts going on every where to evolve improved methods of administration in the light of experience.¹⁷

The '**Gram Sabha**' is a loosely organised body of all adults of the '**Panchayat** area' whoever lives in the village and whose name is inscribed in the electoral rolls for the Legislative Assembly of the state is a

¹³ Agarwal, R.C., Constitutional Development of India and National Movement, NewDelhi, 1984. p.437.

¹⁴ Venkatesan, G. Local Government in India, Madurai, 1987, p.7.

¹⁵ Rajalakshmi, R., Tamil Polity, Madurai, 1983, p, 79.

¹⁶ Lunia, B.N., Evolution of Indian Culture from Earliest Time to the Present Day, Agra, 1980, p,318.

¹⁷ Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., A History of South India from pre-Historic Time to the Fall of Vijayanagar, Bombay, 1966, p, 205.

member of this body. Its meetings are convened twice a year. The purpose of these meetings is to obtain the opinion of the people regarding the annual budget of the gram panchayat and also to acquaint them with the progress of the various development plans of the villages.¹⁸

However, when the Government discovered that **panches** and **sarpanches** had developed an attitude of indifference towards this institution it made the executive officer of the **panchayat samiti** the supervisor in chief of the **gram sabha** and charged him with the duty to see that the meetings of the **gram sabha** are convened in accordance with the provisions of the law. Being too much hard-pressed with a variety of other duties the general tendency on the part of the executive officer is to further delegate this responsibility to the extension officer of the panchayat. It is now the duty of the latter to keep track of the meetings of the **Gram Sabha**. He prepares in the beginning of each year, a schedule of meetings of the **Gram Sabha** for all panchayats under his jurisdiction, and later on vigorously pursues that this schedule is strictly adhered to by every panchayat. If anyone of them shows slackness or indifference he at once pulls them up.¹⁹

Further extreme care was taken to keep politics away from the activities of these village institutions. The Sarvodaya leaders led by Jayaprakash Narayan took the lead in this direction. Jayaprakash Narayan opined that the Panchayat Raj and party system are contradictory since the former sprang from the grass-roots and the latter involved implementing decision from above. To quote Jayaprakash Narayan: "Parties create dissensions where unity is called for, exaggerate differences where they should be minimised". In a "Communitarian society", he feels differences are resolved by taking consensus of opinion thereby promoting harmonious relations between the members of the community. He prefers a participating democracy in the administration. In India the organisation of local self-Government was carried to a pitch of perfection unsurpassed in the annals of any other ancient nation.²⁰

The British system has been organised on decentralised lines. The local Government institutions of that country have emerged from two different streams. Some of them trace their origin to pre-historic days when the United Kingdom had not yet come into existence. At that time, they were petty kingdoms, loosely organised and primitively administered. In the process of unification that followed they retained some of that power with them and made over the rest to the new kingdom. When the British came to India, village

¹⁸ Bhatnagar, S. Rural Local Government in India, NewDelhi, 1978, p, 24.

¹⁹ Rajamanikam, M. Kalvettukalil Arisiyal Samayam Samudayam, Sekar Publications, Madurai.1917, p, 280.

²⁰ Lunia,B.N., op.cit,p.318.

panchayat was the only institution that existed then. New rulers initiated a two-pronged drive on the one hand, they destroyed the traditional panchayat and on the other they organised the district administration.²¹ After some time the British rulers were confronted by a number of economic and administrative difficulties some of which had resulted from the fast mounting demand of the people for civic amenities in cities and towns. It was in the wake of that crisis that village panchayat were established. During the nineteenth century, the traditional village panchayat system more or less vanished from the land of its origin. If a few Panchayats still existed in certain remote village they have practically no say in the administration of the locality.

The concept of panchayat Raj got strengthened during the British regime. The Madras village Panchayat Act was passed in 1920, with the object of providing for the administration of villages and thereby developing the system of local Self-Government in rural areas. By 1920, the foundations for a three tier system of Local Government were laid with the village panchayat as the basic unit. Later, the Local Boards Act of 1930 which repealed the Madras Village Panchayat Act of 1920, abolished the Union Boards and placed the village panchayat and the district and the **taluk** boards under the same statute.²²

In 1935, the Government of India Act was passed.²³ It was the second in the series to bring about a whole sale change in the administrative structure of the country. The provinces which had so far been conceded partial popular government were given complete autonomy with the result that the directly elected legislature with responsible ministers came into existence in all the provinces. The Panchayat Acts were recast. Efforts were made not only to democratise the constitution and the functioning of the village panchayats but also to physically expand their network. Not much could however be done. The campaign soon came to be disrupted by the war effort and the subsequent political stalemate.

The panchayat received greater importance with the attainment of Independence. Article 40 enshrined in the Directive Principle of State Policy of the Indian Constitution gave a directive to all the states to take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to work as units of Self-Government. A place was thus permanently carved out for

²¹ Bhatnagar, S. op.cit, p.4.

²² Venkata Rao, V., & Niru Hazarika, Local Self-Government in India, Madurai, 1982, p.68.

²³ Bhatnagar, S. op.cit, p.27.

them in the national frame of the Governmental Organisation. Article 40 of the constitution states,²⁴ “The State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of Self-Government”. The inclusion of the panchayats in the constitution gave a new impetus to the growth of this institution. Almost all the state Governments enacted the panchayat Acts afresh, incorporating in them the democratic spirit of the new age. Special departments were established to organise the panchayats and to look after their works.

The Madras Village Panchayat Act of 1950 was enacted in pursuance of this objective. This Act brought into effect far reaching changes in the realm of local Self-Government. This Act declared that a panchayat should be formed in every village with a population of 500 and above and where the population is less than 500 one or more village have to be clubbed together to form a panchayat. Panchayats having a population of 500 and above and an annual income of Rs.10,000 and above are to be classified as class one panchayat and others as class two panchayat.²⁵ In 1952, the community development programme was started with a view to actively involve the people in the various development activities.

Five years after its introduction, a study team was appointed to evaluate its performance under the Presidentship of Balwantrai Metha.²⁶ This team conducted a thorough study of the working of the community development programmes and submitted its detailed report in November, 1957. This report revolutionised the entire thinking about the community development as well as the local government. The Balwantrai Metha Committee Report after having been submitted to the Government was first considered by the National Development Council and later on by the Central Council of local Self-Government. Both these bodies liked the scheme and commended it to the State Governments.²⁷ The Five Year Plan targets were fixed to boost the co-operative movement to provide rural credit. The National Development Council adopted a resolution on co-operative policy and laid down the broad pattern. Among other things, the council considered that for the development of co-operation as a people’s movement, it was essential that co-operatives should be organised on the basis of village community as the primary unit and that

²⁴ Ibid, p,27.

²⁵ Krishnaswami Pillai, M. op.cit, p,19.

²⁶ Ibid, p,181.

²⁷ Haldipur, R.N. and Paramahansa, V.R.K., Local Government Institutions in Rural India, Hyderabad,1970,p ,101.

responsibility and initiative for the social and economic development at the village level should be placed fully on the village Co-operative and the village panchayat.

Panchayats and Co-operatives existed and functioned independently. Jawaharlal Nehru thought of some co-ordination between these two bodies and this prompted him to remark that “every village should have three things, a panchayat, a co-operative and a school”. Only then, conditions for social and economic development of rural India could be created. The committee submitted its report in 1957 which paved the way for the formation of a new three tier panchayat Raj namely Gram Panchayat at the grass root level, panchayat Samitis in every development block and Zilla Parishads at district level. The TamilNadu panchayat Act of 1956 introduced panchayat administration in Tamilnadu in the present form. A panchayat union council was constituted as the governing body for each panchayat.²⁸

IV. History of Kalugumalai Panchayat:

As found from the minutes of the Town Congress Committee of Kalugumalai it is understood that even from the year 1920, the elders of this town were persuading the Inspector of Local Boards to constitute a village panchayat in Kalugumalai. But all their efforts to bring panchayat administration were frustrated by the Zemindar of Ettayapuram who was contending that the entire town of Kalugumalai belonged to him. However when India attained Independence in 1947, the people of Kalugumalai succeeded in bringing panchayat administration in Kalugumalai. Thus the first panchayat was constituted on 8th November 1947 in Kalugumalai. As a result of substantial increase population and revenue, Kalugumalai was upgraded as second Panchayat in 1954. Due to the same reason was elevated to the states of a Town Panchayat in 1959.

V. Unique features of Panchayat Raj system:

The panchayats performs a very effective and educative role in a democracy. The local bodies like the panchayats serve as a training ground in the art of self-Government. The British Government in India, whatever may be its other short comings, should be given credit for evolving such a novel administrative system. The system of local self-Government as conceived by the British aimed at efficient and quick implementation of programmes and other matters affecting the interesting of the common men.

The authorities attached to the village panchayat, Town Panchayat and Panchayat Union carry out all the functions pertaining to the welfare and progress of the people. The British Government under Lord Ripon originated the idea of Self-Government by forming Local Boards. As a result of this initiative, Lord

²⁸ The Kalugumalai Congress Committee Kovilpatti Taluk, Tirunelveli District issued Pamphlet, p, 2.

Ripon was called as the “Father of Local Self-Government”. The Panchayat Raj concept underwent metamorphic change in the post Independence period. The Balwantray Mehta Committee suggested many radical and innovative changes in the structure of the Panchayat Raj. Though the history of Panchayat Raj marked both ups and down, its achievements can never be minimized. In other words, no programme in India can become a national programme if it is not a rural community oriented programme. These programmes are implemented by the Government through the agency of panchayats, because the panchayat symbolises grassroots democracy.

The Town Panchayat of Kalugumalai which was constituted as a village panchayat on 15th July 1952 was upgraded into Selection Grade Town Panchayat on 26th June 1969. Substantial increase in population and revenue necessitated, the Government to upgrade Kalugumalai Village Panchayat to Selection Grade Panchayat. The Kalugumalai Town Panchayat did live up to the expectations of the protagonists of the panchayat system. In the sphere of education, it provided the much needed infrastructural facilities. The schools run by the panchayat union and other agencies have earned the good will of the people. This is mainly due to the sustained interest shown by the officials of the panchayat in the sphere of education. The rate of literacy is substantially high in Kalugumalai. This is mainly due to the quality of education imparted and the interest shown by the panchayat in the direction.

The panchayat has taken all the possible steps for the effective implementation of social welfare measures of the Government. The nutritious meals scheme is implemented with all care. Further, the panchayat is spending quite a good sum of money to promote public welfare.

The medical facilities in the town are adequate so people of the town need not go to other urban centres for consultation or treatment. The panchayat is also arranging for periodical medical checkups for the children studying in the schools. The panchayat has put in considerable efforts to provide adequate drinking water facility to the people of this town and Kumarapuram village which comes under the jurisdiction of the town panchayat. To tide over the water problem, the panchayat implemented the kovilpatti-Sivalaperi Scheme. As a result of this scheme, there is no problem for drinking water in the town. Further arrangements are also on foot for the extension of pipe lines to the newly formed **Adi Dravida** and other Colonies. The Town Panchayat has taken effective steps towards connecting the entire nearby village

by forming ring roads.²⁹ Further, various measures have been initiated to improve the existing roads. Under the Self-Sufficiency Programme, the panchayat union has provided employment opportunities to the unemployed of this area.

On the social front, the social education organisers are giving training to the rural women in tailoring, embroidery and spinning. The nutritious meals programme implemented by the union has attracted the attention of many poor boys and girls goading them to join the schools. The village industries strengthen the rural base of Indian economy. Making arrangements for training in skill is another aspect of constructive work. The training of rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM) and the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) have assisted the people of this town to a great extent.³⁰

As part of these two programmes mentioned above, Bank loans and Government subsidies are given to skilled persons, for purchase of machinery to earn their livelihood. These schemes have enhanced the economic status of many families living in this town. Further, these programmes have enabled the people of this town to spend their time fruitfully. Kalugumalai Town is rapidly growing in extent and has a promising future as a centre of industry and commerce. People from the surrounding villages bring their farm products such as plantain fruits, plantain leaves and sweetroots to Kalugumalai. The products are sold and transported to Kovilpatti and other nearby places in Lorries, tempo vans, as a result of this commercial activities, there are a large number of Lorries available. Thus travel facilities in Kalugumalai are quite satisfactory. Buses run at regular intervals to all the surrounding villages and towns from Kalugumalai. However a full-fledged bus stand is a long felt need of this town and it is likely to materialize soon as a new bus stand is under construction in Arumuga Nagar.

Conclusion:

The Kalugumalai Town Panchayat is regarded as a model panchayat by the administrators. The panchayat which is presently looked after by the Special Officer has made strides in different spheres. The panchayat has provided an ideal educational climate for the children of the town. The public welfare activities are given priority by the panchayat union. Thus the Kalugumalai Town panchayat has taken all the possible steps to male people of the town lead a comfortable life.

²⁹ Kalugumalai Town Panchayat, Water Supply Record, 1989.

³⁰ Tamil Nadu Acts: The Civil Court Manual 1953, Madras, 1987, p, 4593.