

EVOLUTION OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE: FROM ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS TO COLONIAL RULE IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

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ABSTRACT

The local government system in the Indian subcontinent has undergone significant evolution throughout its history, characterized by diverse political structures and administrative frameworks. In ancient times, the subcontinent witnessed the emergence of sophisticated urban civilizations, such as the Indus Valley Civilization, in addition to that over reliance on agricultural setup, local government system was also directed towards improving rural life. Hence ancient time period accompanied both rural and urban settings to manage local government system.

During the Mughal era (1526–1857), the subcontinent experienced a centralized form of governance under the rule of emperors who established a hierarchical administrative system known as the Mansabdari system. Local governance was delegated to appointed officials, such as the zamindars and jagirdars, who were responsible for collecting taxes and maintaining law and order at the grassroots level.

The British colonial period (1757–1947) marked a significant transformation in the local government system, as the British East India Company and later the British Crown imposed a centralized bureaucratic administration. The introduction of the District Collector and the implementation of the Ryotwari and Zamindari systems further consolidated British control over local governance, albeit with limited representation for indigenous populations.

Keywords: Local Government System, Decentralization, Centralization

Early History of local governance

The area of the subcontinent was greatly influenced by the modernization process. It also helped usher in modern political ideas during different eras. The Aryans, Arabs, Mughals and British all introduced different regimes of political modernization in the same region. Therefore, this region also saw an extensive local government system compared to the rest of the world. Most of the areas were rural in nature, so the main focus of the LG system in the Indian subcontinent was to target these rural and backward areas (Ahmed, 1997). Villages and small towns existed in the isolated nature that inspired the prosperity of the LG system in various regions of the subcontinent. Local councils or stockings were set up in these areas to deal with local issues. There used to be CEOs who dealt with local issues within the LG system. This helped to resolve minor issues at the local level with particular help from the higher level who appointed such officers and established authorities in these local areas (Agrawal & Ribot, 2000).

The majority of rural areas and population in the Indian subcontinent meant that most of the population was also associated with the agricultural area. All backward and remote areas employed agriculture as their main source of income. In this way, the local government system was largely linked to this agricultural system, meaning that local elected members had the primary responsibility for collecting taxes from their respective constituencies (Alan, 1997).

In ancient times, all the important tasks of the LG system were performed by members of the Panchayats. Panchayat means local assembly or local parliament where the problems of the affected areas were discussed (Callard, 1957). This panchayat was headed by a chief known as "Headman" or "Chief". Basically, there used to be five members of each panchayat who took decisions by their consensus. The local government system was thus entirely in the hands of these five members, who were mostly drawn from the local elites (Alavi, 2001).

In ancient times, the LG system in the Indian subcontinent was handed over to the panchayat. This panchayat had various assigned responsibilities. These tasks included allocating land to peasants, collecting taxes, settling local disputes, and tending and watching over the basic needs of the people. All the functions of these local councils were designed according to the needs and resources of the area (Rahman & Kundu, 2004). For example, panchais in urban areas had additional duties assigned to them. They were also assigned tasks related to maintaining order. In addition, they also collected taxes from the masses at the behest of the central government. Later, these villages were further developed over time and reforms were introduced according to the variations in the needs and problems of the respective areas (Anjum, 2001).

Along with agricultural and taxation tasks, these panchayats were also given legal and judicial duties. On the one hand, local administration was handed over to panchayats at the same time; they also dealt with local issues of legality and justice, as it was not possible for the local population to knock on the doors of the courts in the capitals (Callard, 1957).

According to the existing sources, the researcher found that the Indian subcontinent has gone through various political regimes. All the different regimes introduce an evident system of local government which was practiced under the leadership of the panchayat. This local government system had important functions in agriculture, administrative, judicial and legal spheres in local areas (Kumar, 1982).

Local governance during Mughal period

Mughal rule is also a significant era in the subcontinent. This dynasty was well known throughout the world as it was one of the leading ruling dynasties of its time. It generated almost more than 20% of GDP at its peak (Talbot, 1996). This was the reason why foreigners took over the subcontinent and later this country. The Mughals introduced many administrative reforms during their tenure. Even though it was a royal rule, they still established a local system of governance to collect taxes from the local community. The main purpose of this local government system was primarily to obtain local information, convey the orders of kings, and collect taxes. Mansabdari system brought profound improvements in the local government system by empowering local lords to manage the local chores (Litvack, & Bird, 1998).

Limited improvements to the LG system were introduced during Muslim rule over the subcontinent. Arabs, Ghaznavids, Khiljis, Gharuids, Tughlaqs and Afghans remained in the subcontinent for a short time. Most of them came to this country only for economic gains and once they achieved their goals, they returned to their native countries. This was the main factor that the LG system could not flourish during their ruling regimes. During this time

there were scattered rural communities divided into several houses. People from these communities solved their local problems in their own way (Malaviya, 1956).

The Mughals also focused on rural areas like many other former rulers. They had to target the backward areas to bring those areas under the mainstream. Therefore, the Mughal government tried to make significant changes in the rural areas. Although the concept of local government was unknown at the time, smaller villages were governed by a system similar to local governments today (Mangahas, 1982).

Most historical studies show that the Mughal rule was not significant with respect to the local government system. The main reason was the strong royal systems that strongly opposed the participation of the civil community in political affairs. After the Mughal rule, it was the British regime that introduced the modern system of local government in various areas of the subcontinent. They dismantled the highly controlled rules of Mughal royalty and introduced reforms regarding the LG system.

As the Mughals targeted the rural areas for agricultural purposes, the British also introduced the modern LG system in the same perspective. They also targeted all major and minor rural areas to collect taxes imposed on agricultural land and produce. They established a modern political system in the villages, which was usually headed by a chairman or headman. For the first time in the history of the subcontinent, the British introduced "feudalism from below", which aimed to privatize land under the right of permanent settlement (Manyi, 2007).

Local Government System during British Period

After the end of the Mughal rule, the British established their rule in India. The British have been involved in the political and administrative sphere of the subcontinent for centuries. Over time, they learned about the shortcomings of Mughal political administration. They took advantage of these shortcomings and took over the subcontinent after the War of Independence in 1857 (Tinker, 1968). After the war, they introduced many social, political and administrative reforms in the subcontinent. The British also introduced a modern system of local government in the subcontinent, which provided the basis for the LG system (Metcalf, 1962).

Before the War of Independence, the administrative system of the British dealt with wider areas. They did not focus on smaller villages or scattered communes, rather they focused on larger provinces, i.e. the annexation of Sindh in 1843 and Punjab in 1849 (Montes, 2002).

It was much later that the British government focused on the local government system. Here, their main focus was on villages and local communities. This LG system was introduced to provide facilities to local communities and in return collect taxes from them. These taxes mainly concerned the agricultural area. During this period, industry was not so developed, so the major share of tax collection was obtained from agricultural fields and land (Venkatarangaiya & Pattabhiram, 1969).

It is true that the British introduced a sophisticated system of local government in the subcontinent, but there were certain perspectives on how to achieve this. The British wanted to create a local elite class that could serve their vision in their territory. Thus, through the local government system, they prepared a local elite class in political areas that later fulfilled their goals (Tinker, 1968).

At the same time, the British controlled the entire system of local government through strong control over the bureaucracy. He appointed British bureaucrats under whom the local elite were also controlled. They did this in the perspective that if the natives turned against their will, they would be crushed by this bureaucracy (Venkatarangaiya and Pattabhiram, 1969). This British local government system was mainly run by unelected people, i.e. commissioners and deputy commissioners. Elected members of the local government system

have a limited role in this system. They were also in the minority against the long list of officials appointed by the British (Metcalf, 1962).

There was only a Deputy Commissioner, a nominated representative of the British who influenced the whole system of local government, but there were also his representatives at the local level. Non-representative members had a major role in the implementation and control of the LG system (Ahmed 1984).

The British government introduced many reforms in the local government system of the subcontinent and of all the rural-urban divide was prominent. Rural and urban councils were formed to provide specific facilities to the masses (Siddiqui, 1992). Municipal authorities performed communal services including infrastructure development, construction of roads, water management and sanitation facilities, etc., on the other hand, the scene of rural councils was quite different. The local elite class was empowered under this LG system, although they had limited representation in the LG system. Rural areas had minimal opportunities compared to urban areas (Siddiqui, 1992).

Most researchers admired the local government system developed by the British as providing a better service delivery system. It is true that for the first time in the history of the subcontinent they introduced a large-scale LG system. But the real picture was somewhat different because this LG system was just a show because they were actually also strengthening their rule over the local people under which the bureaucracy was widely used by the British (Van den Dungen, 1972).

Special attention was paid to the province of Punjab and this bureaucracy was launched to tighten its jaws to check the political stranglehold even at the local level. This was due to soil fertility and healthy agricultural production, which were the main source of tax collection during this period. By the same token, legislation was also passed to involve well-to-do and prominent families. These British were successful in their plans as they provided local elites with more and more political and agricultural opportunities such as the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900, the Punjab Pre-emption Act of 1913. These laws restricted the use of land under the control of agricultural holdings. Classes and prohibited the transfer of land to non-agricultural classes were an important trait and aspect of the local governance during that time period (Wajidi, 2000).

The British also initially did not pay due attention to the local government system. Their main concern was higher level governance at the federal and state levels. After solving the larger management problems, they turned their attention to the local government system so that remote areas could be incorporated. Bureaucracy thus played a key role in the local government system as there was a shortage of locally elected members as proper local elections were not held (Rondinelle & Nellis, 1986).

This led to a highly centralized system of local government. The LG system was not an experiment by the British to understand the emotions and feelings of the masses at a basic level (Talbot, 1998). After assessing the perception of local communities, the main share of local management remained in the hands of the civil and military bureaucracy.

The efforts of the local government still influence the British government in Pakistan even in the present scene. During the 1950s, the first attempt at the LG system was started by Ayub Khan, which was heavily influenced by the British, the Basic Democracies system was also similar, as the Deputy Commissioner also played a significant role in the LG of Pakistan under the Ayub government. Khan. On the other hand, the local elite class was also chosen by Ayub Khan because it was chosen by the British (Friedman, 1960).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of local governance in the Indian subcontinent, as explored from ancient civilizations to colonial rule, highlights the intricate interplay of historical, political, and socio-economic factors shaping administrative structures over millennia. From the decentralized systems of ancient city-states to the centralized bureaucracies of Mughal emperors and British colonial administrators, the subcontinent has experienced diverse models of governance that have left enduring legacies on contemporary administrative practices. Despite the complexities and challenges inherent in these systems, the historical trajectory underscores the resilience and adaptability of local governance mechanisms in responding to changing political landscapes and societal needs. Moving forward, a nuanced understanding of this historical continuum is essential for informing efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, promote decentralization, and foster inclusive development in the modern era. By acknowledging the rich tapestry of local governance traditions in the subcontinent and learning from past successes and failures, policymakers and stakeholders can chart a path towards more effective and responsive governance structures that better serve the diverse needs of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other nations in the region.

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