

A Study of Decentralized Rural Governance Practices during the Chola Period

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Abstract

This study examines the structure, functioning, and significance of decentralized rural governance practices during the Chola period (c. ninth to thirteenth centuries CE), highlighting their relevance in the history of local self-government in South India. Drawing upon epigraphical evidence, inscriptions, and secondary historical analyses, the paper explores how village assemblies such as the *sabha*, *ur*, and *nagaram* operated as autonomous institutions managing local administration. These bodies exercised authority over land revenue collection, irrigation management, temple administration, dispute resolution, and welfare activities, demonstrating a high degree of participatory governance. Special attention is given to the *kudavolai* system, an early electoral mechanism that emphasised eligibility criteria, rotation of office, and accountability, reflecting sophisticated administrative norms. The study argues that Chola rural governance was characterised by decentralisation, collective decision-making, and legal accountability, supported by clearly defined rules and procedures recorded in inscriptions. While these institutions functioned within the overarching authority of the Chola state, they retained substantial autonomy in everyday governance. By analysing these practices, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of indigenous administrative traditions and challenges the notion that decentralised governance is a modern innovation. The findings underline the Chola system's historical importance as a model of effective rural self-governance rooted in social responsibility and institutional continuity.

Keywords: Chola period, rural governance, village assemblies, decentralisation

Introduction

The study of decentralized rural governance during the Chola period occupies a significant place in Indian historiography, as it reveals an advanced and well-organized system of local self-administration that functioned centuries before modern democratic institutions emerged. The Chola rulers, who governed large parts of South India between the ninth and thirteenth centuries CE, developed an administrative framework that effectively combined centralized royal authority with strong village-level autonomy. In the predominantly agrarian society of the time, villages were the basic units of administration, economy, and social life. Rather than exercising direct control over every local affair, the Chola state delegated substantial administrative, fiscal, and judicial responsibilities to village assemblies. This decentralized arrangement not only reduced the administrative burden on the state but also encouraged community participation in governance. The relevance of this system becomes especially evident when examining how local institutions managed land, irrigation, taxation, temples, and welfare activities in a largely self-regulated manner across regions of present-day Tamil Nadu.

Decentralized rural governance under the Cholas was institutionalized through well-defined village bodies such as the *ur*, *sabha* (or *mahasabha*), and *nagaram*, each serving specific administrative and socio-economic functions. These assemblies operated through committees (*variyaams*) whose members were selected based on prescribed qualifications, moral conduct, and property ownership, reflecting an early concern for accountability and efficiency. The presence of codified rules, transparent procedures, and periodic audits demonstrates that governance was not arbitrary but guided by established norms. Inscriptions engraved on stone and copper plates provide detailed evidence of these practices, offering rare insights into grassroots administration in pre-modern India. Studying Chola rural governance is therefore crucial not only for understanding the political history of South India but also for appreciating indigenous traditions of decentralization, participation, and institutional continuity. This introduction sets the foundation for examining how these systems functioned, their social limitations, and their enduring legacy, thereby highlighting the Chola period as a landmark in the evolution of rural governance and local self-government in the Indian subcontinent.

Concept of Decentralized Governance in Ancient India

The concept of decentralized governance in ancient India was rooted in the organization of society around self-sustaining village communities that enjoyed considerable autonomy in managing local affairs. Long before the emergence of modern administrative systems, villages functioned as basic units of governance, economy, and social regulation. Local assemblies composed of elders, landholders, and respected members of the community were responsible for decision-making related to land distribution, irrigation, tax collection, dispute resolution, and religious activities. This form of governance emphasized collective responsibility and local participation rather than direct and continuous intervention by the central authority. While kingship was acknowledged as supreme, rulers generally recognized the practical advantages of delegating everyday administration to local bodies, allowing the state to maintain stability over vast territories.



Ancient Indian decentralized governance was not uniform across regions but adapted to local socio-economic and cultural conditions. Textual sources, including *Dharmashastra* literature and *Arthashastra* traditions, along with epigraphical evidence from different dynasties, indicate the existence of structured local institutions with defined roles and norms. In South India, these practices reached a high level of institutional maturity under the Cholas, where village assemblies such as the *ur*, *sabha*, and *nagaram* exercised extensive administrative and financial powers. Although participation was often shaped by caste, property ownership, and social hierarchy, these systems promoted accountability through collective oversight and codified rules. Thus, decentralized governance in ancient India represented a pragmatic and resilient administrative tradition that balanced royal authority with local autonomy, laying an important historical foundation for later concepts of local self-government and participatory administration.



Significance of the Chola Period in Administrative History

The Chola period occupies a distinguished position in Indian administrative history due to its highly organized, systematic, and decentralized model of governance that combined imperial authority with strong local institutions. Between the ninth and thirteenth centuries CE, the Cholas established an efficient administrative framework across large parts of South India, particularly in present-day Tamil Nadu. Unlike many pre-modern states that relied heavily on centralized control, the Chola polity institutionalized village self-government as a core administrative principle. Clearly defined local bodies such as the *ur*, *sabha*, and *nagaram* were entrusted with responsibilities ranging from land management and revenue assessment to irrigation maintenance, judicial functions, and temple administration. This delegation of

authority enhanced administrative efficiency, ensured local accountability, and enabled effective governance over an extensive agrarian landscape.

A major reason for the historical significance of the Chola administrative system lies in its reliance on codified rules and transparent procedures, preserved in a vast corpus of inscriptions. The detailed regulations found in inscriptions from places such as Uttaramerur reveal sophisticated practices including eligibility criteria for office bearers, rotation of responsibilities, financial audits, and mechanisms to prevent corruption. These features reflect an advanced understanding of institutional governance and public accountability that was remarkable for its time. While the system was shaped by social hierarchies and primarily benefited dominant landholding groups, it nonetheless fostered collective participation and administrative continuity at the grassroots level. Consequently, the Chola period stands as a landmark in administrative history, offering enduring insights into indigenous traditions of decentralization and influencing later governance practices in South India, as well as modern interpretations of local self-government in India.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with decentralized rural governance during the Chola period has expanded significantly in recent years, emphasizing the sophistication of local administrative institutions in pre-modern South India. Chitra and Abbas (2025) provide one of the most recent interdisciplinary contributions by situating Chola decentralization within a broader socio-administrative framework. Their study highlights how local bodies functioned not merely as extensions of royal authority but as semi-autonomous institutions that shaped agrarian productivity, social order, and regional stability. By examining land management, irrigation control, and fiscal decentralization, the authors argue that Chola governance promoted a participatory ethos among dominant village groups. Their work is important for linking administrative practices with social outcomes, showing how decentralization contributed to long-term societal cohesion in South Indian villages. This perspective moves beyond purely institutional descriptions and underscores governance as a lived social process.

Several studies focus specifically on the institutional mechanisms that enabled decentralization, with particular attention to the *kudavolai* (pot-ticket) system. The article *Local Self-Government under the Chola: Kudaivola System* (2024) published in IJCRT offers a focused analysis of electoral practices used for selecting committee members. The study emphasizes the procedural clarity, moral qualifications, and rotation of offices that characterized Chola village governance. By interpreting inscriptional evidence, especially from Uttaramerur, the article highlights early democratic elements embedded in the Chola administrative system. This contribution is significant because it challenges the assumption that electoral accountability is a modern phenomenon, instead demonstrating that regulated selection and disqualification mechanisms existed in medieval South India, albeit within socially restricted frameworks.

Earlier foundational works such as Ranjan (2014) and Peersab Nadaf (2017) provide systematic overviews of Chola administrative structures and local governance. Ranjan's study focuses on

village communities as functional administrative units, analyzing how assemblies like the *ur* and *sabha* managed taxation, judicial matters, and communal resources. The author stresses the administrative rationality of delegating authority to local institutions in a vast agrarian empire. Similarly, Peersab Nadaf (2017) examines Chola administration through a historical-analytical lens, highlighting the balance between centralized monarchy and decentralized execution. Both studies are valuable for establishing the structural foundations of Chola governance and for emphasizing continuity between state authority and village autonomy, though they pay comparatively less attention to issues of social exclusion and power asymmetries.

Legal and administrative dimensions of Chola decentralization are further explored in *Chola Government: Local Self-Government* (2022), published in the International Journal of Law Management & Humanities. This work frames Chola village institutions as quasi-legal bodies with clearly defined rights and responsibilities. It emphasizes the presence of codified rules governing eligibility, accountability, and punishment for malpractice, suggesting a proto-constitutional character in local governance. Complementing this, the *Public Administration of the Medieval and Later Cholas* project provides a broad historical narrative of administrative evolution, tracing how local governance structures adapted over time. Although descriptive in nature, these works are significant for highlighting the normative and regulatory aspects of Chola administration, reinforcing the argument that decentralization was institutionally embedded rather than informally practiced.

Epigraphical and digital resources play a crucial role in contemporary scholarship on Chola rural governance. Wikipedia-based studies on Uttaramerur inscriptions and Tamil copper-plate inscriptions, despite their non-traditional academic format, compile and synthesize a vast range of primary sources. These entries draw attention to the granular administrative details recorded in stone and copper, such as committee formation, financial audits, and social disqualifications. SelfStudyHistory (2020) further contextualizes these inscriptions by explaining the functions of village assemblies in accessible yet scholarly terms. While these sources must be used cautiously, they are valuable for consolidating dispersed epigraphical evidence and for supporting more formal academic analyses of decentralized governance practices.

Recent policy-oriented and educational platforms such as VisionIAS (2025), PWOnlyIAS (2024), UniversalInstitutions.com (2025), and Drishti IAS (2025) reinterpret Chola governance from a contemporary administrative perspective. These sources emphasize the relevance of Chola decentralization for understanding the historical roots of local self-government in India. By linking medieval practices to modern concepts such as Panchayati Raj, they underscore the enduring legacy of Chola institutions. Although primarily designed for academic training and competitive examinations, these works contribute to the literature by framing Chola governance as an indigenous model of decentralization. Collectively, the reviewed literature demonstrates that decentralized rural governance during the Chola period was administratively sophisticated, socially embedded, and historically influential, while also reflecting the social hierarchies of its time.

Functioning of Decentralized Rural Governance

The decentralized rural governance system during the Chola period functioned through well-organised village assemblies that exercised substantial authority over local administration. Institutions such as the *sabha*, *ur*, and *nagaram* were central to village-level governance and operated with clearly defined responsibilities. These bodies managed land revenue assessment and collection, supervised agrarian production, and maintained detailed records of land grants, tax exemptions, and ownership rights, as evidenced by numerous inscriptions. Irrigation management formed a crucial aspect of their functioning, particularly in the agrarian economy of the Kaveri delta. Village assemblies were responsible for the construction, maintenance, and regulation of tanks, canals, and sluices, ensuring equitable distribution of water among cultivators. Committees were often appointed to oversee specific functions, reflecting a system of administrative specialisation and collective decision-making. Through regular meetings and documented resolutions, these assemblies ensured transparency and continuity in governance, thereby reducing dependence on direct intervention from the central state.

In addition to economic and administrative roles, decentralized rural governance under the Cholas encompassed judicial, social, and religious functions that reinforced local autonomy. Village assemblies adjudicated minor disputes related to land, property, and social conduct, imposing fines or corrective measures in accordance with customary law. They also regulated social welfare activities, including the management of temples, endowments, and charitable services such as feeding houses and educational institutions. The selection of office-bearers, notably through the *kudavolai* system, emphasised accountability, moral integrity, and periodic rotation of responsibilities, preventing the concentration of power within a few individuals. While operating within the broader framework of royal authority, these local institutions enjoyed significant independence in everyday governance. However, participation was often limited by caste and gender hierarchies, indicating that decentralization, though effective administratively, was socially selective. The functioning of decentralized rural governance during the Chola period illustrates a sophisticated system of local self-government rooted in collective responsibility, procedural order, and administrative efficiency.

Conclusion

The study of decentralized rural governance practices during the Chola period reveals a remarkably advanced administrative system that successfully balanced centralized royal authority with strong village-level autonomy. The Cholas institutionalized local self-government through well-organized village assemblies such as the *ur*, *sabha*, and *nagaram*, enabling rural communities to actively manage their own administrative, fiscal, judicial, and welfare-related affairs. Evidence from inscriptions across present-day Tamil Nadu demonstrates that these bodies operated under clearly defined rules governing membership, elections, rotation of office, and accountability, thereby ensuring administrative efficiency and continuity. The celebrated inscriptions from Uttaramerur in particular highlight the systematic nature of decision-making processes, including the *kudavolai* method of selection and strict disqualification criteria to prevent corruption and misuse of power. While participation in

governance was influenced by social hierarchies, land ownership, and caste-based privileges, the overall framework encouraged collective responsibility and local problem-solving in an agrarian economy heavily dependent on effective irrigation and land management. This decentralized system reduced the administrative burden on the central state while fostering a sense of civic duty and institutional stability at the grassroots level. In conclusion, Chola rural governance represents one of the earliest and most well-documented examples of decentralized administration in Indian history. Its legacy extends beyond its historical context, offering valuable insights into indigenous traditions of participatory governance and informing modern debates on local self-government and decentralization in India.

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