We have a glorious picture of Village Panchayats in India, since the Vedic age. A study of village administration in ancient India reveals that since the remote past the village had been a self-governing unit of local administration. The village headman along with other village elders formed the village Panchayat or such other village institution for the administration of justice and other local affairs. They managed all affairs of the village concerning general security and welfare of the village community. This may primarily be attributed to the natural and environmental factors in and around human habitation in the older times. The natural instinct in every human-being to live and move together with other fellow members, in the interest of security of life and livelihood, just induced the people to live in association with a group of people of similar habits and understanding. The very need of continuous supply of food, and shelter to the members of the group or community induced them to settle on a piece of territory for the purpose of cultivation and domestication of animals. This led the people to establish villages. With the establishment of a village the need for community organisation and leadership of the villagers was felt. The villagers had to get themselves organised to face and fight against all odds and
hazards in their living and to arrange their food supply by combined efforts. It was but natural that to enable such an organisation to function effectively, some one amongst the villagers with superior strength and ability must take leadership of the community. This brought into existence the village headman living in a village. Later on when different groups of people with like habits settled together in a village, the old system of village leadership, by and large gave way to multi leadership. A group of leaders decided various problems of the village and guided the villagers in solving their problems.

Such groups of village leaders later on were known as Panchayat, the "Panch Parameswar". The Pandits were generally olderly persons with matured wisdom. They were held in high esteem by the villagers. The villagers obeyed their direction, accepting it as an order emanating from five Gods (Panch Parameswar). This very concept of "Panch Parameswar" had been prevalent amongst the villagers for centuries together. The word "Panch Parameswar" meaning the devoted village leaders, could be heard from the old villagers till recently. The peace and prosperity of the villages in the golden age of India might be attributed to this very concept of devoted village leadership, which was greatly responsible in inculcating amongst the villagers the feeling of "one for all for one" in a village community.
From the earliest vedic age, the villagers themselves had to manage their local affairs in the village and the village headman was called " Gramani ". He used to function both as King's official as well as the main leader of the villagers. Pramatha Nath Banerjee says " originally it seems that the villages were completely self-governing. They were practically free from central control, The Gramani (headman) and other village officials were appointed by the community and were accountable to them ".

There is however no authentic evidence available to know whether the post of " Gramani " was elective, nominated or hereditary. But in any case the " Gramani " was the village headman, he played a notable role in administering the village affairs like village defence, settlement of disputes amongst the individual villagers, maintaining village records and the realisation of the King's dues (1). In fact, the Gramani maintained a healthy relationship between the State and the people, and he was almost like a father to the villagers to look after and manage all the affairs of the village.

**PANCH MANDALI AND PANCAYATS.**

The institution of Gramani prevalent both in the Vedic age and in the epic age, found to have yielded its place, by and large, to the group of village leaders or

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or villagers' council in a later period. The village community acquired the character of a self-governing little republic. The village government was run by the village leaders council (Pancha Mandali) or Panchayat. According to Brihaspati "Two, three or five persons shall be appointed to look after the welfare of the association of village community". John Mathai says "the word Panchayat possibly indicates that the number of those who originally constituted the council was five, but there is no evidence that this number was adhered to with regularity. The term has almost completely lost its numerical connotation and means only an association of people for doing administrative or judicial works".(2)

We think that the number five being an auspicious number to the Hindus in performing their religious and social rights, perhaps a group of five leaders became predominant in the village councils. Thus, the word Panchayat (Panch-Ayat) meaning the control of five, and a village leader as Panch (one of five) and the Head of the Panchayat as Sar panch means the superior panch, came into existence. This can further be authenticated from the use of the term "Panch Mandali".

During the Gupta Period the village council was known as Panch Mandali and it was entrusted with administrative and judicial functions in the village. The word "Panchmandali" is also mentioned on the Sanchi Inscription of King Chandragupta II. (3)

According to Dr. A. S. Altekar the village councils appeared to have evolved into regular bodies in Gupta period at least in some parts of India. They were known as Panchamandalis in central India, Gram Janapada in Behar."(4)

The Panchat system seems to have flourished in many parts of India for centuries together. According to R. C. Dutta, "the Institution of Village Panchayat was developed earliest and preserved longest in India among all the countries of the earth".(5)

Mama mentioned three kinds of settlements, grama (village) Pura (town) and Nagara (city). The village was the lowest administrative unit. The Kharasara Jataka says that the village headman was the main person in village administration of the Aryan Village Community in the Sixth Century B.C. He could function only with the cooperation and assistance of the village elders in all affairs of a village community. It seems that wherever the Aryans migrated, to the east, west and south, they carried with them such pattern of village administration through village headman, as person acceptable to the villagers. A branch of Aryans also said to have migrated to the Kamrupa region. It is likely that the Aryan system of village administration was extended to the ancient Pragjyotishpura also.

5. Ramesh Ch.Dutta- The Economic History of India under early British Rule pages 151-52.
VILLAGE CORPORATE LIFE AND KINGSHIP.

Prof. Rhyia David's remarks that "the local affairs of each village was carried on in open assembly of householders held in the groves which then and now formed so distinctive a feature in the long and alluvial plain. Such corporate life of the villagers was nothing but a little republic which functioned, almost independently, within its local sphere and without outside interference."

Dr. R.K. Mukharjee says that "the independent development of Local Government has provided, like the shell of the tortoise, a heaven of peace where the national culture can draw in for its own safety, where political storms burst over the land". Dr. R.K. Mukharjee Local Government in Ancient India Despite all the political storms that passed over India from time to time, the village community had its growth and development from within.

During the Mauryan period, as it is evident from the accounts of Megasthenes and Kautilya's Arthasastra, that despite of a system of centralised administration during the period, the village bore collective responsibility for realisation of State dues and for maintenance of law and order under the village officer "Gopa". In their corporate capacity the villagers were required to construct and maintain the works of public utility and to undertake measures tending to the improvement of the village and those who took the lead in such matters received honour and rewards from the King."(6)

6. Arthasastra Book III Chapter I.
Kautilya has referred to the village elders acting as trustees for minors, arranging works of public utility and exercising judicial powers along with the village headman. The Greek Ambassador Megasthenes visited the court of Chandra Gupta in 303 B.C. and stayed in this country for a long period. In his account, he described the village communities as independent little republic almost self-contained and self-governed. The Chinese Pilgrim Fa-hien, who visited this country during (400 A.D.-500 A.D.) remarked that the State did not interfere much with the village corporate life and the local institution received due recognition from the Central Government.

**THE VILLAGE GUILDS.**

Besides Panchayats, there were guilds whose basis was economics. There were the village guilds of peasants, traders, weavers, potters and other artisans. Each guild had its own rules which were duly recognised by the Royal Judges, in case of any appeal from the guild tribunals. During the Gupta period in the 4th century such guilds have been referred to as fairly developed independent powers both in economic and judicial affairs. Guild system appears to have existed in the ancient Kamrupa region also. There have been many references to the existence of such villages in the ancient Kamrupa which were established with the professional groups of the people like potters, fisherman, boatman, goldsmiths, blacksmiths etc. In the ancient copper plates (Tamra Sasana) and stone inscription (Silalipi) of the different Kings of the Kamrupa...
Region at different times the existence of such villages have been referred to. (7) The names of the old villages in the present Assam also clearly indicate the existence of such villagers exclusively of the different professional groups. These names are the potter village (Kumargoan or Hiragaon), spinners village (Katanigaon), blacksmiths village (Kamar)goan, goldsmiths village (Sonarigaon), brass metal workers village (Kohargaon), bell metal workers village (Moriagaon), carpenters village (Barhogaon), fisherman village (Kaibortagaon) etc.

JUDICIAL FUNCTIONS.

There have been many references in the old books like Smritis, Nitisara, and Arthasastra and in the old inscriptions indicating that the village headman and elders did settle village disputes, exercising judicial powers either assumed by themselves or as recognised by the kings. Sukracharyya's Nitisara indicates that the village council or the Panchayat exercised its powers both in executive and judicial matters. In his Nitisara Sukracharyya advises that the local judge, who lives in a place where the subject matter or a dispute arises is the best judge for deciding the case. There have been references of the existence of separate courts for different classes of the people like Forest Court, Merchants Court, Warriors Court etc. There have been references that during the rule of the Hindu Kings and that of the Pishwas and Marathas, the elected village councils or the Panchayats enjoyed judicial powers and their judgements were

given due importance by the Royal Judges or by the Rulers themselves. Even during the reign of Muslim Rulers under whom the administration was almost centralised with lesser importance to the village autonomy, the old function of the village Panchayats somehow continued. The Muslim Rulers also gave importance to the judicial decisions of the Panchayats. One interesting instance may be cited in this regard during the reign of Ibrahim Adilshah of Bijapur (1512-1569 A.D.) which reveals an impartial attitude of the Ruler and his respect towards Panchayat's decision. A dispute occurred between one Bapaji Musalman and Jagadale of Masur. The case was first decided by the village court (Gota) of Masur in favour of Jogdale and then on appeal the District Panchayat of Karad upheld the decision. Bapaji Musalman went to the Emperor direct and said that the Panches of Masur being Hindus, decided in favour of Jogdale. The Emperor instead of deciding the case himself referred to it to another Panchayat at Paithan. This court confirmed the decision of the previous courts and as such the Emperor enforced the judgement against Bapaji Musalman.(8)

Even during the early period of the British Rule the Panchayat system of adjudication was adopted by the Britishers themselves under the East India Company. The then administrator of Bombay in 1869-70 constituted three separate

Panchayats for the Hindus, Parsis and Muslims by taking five persons from such communities in their respective Panchayats. Mount Stuart Miliphinstone, the first Governor of Bombay (1819) wrote in his report that while he acquired the territories from the Pishwas, he found each village to be a little republic with its Panchayat as the executive body. Such Panchayats provided for watch and ward, for settlement of disputes of the villagers and also for rendering other essential services to them.

In Assam, during the early part of the British rule David Scott, the then Commissioner of the region introduced the Panchayat system of adjudication by establishing a "Bar-Panchayat" at Jaysagar (1826-1828) with some distinguished local persons of the time. Side by side, the British administrators established two kinds of Panchayats viz., "Saru Panchayat" and "Charachari Panchayat" for the purpose of administering justice at different levels.

This was perhaps the first occasion the people of Assam got acquainted with the very name Panchayat in this region.

**SOME IMPORTANT ACCOUNTS OF OLD INSCRIPTIONS.**

There have been many references to the Panchayat system in the old inscriptions mostly found in South India. The most remarkable of which are the two stone inscriptions
found in the Baikunth Perumal Temple of Uttarmerus (Present Uttar Mellur) village of Changlepat district in Tamilnadu and which were engraved during the reign of Chola King Parantaka-I (907 A.D.-949 A.D.). This was an agrahara village mostly inhabited by the learned Brahminas. The village assembly of such agrahara village was known as Sabha, while that of any other village was known as Ur in most of the regions of South India. The Sabha or Ur elected its village council called Alunganam. These inscriptions show that during the reign of the Parantaka-I the members of the village assembly elected the following committee for a term of one year.

(1) Annual Supervision Committee with 12 members was formed before the formation of other committees. Only those persons, who previously enjoyed membership either in a garden committee or in a Tank Committee and advanced in age and learning were entitled for the membership of this committee. This was a supervisory committee over all other committees.

(2) Garden supervision Committee with 6 members looked after horticultural and agricultural development.

(3) Tank Supervision Committee with 6 members entrusted with the responsibility for the supervision of tanks and water supply.
(4) Justice Supervision Committee with 6 members was entrusted with the responsibility of administering justice.

(5) Gold Supervision Committee with 6 members was entrusted with the responsibility of coinage, currency regulation and other financial matters.

(6) The Committee named as Panch Vara was formed for realisation of taxes. This committee also consisted of 6 members.

No person was qualified to be elected to any one of these committees if

(a) he had no tax-paying land equivalent to one fourth of a velli (1 velli = 6'1/3rd of an acre) but with the relaxation that a person well versed in vedas and one of the four Bhasyas could become a member if he had tax paying land of at least one eighth of a velli.

(b) he had no house of his own,

(c) he was below 35 years or above 70 years in age,

(d) he was not well versed in Mantra Brahma and could not teach it to others,

(e) he did not acquire wealth by honest means,

(f) he was elected to any of those committees for three previous years,

(g) he failed to submit accounts while he was in any of those committees, he was relative of such persons,

(h) he was a sinner or relative to any sinner,
(i) his name was recorded as a guilty person in any illicit affair and in any of the five great sins viz :
(1) Killing of Brahmin (2) Use of intoxicants (3) Adultery (4) Theft (5) association with any one who was guilty of those crimes.

(j) he was an outcaste, or had the association with low people and unless he performed expiatory ceremony,

(k) he was insane,

(l) he had taken any forbidden food or he was a village post.

The Chola Emperor Parantaka-I made these rules and promulgated them to make his administration smooth and efficient and at the same time granted his subjects a share in Government. There are some inscriptions to affirm the existence of the village assemblies in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Utkal, Baroda, Cambay and Gujrat regions.

In the ancient Kamrup region, though we do not have any clear indication of the existence of such village assemblies, the possibility of their existence cannot be ruled out. The Nidhanpur plate of the King Bhaskarvarma (600-650 A.D.) has mentioned an agrahara, the Mayursalmala Agrahara village even before three hundred years of the reign of the Chola emperors in the South. The same plate has also mentioned Jyesthavadran (respectful village elders). As such the importance of village elders in those days can rightly be presumed. The Mowgong plate of the King Balavarma of the

ninth century has mentioned of "Dijjina" "Janapada" (an administrative Unit) and of the "Pramukh Janapudan" (the head of the Janapada).(10)

DEcAY OF PANCHAYATS.

The village communities of India flourished as the active units of local administration from time immemorial till the British consolidated their centralised administration in the country. Some of the British administrators namely Sir Thomas Munro, the Governor of Madras (1813) Mount Sturat Elphinstone, the Governor of Bombay (1819) Sir Charles Metcalfe the Governor General of India (1850) and others spoke about the village community system which was in existence when the British occupied this country.

Sir Charles Metcalfe observed "The village communities are little republics having nearly everything they want within themselves and almost independent of foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts, dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds revolutions, Hindu, Pathan, Mughal, Maharastra, Sikh, English are all masters in turn, but the village communities remain the same.

The Union of village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself has contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India through all the revolutions and changes which they

have suffered and is in a high degree conductive to the happiness and to the enjoyment of a great portion of freedom and independence."(ll).

But the gradual expansion and consolidation of the British administration throughout the length and breadth of this country, the Britishers introduces a new system of highly centralised administration. Under the administration all the activities of the government were guided and controlled by the directives issued from its Headquarters. The British government did not feel any necessity of involvement of the village communities in their administration. The changed revenue system subdued princely States, zamindaries of permanently settled estates and Ryotwari system. The Government dealt with the Prajas zamindars and the landholders of the temporarily settled estates directly for revenue collections. The village communities were thus deprived of their traditional function of paying the village tolls or revenues through their organised village units. In judicial administration also, the age long tradition of settling village disputes by the village Panchayats were gradually wiped out by introducing civil and criminal courts, the jurisdiction of which were later extended even to the remotest villages.

As a result of such changes in the administration the community fees feelings and solidarity of the villagers had to give way to their individualistic outlook and the very sense of one for all and all for one in a village