CHAPTER VI
RURAL ADMINISTRATION
Information about rural administration in ancient India is available through two main sources viz. literary and epigraphic. Literary sources emanating from northern India are valuable because of their antiquity. Epigraphic records, which are also found in northern India, are vague, while southern epigraphic records furnish us with definite and detailed information. The only drawback of the southern records is that they are of a later period. But they present a developed and clear exposition of the principles of formation and the functions of rural administrative bodies mentioned in the Smṛti literature. R.K. Mookerjiⁱ has discussed the use of Sanskrit terms of the Smṛtis in the southern epigraphs which shows the contribution of the same bodies in the later period, with minor changes to suit the local needs.

These local bodies are denoted by many terms in ancient Indian literature which are very confusing. Still more confusing is the divergence of opinion among the commentators regarding the proper meaning and scope of various terms employed in the original texts for these popular bodies. Dr. Mookerji furnishes us with a list of the various terms used in Sanskrit literature, viz.,

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Kula, Guna, Jāti, Pūja, Vrāta, Śrenī, Saṅgha, Naigama, Samūha, Sambhūya, Samutthān, Parisat, Charṇa and states that "most of these terms occur in legal literature, which is characterised by the definiteness and precision of its phraseology and language and yet the commentators very often differ in their interpretation."¹ We think that names of these bodies differed from locality to locality due to the change of dialect.

The Grāma was the lowest political unit from the very early times as this term occurs frequently in the Rgveda and in later Vedic literature. The natural instinct of co-operation and the lack of security in the times compelled the people to organise themselves in units varying in nature.

We come across two types of co-operative bodies in ancient India, i.e., first, those which transacted the daily and normal business of the villages and second, those which were economic in nature, viz. the guilds. Though this distinction cannot be made with precision, to avoid confusion we can discuss them under these categories.

There are many references to the Saṅgha, the Samiti and the Vidatha as transacting business concerned

¹ Mookerji - Local Government in Ancient India, p. 29.
with public affairs in the Vedic period.\textsuperscript{1}

The terms Kula, Śreṇī, Pūga and Gaṇa which are mentioned in the Smriti literature in connection with the rural administration are discussed in detail (their composition and functions) in the chapter on the Judiciary. Kāśikā,\textsuperscript{2} while referring to Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī, suggests that Pāṇini used Saṅgha in a generic sense, denoting any type of assemblage for common aims and interests.

Confirming the existence of rural administrative bodies, Manu expressly lays down their authority while stating that the king shall banish anyone who breaks the agreement of a village community.\textsuperscript{3}

The evidence from both the North and the South shows that almost all the respectable householders were members of the village assembly. The co-operative capacity of a village is affirmed in the following injunctions of Vaśiṣṭha and Nārada. The former suggests that the king was to punish the village as a whole if the "Brāhmaṇas subsist by begging; for it feeds robbers".\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{1}How Sabhā, Samiti and Vidatha regulated the political, social, religious and judicial affairs is discussed in detail in the III chapter.

\textsuperscript{2}III. 3, 42, 86.

\textsuperscript{3}Manu. VIII. 219, 221.

\textsuperscript{4}Vaś. III. 4; S.B.E. Vol. XIV. p. 17.
Nārada, too, holds that in case of a theft of animals, "wherever the foot-marks go to, whether it be a village, pasture ground or deserted spot (the inhabitants or owners of) that place must make good the loss.

"When the foot-marks are obscured or interrupted, the nearest village or pasture ground shall be made responsible."

The foremost task of this assembly was to choose the executive for transaction of public affairs as it was difficult to carry on the work in the big assemblies comprising all householders of the village. Though the northern evidence does not refer to any regular and standing committee till the Gupta period, the Smṛtis vested the authority in the village headman and the village elders or the best men of the community forming an informal body.

Referring to village assemblies, Gautama too opines that "they declare that an assembly (Pariṣad shall consist) at least (or) the ten following (members), four men who have completely studied the four Vedas, three men belonging to the three orders enumerated first (and) three men who know different institutes of law."
Baudhāyana’s view that all the three twice-born castes were represented on these assemblies, but the representatives must be such as follow the occupations prescribed for the castes they belong to accords with that of Manu.¹ Bṛhaspati opines that the villagers are to be governed by two to five persons selected from the best men of the community.² Manu holds that whatever an assembly consisting of at least three or 10 persons who follow their prescribed occupations (of good conduct) declare to be the law, the legal (force of) that one must not dispute.³

These authorities refute the view of modern scholars that ancient Indian society was dominated by the Brāhmaṇas alone, but they indicate that the basic unit of administrative bodies comprised the three twice-born classes and not the Brāhmaṇas alone, and it was quite democratic in nature.

Kauṭilya refers to village elders as trustees⁴ who act as arbitrators in the case of boundary disputes.⁵

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¹Baudh. Dw. S. I. 1, 1, 8.
²Bṛhas. XVII. 9.
³Manu. XII. 110.
⁴Arth. III. 10.
⁵Ibid., II. 9. — चौक विवाद सानान्तः कृष्ण: ।
He does not refer to any village council or its sub-committees. In the Gupta records there are clear references to regular village administrative bodies and officers.

The deficiency of the northern evidence regarding the composition of these local bodies made up through the inscriptions of Southern India though they are late in date. We can safely conclude from the elaborate expositions of the South that these institutions developed and flourished during the preceding period throughout the country; they are nothing but confirmation of the Smṛti evidence. We may take up the case of an Agrahāra village named Uttarmerur still flourishing as Uttarmullur in Chingleput district.¹ The two inscriptions provide definite details of the composition of the village assembly and are engraved on the walls of the Vaikunṭha Perumal temple assigned to the 10th century A.D.

These inscriptions prove that the big village assemblies were divided into sub-committees with the designations roughly corresponding to their functions, viz., Annual Committee, Gold Committee, Paṇca-Vāra Committee, Tank Committee, Garden Committee and Committee for the Supervision of Justice.

¹Nilakanth Sastri - Studies in Chola History for the text of the inscriptions.
Secondly, the inscriptions furnish us with the details of the election of members of these sub-committees. The village was divided into 30 wards and one member was chosen from each ward to serve on these committees. Though the selection was made by casting lots, it would not be fair to under-rate the democratic instinct among the people which compelled them to give representation to each ward of the village.

The inscriptions also lay down the qualifications for members and speak of the classes which were disqualified for this purpose. They also lay down the qualifications for a person to be appointed an accountant in the village.

Freedom of speech and the rules of debate in the village assembly were a well-known feature of the rural set-up in ancient India. Even the Vedic literature speaks of the people who were revered by their fellow-beings for being good at debates in the assembly. Fines were imposed for unfair speeches. This is confirmed by a 9th century inscription at Tinnevelley which records that unfair obstructionists in the village assembly would be fined.

We now pass on to the second category. As Vedic society was classified on the basis of occupations, it would not be wrong to presume that the people's corporate
organisations were economic in nature at the time of their emergence. We can draw this analogy on the basis of the Puruṣa-Sūkta,¹ which is the very first reference to different classes in society and mentions their relative superiority on the basis of occupation. In course of time, this might have led to the establishment of guilds of different classes. References to guilds in Vedic literature show that they were flourishing institutions. The Atharva-Veda² records the expressions Śraisthya and Śrestḥin, denoting the high position of the guild chiefs.

The period of Dharma-sūtras presents a further stage of development as Gautama³ authorises cultivators, traders, herdsmen, money-lenders and artisans to lay down rules for their respective classes. He further lays down that the king should give his decision after conferring with those who know the law. R.C. Majumdar remarks: "The Corporations of Traders are now recognised by the constitution as an important factor in the State and invested with the highly important power of making

¹Rv. X. 90.
²Av. I. 9, 34; X. 6, 31; Ait. Br. III. 30, 3; IV. 25, 8-9; VII. 18, 8; Chh. Up. V. 2, 6; Kauś. Up. IV. 20; II. 6; IV. 15-20; Brihad. Up. I. 4, 12.
³Gaut. Dh. 5. XI. 21.
laws for themselves."¹

There is ample evidence in Buddhist literature throwing light on the existence of such organisations of an economic nature.

The references to guilds in the Mahābhārata clearly show their political importance; Vana Parva² records Duryodhana’s defeat at the hands of Gandharvas and shows that the prince was ashamed of coming back to the capital as he did not have the guts to face the heads of the guilds (Gapamukhya). In another context, the epic enjoins upon the king to sow the seeds of dissension among the heads of the guilds and incite them to injure his enemies; at another place they are described as one of the principal supports of the royal power.³

Kauṭilya directs the Accounts Superintendent to make regular entries pertaining to the history of customs, professions and transactions of these corporations.⁴ He points out in another context that the village guilds were to be protected from intrusion by outside guilds⁵

¹Majumdar - Corporate Life in Ancient India. p. 22.
²Mun. Vanaparva. 238. V. 15.
³Āśrama-varṣika Parva. 7 VV. 7-9 Śāntiparva. 59. V. 49, 138. V. 63.
⁴Shamasastry - Kauṭilya’s Arthaśāstra. p. 69.
⁵Ibid. p. 54.
and further opines that in an ideal scheme of a city, there is always a place for guild houses. ¹

The Bhattiprolu inscription² (C. 200 B.C.) refers to the gifts made by corporate units (Gaṭhis). The Mandasor inscription of Kumāragupta and Bandhuvarman records the construction of a temple by the guild of silk-weavers. Seals discovered at Basarh also bear testimony to the existence and working of the guilds bearing different names according to the profession of their members.

Different kinds of guilds were flourishing in ancient India, the names of some of them may be mentioned here: goldsmiths, silver-smiths, workers in base metals, carpenters, stone-dressers, leather manufacturers, musical companies, priestly-guilds, military-guilds, etc.

Inscriptions from the South are more numerous and clear in character, showing that the guilds were beginning to acquire the status of 'self-governing industrial corporations', as Dr. Mookerji calls them.³ For instance, the inscriptions at Tirukkovalur⁴ record

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¹Sūrāsastra - Kaṭilya’s Arthaśāstra. p. 61.
²E.I. II. p. 325.
⁴E.I. VII. 138, p. 47.
the gift of a perpetual lamp to God Perumal of Tiruvirattanam temple in a village of Malāda, of 15th Kalaṇḍus of gold to a guild which entered into the following agreement:

"We the citizens of this place have received these 15 Kalaṇḍus of gold;

"Out of the interest of this gold we the citizens, shall have to pour out daily one ulakku of oil."

The information available on the proceedings of these village assemblies is totally inadequate.

**Village Officers:** The village headman was the most important figure in the local administration in ancient India. His personality was an important factor as the initiative regarding the conduct of local affairs was in his hands. Ancient Indian literature and epigraphs throw considerable light on his position and duties.

Several terms are used to denote the village headman. In Vedic and later literature he is known as Grāmapī.¹ Manu² and Kaṭīlyā³ style him as Grāmāṭhipa.

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¹Rv. X. 62; X. 11; 107, 5; Av. III. 5, 7; XIX. 31, 12; Māt. Saṁ., I. 6, 5; Saṭ. Br. III. 4, 1, 7; V. 4, 4, 8; Brhad. Up. IV. 3, 37, 38. etc.

²Manu, VII. 115-16.

³Arth., III. 10.
The inscriptions of the first millennium of the Christian era call him Gramika or Grāmeyaka in northern India.¹ In the eastern Deccan he was known as Muṇḍa.² In the Agnipurāṇa he bears four names viz., Grāmādhipati, Grāmeśa, Grāmabharīṭa, and Grāmāṇi.³ At one place the same text calls him Mahattara, while comparing the five senses of the body to the five families carrying on the village administration and states that it is headed by the soul which is loftiest of all, like the Mahattara in the village.⁴ The term Mahattara occurs in the same sense in the Ghugarahatti copper-plate inscription of Śaṃcāradeva⁵ belonging to the 6th century A.D. and it is referred to in the Pallava⁶ and Vākāṭaka⁷ inscriptions. The expression also occurs in Kālidāsa's literature.⁸

Modern scholars differ on the exact meaning of

³Agni. 223.1; 223.3; 253.50; 351.46; 353.2; 362.10.
⁴Agni. 165. 11-12.
⁵E.I. XVIII. pp. 86-87.
⁶E.I. VII. p. 145.
⁷E.I. XIX. p. 102.
⁸Sak. V. p. 82.
of the term Mahattara. Monier Williams interprets it to mean "the head or the oldest man of the village". Pargitar, D.C. Sirkar, Cowell and Thomas and Aitekar all declare Mahattara to be an influential man of position due to his wisdom, age or wealth, while Dr. Kane considers the term Mahattara to mean the village headman. Saletore holds that it is not clear whether such a person was a member of the village council or head of the village.

We think that the term was used to denote both the meanings in different places at different times. Sometimes it indicated the village headman while at other times it referred to men of high social status revered due to their wisdom or wealth or on account of their old age.

There is no clear and decisive evidence in Vedic literature to show whether the village headman was popularly elected or was a nominee of the king or whether he was a

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2 I.A. XXXIX. p. 213.
3 Cited from Mujumdar - History of Bengal. p. 268.
4 Harșacarita (Trans. & notes) Ch. VII. p. 183.
5 Aitekar - State and Government in Ancient India. p. 230.
6 Kane - Harșacarita. p. 212.
7 Saletore - Life in the Gupta Age. p. 295.
self-styled head. Authors of the 'Vedic Index' observe: "The Gramani's connection with the royal person seems to point to his having been a nominee of the king rather than a popularly elected officer." The Śrauta literature throws indirect light on this point when it suggests that the king should legally sanction the authority of the headman and the assembly over the village to conduct the people's daily life. The idea that the village headman was appointed by the king is also implied in the Dudhpuni rock inscription of Udayamāna of the 8th century A.D. The inscription records the appointment of Udayamāna, a merchant from Ayodhyā, as head of village Brāmarśālamali by King Ādi Sīma when the merchant undertook the responsibility of paying royal dues and feeding the royal party.

One of the Jātaka stories records the expulsion of the headman by the king, but appointment of a new headman is not referred to, which may be taken as an indication that the villagers had the right to choose their headman.

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1 Macdonell and Keith - Vedic Index I. p. 246.
2 E.I. II. No. 27.
3 Kūlavāka Jātaka. p. 198.
In later days the post became hereditary. To this we have many references in the indigenous literature as well as in the epigraphs. The hereditary feature of the village headmanship is referred to even in the early Mathura Jain inscriptions of the 4th year which refers to a lady who was the first wife of the village headman and daughter-in-law of the village headman.\(^1\) The Kathāsaritasāgara records that a sonless dying chief of a non-Aryan village (Palli-Pati) offered his village to his daughter.\(^2\) All this proves the hereditary nature of the post.

Altekar observes that the village headman's post was usually hereditary, "the government having the right to nominate another scion of the family if the succession of the son was not approved."\(^3\)

As far as the caste of the headman is concerned, he was generally a non-Brāhmaṇa.\(^4\) and a Vaiśya. Altekar conjectures that as the village headman was the chief of the village militia, he often belonged to the Kṣatriya caste and further observes that sometimes Vaiśyas too

\(^1\)Lüder's List Nos. 48 and 69 a cited in Majumdar's Corporate Life in Ancient India. p. 134.
\(^2\)K.S.S. X. 192.
\(^3\)Altekar - State and Government in Ancient India. p. 225.
\(^4\)Except the land-grants made in favour of learned Brāhmaṇas.
aspired to and obtained the office. But the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa clearly states that "the prosperous are three indeed, viz. the learned Brāhmaṇa, the village headman (Grāmaṇī) and the Rājña." Although the three twice-born classes carried on all the administrative functions and the caste of the Grāmaṇī is not described in this Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa reference, one may safely conclude that this post was generally assigned to the Vaiśyas. In the Maitrāyaṇī Saṁhitā, Grāmaṇī is expressly mentioned as 'Vaiśya Grāmaṇī'.

The Grāmaṇī seems to be a very important functionary during the Vedic period and in the Jātakas he appears almost like a king. We shall discuss his functions and duties along with those of village bodies as they are inseparable.

There is no doubt that he enjoyed a prominent position right from the Vedic period. He figures on the list of the Ratnins (king-makers) in Vedic literature. In lieu of his functions performed for the Central government, he was compensated with rent-free land and he could realize fines from the villagers for misbehaviour.

1Altekar - State and Government in Ancient India. p. 225.

2Taitt. Br. II. 5, 4, 5. — सत्स्यां ग्रामणे ग्रामणी राज्यस्तोष्यां मेलन्द्रो बलत ।

3Mait. Saṁh. II. 6, 5; IV. 3, 8.)
The following incident from the Kūlavāka Jātaka makes this clear. The headman, regretting the reformed character of villagers by the efforts of Bodhisattva, exclaims: "When these men used to get drunk and commit murder and so forth, I used to make a lot of money out of them not only on the price of their drinks but also by the fines and dues they paid."¹

Some incidents reflect the tyrannical and autocratic behaviour of the village headman Vātsayāyana's Kāmasūtra records that the son of a village headman compelled certain women of the village to do odd jobs in his house.² The Jātaka stories also bear testimony to it. Kharassara Jātaka tells us that a nominee of the crown in a village had a secret understanding with a band of robbers who looted the villagers and was punished by the king for this offence.³ Kūlavāka Jātaka also records a similar case of a headman who regretted the refined behaviour of the villagers through the Bodhisattva's efforts and in a report to the king described the Bodhisattva and his companions as a band of robbers.

²Kāmasūtra. V. 5.5. – ग्रामिणायतेरा रुपक्य ततो बुद्धतुलस्य 
भूने ग्रामीणायोगति वर्णमात्र सांख्यताध्वनित्य विषयचतुर्थे विदित।
³Jātaka Vol. I. p. 34.
But this false accusation was discovered and he was made a slave to the villagers. These incidents throw light on the autocratic behaviour of the village headmen and also indicate that the villagers did not make themselves slaves to his autocracy because no administrative organisation can work well without the civic sense of the people.

The headman was also supposed to help the villagers in times of distress; we learn from the Gahapati Jātaka that during a famine a village headman provided meals to the villagers who approached him for help, on the condition that they will compensate him after harvesting their crops.¹

These references make it clear that the village headman bore a two-fold responsibility, i.e., towards the king and towards the villagers too, as it was not advisable for him to disregard public opinion and the time-honoured customs of the locality.

Manu states that the headman was to report to the person in charge of 10 villages called Daśi; he was responsible to the person in charge of 20 villages called Viśanti, and Viśanti in turn was to report to the officer in charge of 100 villages known as Śanti or Sant-Gramādhipati;

above him was still another called Sahasara-Grāmādhīpati.¹
They were all appointed by the king. Manu also suggests that the king should appoint a minister over them.²

The Agnipurāṇa partly supports Manu while recording that the village headman should himself try to settle matters, but if he is not capable of doing so, then he should report to the chief of 10 villages.³ Glimpses of this system can be had in our earliest literature. Macdonell and Keith suggest that Śatapati, referred to in Maitrāyaṇī Sāhita⁴ and Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa,⁵ should correspond to the lord of 100 villages.⁶

Commenting upon the Grāmaṇī's position, Altekar declares that "though responsible to the State, he was essentially a man of the people and used to be ever ready to protect their interests. He was as necessary for the State as for the people."⁷

¹ Manu. VII. 116-17.
² Ibid. VII. 120.
³ Agni. 222. 3 and 4.
⁴ Mait. Saṃh. IV. 14, 12.
⁵ Taitt. Br., II. 8, 4, 2.
⁶ Macdonell and Keith - Vedic Index II. p. 351.
⁷ Altekar - State and Government in Ancient India. p. 171.
The village headman was not the only dignitary who looked after the administration of the village. He was assisted and guided by public opinion through a council of villagers. Sabha Parva mentions an assembly of five officers: the administrator, the collector of revenue, the officer in charge of ensuring co-ordination between the people and the revenue collector, the scribe and the witness. The Damodarpur copper-plate grants of Kumāragupta of 444 A.D. and 447 A.D. refer to a board comprising the guild president, the merchant, the representative of the artisan class, whom Dr. Sircar styles as the secretary of the board, the Nagar-āresṭhin and the Paṭel, headman of village, and a scribe, for local administration. The Ghugrahatti copper-plate inscription of Samācāradeva (6th century A.D.) describes the village headman as the head of a council of five. The Baigrama copper plate inscription (448 A.D.) addresses these village elders as Samvyavahāri Pramukhaḥ.

The Pāñchi stone inscription of Chandragupta II (412 A.D.) refers to Pañchamaṇḍali. Many scholars

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1 Nilakantha Sastri’s comments on the Sabha Parva. 5.84 (Poona).
3 E.I. XVIII. pp. 76-77.
interpret this expression as the forerunner of the modern Pañchāyata. But this interpretation cannot be held authoritative as the inscription refers to a religious assembly of five.

Among the village officers is mentioned Aṣṭakulādhikarṇa in the Gupta inscriptions of the 5th century A.D. The Dhanaidhan copper-plate grant (432-33 A.D.) records the information given by an officer called Viṣṇu to the Brāhmaṇas, the Mahattaras and the others, including the Aṣṭakulādhikarṇa. The Damodarpur copper plates of Buddhagupta (482-83 A.D.) also refer to Aṣṭakulādhikarṇa among the important figures of the village. He is described as the officer in charge of eight villages by R.D. Bandyopadhyaya, while R.G. Basak thinks he was the officer-in-charge of eight families (Kulas) in the village. Saletore observes that "the Aṣṭakulādhikarṇa was definitely a village official who was consulted along with the Mahattaras, the Grāmaṇīs and the Kuṭambins in matters pertaining to land administration."

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1 Sircar - Sel. Ins. p. 287.
2 Ibid. p. 332; E.I. XV. p. 135.
4 E.I. XV. p. 137.
Later, Sukraniti\(^1\) also refers to the following village officials: (1) Sahasādhipati; (2) Bhāgahāra; (3) Lekhana; (4) Sulkagraha and (5) Pratihāra. These officers represent different castes viz., Kṣatriya, Brāhmaṇa, Kāyastha, Vaiśya and Śūdra respectively.

**Functions of Village Headman and Other Officials**

The local bodies "gradually evolved out of popular gatherings of the earlier periods which discussed social, religious and political matters at that time", states Altekar.\(^2\) In the light of this comment, we can form some idea about the functions of the local bodies and the village headman. Though it is difficult to categorise their functions on the basis of the available information, we may allocate them under different heads, viz., maintenance of law and order in the village, with the headman as the chief of the village militia and head of the village council; collection of royal revenues and settlement of land; undertaking works of public utility; authority to legislate, dispensation of justice and functioning as banks and trustees.

Looking after the village defence was the first and foremost duty of the village assembly. Dr. Mookerji

\(^{1}\)Sukra. II. 120–21.

\(^{2}\)Altekar - State and Government in Ancient India. p. 232.
is explicit on the point while remarking: "It is indeed but natural that the power of self-rule exercised by the villages and local bodies should necessarily involve, as its corollary or rather its prerequisite, the power of self-defence, the responsibility for watch and ward executed through their own organisation of the police and military."¹ Because of the insecurity of the times and the slow communication with the centre, it was necessary for the village assembly to have its own police and military power for immediate operations whenever necessary.

Vedic literature is not explicit on the functions of the Gramapātī, but from his association with the Senānī as one of the Ratnins we may conclude that the headman was the chief of the village militia in times of need. Later, during the Jātaka period, the same practice was in vogue. This is clear from the Sattigumba Jātaka² which refers to a village of 500 robbers with an elder at their head; their attacks were met by counter-organisations of the people.

Pāṇini refers to Āyudhīvi Saṅghas which might correspond to the standing military class in the village.

¹Mookerji - Local Government in Ancient India. p. 219.
Kautilya also refers to Śreṇī-Bala and explains its significance as the source of recruitment for the army.\(^1\) Brhaspati allocates to the assembly the duty of defending the village against dangers apprehended from robbers, thieves and disbanded soldiery. Such dangers must be repelled by all, not by one, whoever he may be.\(^2\) Brhaspati\(^3\) and Nārada\(^4\) lay emphasis on the sense of safety and protection among the villagers by prescribing special rewards for showing heroism while successfully repelling invasions. Many copper-plate grants allude to self-defence of the villagers, as they signify the liberal land grants made in favour of war heroes, who laid down their lives while protecting their village. The Mandasor inscription of Kumāragupta and Bandhuvarman records that some members of the guild of silk-weavers distinguished themselves in the profession of arms.\(^5\)

In case of an internal disturbance the village chief was to be held responsible, according to the

\(^1\)Arth. IX. 11.
\(^2\)Brhas. XVII. 5-6.
\(^3\)Ibid., XIV. 8, 10.
\(^4\)Nārada. III. 4.
\(^5\)I.A. XV. pp. 194-96; Sircar - Sel. Ins. p. 299.
Yājñavalkya Smṛti. If any human or other life is destroyed or theft of property takes place inside a village, the village chief should catch hold of the thief and take him to the king. In case of failure to apprehend the thief, he had to make good the loss to the aggrieved.

Another function performed by the village assembly, headed by the headman, was realization of revenues for the crown, fixed according to the kind of land, which was mostly paid in kind — grains, drinks, fuel and flowers, etc. The headman could keep a part of all this as his remuneration for being the agent between the subjects and the sovereign. The southern inscriptions record that it was through the agency of the village assembly that the villagers got concessions in times of famine and distress. Even the penalty for not paying the royal dues was communicated to the village assembly and not directly to the concerned individual. Dr. R.K. Mookerji cites a very interesting incident from an inscription recording the confiscation of land in case of non-payment of royal revenue. The proceedings correspond closely to the working of red-tapism in modern times. The inscription records that an order of the king

1 Yāj. II. 271.
2 Manu. VII. 118.
issued in the 27th year and on the 137th day of his reign reached the assembly in the 30th year and on the 240th day i.e. the communication took three years and 103 days to reach the assembly and take effect.\textsuperscript{1}

The assembly was also in charge of land which did not belong to any individual and which was not reserved as crown land nor consecrated to a temple. This is evident from the inscriptions in Southern India. The village assembly exercised ownership over the lands described under the following heads viz., new accession due to fresh clearing; confiscated property due to the non-payment of royal revenue; confiscated lands of those who were considered to be 'Drohins' and acquisition of private lands for undertaking public works.

That village land could not be sold even for purposes of charity without the approval of village officers is evident from the Paharpur copper plate grant of 479 A.D.\textsuperscript{2} Otherwise, the sale of land was effected through public auction; the procedure at the time of auction described in the southern inscriptions is the same as laid down by Kautilya.

The public works are termed as 'Ṣamūhas' in Śṛṣṭi literature and these were stated to be written agreements

\textsuperscript{1}Mookerji - Local Government in Ancient India. p. 235.

\textsuperscript{2}E.I. XX. pp. 159-61.
among the members of a community who were expected to fulfil their duty to promote public welfare. Any breach of a Samūha agreement was severely dealt with. The sphere of public works under the term Samūha was quite wide — maintenance of public halls, temples, wells, rest houses, incursions against wicked people and relief to the distressed. The authorities had made it clear that such works were not to be undertaken by an individual but must be communal enterprises. Manu clearly holds that 'a righteous king shall apply this law of fines in villages and castes (Jāti) to those who break an agreement!' Brhaspati defines Samūha as a compact formed among villagers, companies of artisans and associations and remarks that such an agreement must be observed both in times of distress and for acts of piety. Kautilya includes public shows also under the Samūhas and lays down that one who does not contribute to the preparations for a public show forfeits his and his family's right to enjoy it; if somebody is caught stealthily witnessing a public show without co-operating in the preparations shall pay double the charges due from him. He also

1 Manu. VIII. 221
2 Brhas. XVII. 5
3 Arth. III. 10.
states that if a person stays away from any co-operative undertaking, he should send his servants and bullocks; even for doing so he shall have to pay the costs due from him though he will not be entitled to share the profits of that undertaking.\(^1\)

An extract from a Jātaka story\(^2\) bears testimony to the clearing of a public road by the villagers themselves. The Uttarmallur inscription also records the widening of village roads. This work was assigned to the 'garden supervision committee'.

"If the power of independent legislation is one of the criteria of an independent political status, it is amply fulfilled in the case of these local associations", remarks Dr. Mookerji.\(^3\) Almost all the Smṛtikāras give authority to these local bodies to lay down rules of conduct for their community\(^4\) and enjoin upon the king to properly enforce them.\(^5\) The powers of legislation and

\^1\textit{Arth. II. 1. - समपूर्व रूपूर सङ्गीतकायय दयायः अस्मिन्ततुक्तः कर्तव्यः।}
\^2\textit{Jātaka. Vol. I. p. 199.}
\^3\textit{Mookerji - Local Government in Ancient India. p. 124.}
\^4\textit{Gaut. XI. 20-22; Manu. VIII. 41, 46; VII. 203; Āp. Dh. S. II. 15, 1. Baudh. Dh. S. I. 1, 2, 6; Vaś. I. 17; Arth. II. 7. etc.}
\^5\textit{Yāj. I. 361; Viṣṇu III. 2; Nārada. X. 2; Vas. XIX. 7 etc.}
dispensation of justice are discussed in detail in the chapter on the 'Judiciary'.

Dispensation of justice was also one of the important functions of the headman and the assembly. Ubhatobhattha Jātaka refers to the judicial powers of the headman who fined a fisherman’s wife for stirring up a quarrel and tied her up to be beaten to make her pay the fine.¹ The authority of these local bodies to dispense justice must be enforced by the State as it duly invested them with judicial power, according to Yājñavalkya.² Serious criminal cases were referred to the king’s tribunal, but there was no limit to their jurisdiction over civil cases.

These local bodies also worked as banks and trustees; this is evident from the early inscriptions of the north and corroborated by numerous southern epigraphs. No. 12 in the series of inscriptions at the Nasik cave records the working of local guilds as banks.³ Burgess assigned the inscription to Cir. 2nd century B.C. This epigraph refers to guilds of weavers which, like

²Yāj. II. 30. — तन्द्रातप्यावृत्तप्रमुखं कुष्टायत्। तद्यशात्वधृतव्यं कुष्टायतां ते स्त्रुता। 11
³Cited from Mookerji - Local Government in Ancient India. p. 97; E.I. VIII. p. 82.
banks, received permanent deposits. The inscription records that Uṣāvadata, son-in-law of King Nāhapaṇa, deposited 3,000 Kāhapaṇas, for members of the Saṅgha dwelling in the cave and "those Kāhapaṇas have been invested in guilds dwelling at Govadhana, 2,000 in a weaver's guild, interest one Pratika (monthly) for the hundred (and) 1,000, in another weavers' guild interest three quarters of a Paḍika (monthly) for the hundred; and those Kāhapaṇas are not to be repaid, their interest only to be enjoyed...".

The Indor copper plate inscription\(^1\) of Skandagupta records the endowment of a Sun temple by a Brāhmaṇa and transfer of the temple properties by him to the guild of local oilman on two conditions - continuation of the internal concord in the guild and daily supply of two palas of oil to the temple.

There are many inscriptions from the South recording the continuity of the banking tradition by local bodies in later times. The inscription at Tirukhavalur,\(^2\) referred to earlier, provides an example.

These references prove that there was no uniformity in the rate of interest; the first (Nasik cave ins. no. 12)

\(^{1}\)Fleet - C.I.I. Vol. III. p. 86.

\(^{2}\)E.I. VII. pp. 138-47.
records two endowments by the same person to two guilds at different rates of interest i.e. 12% and 9%.

The foregoing discussion reveals that the village administrative bodies performed executive, judicial, legislative, commercial, social and religious functions, thus controlling every sphere of life. Dr. Mookerji has described the functions of these bodies thus:

"The communal life of Ancient India indeed sought to express itself through a variety of institutions, civic and municipal, industrial and commercial, political and religious, and the evidence very often treats of all these diverse types of corporate life, thus making it difficult for the investigator to separate one from the other."

Sources of Local Finance

The construction of works of public utility and the hospitality extended to royal parties visiting the village for supervision needed public funds. The fact that fines were imposed and collected proves that there was a regular village fund. From this discussion we may infer that the main sources of local finance in those days were: contribution of individuals and gifts of the king; profits of the public undertakings; penalties

\[ p. 29. \]

\[ ^1 \] Mookerji - Local Government in Ancient India.
realized from wrong-doers; income from lands which were not privately owned nor reserved as crown lands or consecrated to a temple; and lands confiscated for non-payment of royal revenues.

**Relationship With Central Government**

Numerous inscriptions all over the country and the Smṛtis bear testimony to the fact that these village bodies had harmonious relations with the central government which exercised supervision through the following means: occasional summoning of the village headman for negotiations; supervisory visits of royal parties to various parts of the country, punishment meted out to members of the village assembly and the headman for misconduct; dispensing justice in case of quarrels between the two chiefs of the village and directing village assemblies to undertake works of public utility, generally with advancement of funds. Some Smṛtis record that the village assemblies derived their power from the central government. But Altekar strongly contradicts this by stating that "most of the dynasties in Ancient India used to flourish for about two centuries. The village communities and councils were, on the other hand, of hoary antiquity and derived their powers from immemorial customs and not from any charter or delegation from the central government. When the central government became more organised and developed it often sought to control and curtail the powers of the
village councils.¹

The Sabhā parva records a communication between Kīṇa Viṣṇuṭhir and sage Nārada. The latter asks the king: "Do brave and wise pāñchas of your nation engage in collection of funds and other allied Pāñchāyata activities and thus add to the general happiness?"²

Commenting the fine relationship between the central government and rural society, Dr. Mookerji states: "Both of them were independent organisms with distinct and well defined structures and functions of their own and laws of growth and evolution. The limits of State interference were accordingly so defined and fixed as not to encroach upon the sphere of the activities of the social organisation."³

Significance of Local Bodies

Referring to the importance of local bodies, H.N. Sinha states: "An examination of the nature of the local bodies leads to the conclusion that local government was extensively practised as it was effective in the social economy. It wielded vast powers and was essentially

¹Altēkar - State and Government in Ancient India, p. 242.
²Sabhā Parvan. V. 83. - कृन्तुरा: ब्रूक्षुपति: पंव एव पार्वततस्थति: I
cūlam kāraṇāṁ sarvāthā rājanāṃ bāve tathā II
³Mookerji - Local Government in Ancient India, p. 3.
democratic in organisation." That he attaches much
significance to these bodies is evident from his further
comment: "That was indeed the foundation of ancient Indian
polity; it supplied effective breaks to the autocracy of
the king."¹

H.D. Malviya is also very explicit on the issue
of local bodies: "Villages in Ancient India could attain
such a decisive importance in the administrative machinery
mainly because of the close unity in which they were knit
through the panchayat institution, the keen sense that
existed among the populace about their rights and duties
and the high level of justice, fairplay and efficiency at
which the Panchayats functioned as also the confidence
they commanded and the respect they inspired among the
village populace."²

From these references it is clear that ancient
Indian local bodies had the following significant features:
They originated in the bare needs of society in those
insecure times, to promote the well-being of the people
and ensure the protection of life and property. They
discussed all spheres of social life and undertook work
for the development of society. Since ancient Indian

¹Sinha - Sovereignty in Ancient India. p. 324.
²Malviya - Village Panchayats in India. p. 53.
thinkers did not distinguish much among the social, political, financial and judicial functions, these bodies enjoyed such vast powers over the individual that modern democratic assemblies bear no comparison with them.

The literature and epigraphs which record the working of various institutions in different parts of the country do not show any uniformity in their composition. With the changing times the old institutions faded out and new ones were established in their place with more elaborate principles of formation and functions. This shows that they were not creations of the crown but evolved naturally according to the needs of society.

Local bodies acted as intermediary agencies between the king and the people. The main link between the king and his subjects was the village headman who represented the people in the royal court.

They were also in a sense harbingers of the concept of a well-knit modern India (unity in diversity), as is evident from the Mandasor inscription which records that members of the guild of silk weavers took up the profession suited to their tastes, but they were all at the same time governed by the guild organisation. Different tastes and interests could not go together unless the people had a good civic sense. The best example of a good civic sense of the ancient Indians is
preserved in the South Indian inscriptions.

The most notable contribution of the rural organisation is the protection of Indian traditions even under foreign rulers, for they were expected to carry on the village administration according to their own laws and regulations.