



SPECIAL FEATURE

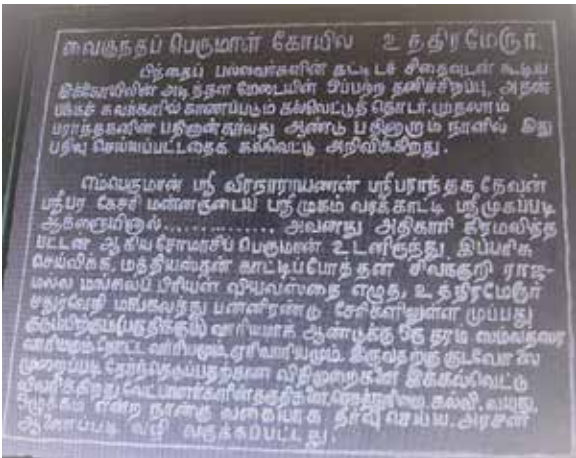
CRADLE OF DEMOCRACY ESTABLISHED IN ANCIENT INDIA AS EARLY AS 920 AD

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INTRODUCTION

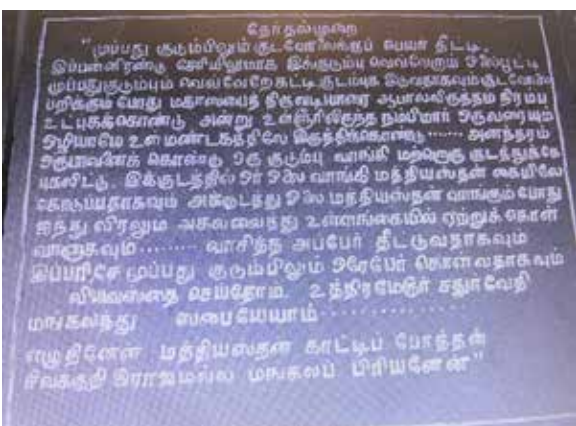
In his speech at the Bhumi Pooja celebration for the New Parliament Building, in December 2020, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, proud of his identity as of Hindu heritage, commented on the inscriptions on the walls of a temple in Uttaramerur near Kancheepuram in Tamil Nadu. These inscriptions that he commented on are on the northern walls of Sri Vaikuntavasava Perumal temple in Uttaramerur, a small village in Kancheepuram district about 90 km from Chennai. These ancient and classic inscriptions from the times of *Parantaka Chola* (920 AD). They describe in specific detail of the village administration was honed into a perfect system.

THE GREAT SIGNIFICANCE OF THOSE INSCRIPTIONS

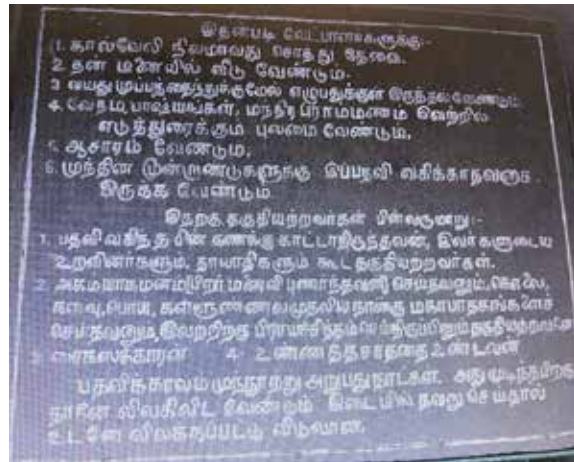


Magna Carta, "The Charter of Freedom" granted in 1215 by the then King John of England is regarded world over as publicized by the westerners as the oldest and greatest constitutional document of all times, perhaps due to ignorance, deliberate or real. But a better treatise or formulation of freedom of individual or self- government was in effect in ancient India a good 450 odd years before the advent of Magna Carta and nearly 1000 years before the Constitution of the United States of America came into being in 1788. Yet the western world is preaching us that America is the mother of democracy in the world! So, let us here, just see the detailed description of the elaborate democracy that thrived in ancient India at a small village, Uttaramerur in Tamil Nadu.

THE INSCRIPTIONS AND WHAT THEY SAY:



What the *Sutra* and *Smriti* literature prescribed were strictly followed and practiced. Prof. R. Nagaswamy, a renowned archaeologist, epigraphist and art expert of South India, has demonstrated the coherence between the



injunctions of *Dharmasastras* and ground realities in ancient India, and in Tamil Nadu in particular. He has used two inscriptions: the *manur* inscription *Pandya Varaguna* and the *Uttaramerur* inscription of *Parantaka Chola* to illustrate the same.

Uttaramerur, which has a 1,250-year history, is situated in the district of Kancheepuram. It was established by the *Pallava King Nandivarman II* in approx. 750 AD. Subsequently, it was ruled by the Pallavas, the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Sambuvarayars, the Vijayanagara Rayas and the Nayaks. It has three important temples, the *Sundara Varadaraja Perumal (Vaikuntanatha Perumal)* temple, the *Subramanya* temple and the *Kailasanatha* temple and all of these possess a great number of inscriptions, particularly dating to the reign of *Raja Chola* (985-1014 AD), his son *Rajendra Chola* and the *Vijayanagar emperor, Krishnadeva Raya*.

The entire village is constructed according to the canons of the *agama texts*, and accordingly, it has a village-assembly *mandapa* at its centre. The three temples of the village are oriented towards the *mandapa*. There are two 10th C.E. inscriptions in the Perumal temple which throw clear light on the system of village administration in ancient India.

The inscriptions dated around 920 AD, in the reign of *Parantaka Chola* (907-955 AD) is an outstanding document in the history of India. It is a veritable constitution of the village assembly that functioned over 1,000 years ago. The inscriptions give astonishing details about the constitution of wards, the qualification of candidates standing for election, the constitution committees with elected members, the functions of those committees, the power to remove the wrongdoer, etc. But it is on the walls of the village assembly (*mandapa*) itself that we have the earliest inscriptions with complete information about how the elected village assembly functioned.

The primary assembly of *Uttaramerur* was known as a *Sabha* in the case of *Agraharas* and *Ur* (*voor*) in the case of ordinary villages. It consisted of all the residents of that particular village. Its meeting was usually summoned by the beating of the drum and when the drum was beat, the entire village, including infants

had to be present at the *mandapa*; only the sick and those who were away on pilgrimage were exempt. The most important aim of the assembly was to elect the executive committee. Accordingly, there were *six* important executive committees:



Vaikuntanatha Perumal

1. Annual Committee (*Samvatsara vaariyam*): It was the most important and influential of all the committees. It had 12 members, and the election of this committee preceded that of all the committees. And only those who had (previously) been on the *Garden committee* and on the *Tank committee*, could be chosen for the *Annual committee*.

2. Garden Committee: It had 12 members.

3. Tank Committee: It had six members. Their duty included the maintenance of tanks, irrigation, levying of tank taxes and utilizing the funds so collected for the same purpose. The committee also had to de-silt the village tanks once in three months and strengthen the tank bunds by widening and raising its height. The sluices and the overflow channels were to be maintained properly.

4. Gold Committee (*Pon Vaariyam*): Its primary work was to test gold by rubbing it against a touchstone. Usage of rough stones were strictly prohibited because that would lead to greater loss of gold by rubbing. The committee members were expected to recover the gold dust from the touchstone at the end of each day and deposit it with the village assembly. Once in three months, they were obliged to go before the village assembly and swear that they had not committed any fraud in the testing. It was well known that people were so proud of their oaths and sworn statements that they would sacrifice their life rather than break their own sworn statements.

5. Pancha-vaara Committee: It had six members, and it supervised the five committees (*Pancha-vaara*) of the village.

6. Committee for Supervision of Justice: It was formed to supervise the justice or fairness of the annual elections of the various committees. Thus, this committee convened the annual meeting of the assembly and conducted the elections of the various committees whenever they were necessitated.

According to Prof. R. Nagaswamy, the most astonishing details that the Uttaramerur inscriptions furnish is the process of Secret-ballot election (*Kuda Olai*) of the said committee members:

The village assembly of Uttaramerur drafted the constitution for the elections. The salient features were as follows:

The village was divided into 30 wards, one representative elected for each. Specific qualifications were prescribed for those who wanted to contest. The essential criteria were age limit, possession of immovable property and minimum educational qualification. Those who wanted to be elected should be above 35 years of age and below 70. Only those who owned land that attracted tax could contest elections. Another stipulation was that such owners should possess a house built on a legally



Temple Gopuram

SPECIAL FEATURE



owned land (not on public *poromboke*). A person serving in any of the committees could not contest again for the next three terms, each term lasting a year. Elected members who accepted bribes, misappropriated other's property, committed incest, or acted against the public interest suffered disqualification.



Accordingly, Uttaramerur, a village of 12 streets, was divided into 30 wards/electoral units for the purpose of elections. A meeting-point was designated in each ward where the residents were to assemble when the drum called for elections. When thus assembled, each resident was to write down on a ticket the name of the person he wished to vote for. When this was done, all the tickets of a ward were filled into a packet. Thus, there would be 30 packets one for each of the 30 wards. Each packet bore the name of its ward on its *covering ticket*. All the 30 packets were then put into a pot (*kodam*) and placed before the *mahajana/sabha* i.e., the village assembly in the mandapa. One of the young boys (who did not know what was

Vaikunta Perumal Temple,
Uttaramerur



inside the packet) was then called to pick out one of the packets. The tickets in this packet were then transferred to another (empty) pot and shaken, i.e., shuffled thoroughly. The boy then drew one ticket out of the pot and made it over to the arbitrator (*madhyastha*). While taking charge of the ticket thus given to him, the arbitrator received it on the palm of his hand with the five fingers open. He then read out the name on the ticket received. The ticket thus read by him was also read out by all the *purohitas* present in the inner hall. The name read out was then put down (and accepted). 30 names were thus chosen, one representing each of the 30 wards. Such a method gave no scope for canvassing and other electioneering methods of doubtful utility and ethical values. The conditions of eligibility were a sufficient safeguard against the election of an undesirable person, and the necessary elimination they involved would leave no chance of producing any undesirable result.

The following qualifications were to be possessed by a member to be eligible for nomination by his ward and they are:



Vaikunta Perumal Temple

1. He must own more than a quarter of tax-paying land (*Kaani nilam*);
 2. He must live in a house built on his own site;
 3. His age must be below 70 and above 35;
 4. He must know the *mantra-brahmana*, i.e., he must know (the *Veda*) by teaching;
 5. If he owns one eighth of land, he must be proficient in *one Veda* and *one of the four Bhaashyaas* by explaining to others;
 6. He must be conversant with business;
 7. He must be virtuous and his earnings must be honest and
 8. He must not have been on any of the committees for three previous years.
- The following were the factors that would affect an immediate disqualification of the candidate:

1. (a) Defaulting persons (those who have not submitted financial accounts) and their relatives, however remote, who are thus specified, namely, the sons of the younger and elder sisters of his mother; (b) the sons of his paternal aunt and maternal uncle; (c) the step brother of his mother; (c) the step brother of his father; (e) his step brother; (f) his father-in-law; (g) the step brother of his wife; (h) the husband of his step sister; (i) the sons of his step sister; (j) the son-in-law who has married his daughter; (k) his father and (l) his son.



2. Incurable sinners and their relatives however remote for killing a brahmin; drinking intoxicating liquor; theft; adultery with the wife of one's spiritual teacher and associating with anyone guilty of these crimes.
3. Outcasts until they perform the necessary expiatory ceremonies.
4. Those who are mentally or morally disqualified.
5. Those who have (i) taken forbidden dishes of any kind which is equivalent to drinking intoxicating liquor; (ii) become village priest; (iii) Committed incest; (iv) rode on an ass (which was a punishment for some offence and hence implied a conviction disqualifying the candidate); and (v) committed forgery.

The above, were inscribed on the 16th day of the fourteenth year of King Parantaka Chola.

Special qualifications were prescribed for the Judges and this is most evident in the Manur inscription: Judge to be elected should have at heart the village's welfare; he should be proficient in Dharmasastra; he should not have served in any village administrative committee five years before their election and once his tenure of five years is completed, he cannot be a judge for another five years. Furthermore, they were to pass an examination in legal texts to qualify as judges; they must be of sterling character and must have studied at least one Veda. The judge should give accounts of the fines collected when he demits office. Judges were fined heavily (in gold) to be paid to the village assembly if they gave wrong rulings.

Another significant point to be noted is the power of the village assemblies to amend the constitution. The village assembly had first met in the 12th year of King Parantaka Chola (918 A.D.) and drafted a constitution and it was brief and vague in certain areas. So, two years later, a more refined constitution was drafted. It can clearly be seen that this later constitution is

detailed, clear and shows certain amendments to the first one. Therefore, there was freedom to frame constitutions for elections to village assemblies, and such constitutions were written documents, drafted clause by clause with meticulous care and when necessity arose, they could be amended to give fuller participation to all members and express themselves in the affairs of the administration.

Prof. R. Nagaswamy remarks that in its entirety, the Uttaramerur inscription show how in every aspect of life the highest standard of democracy was enforced in the village, in complete correspondence to the Dharmasastras. It shows how the Chola ideal of democratic participation extended to a larger section of society, exerting at the same time constant vigil and scrupulous enforcement of the law, without favours or prejudices. He calls it the *grass root democracy*. It is thus a perfect example of how the theory and practice of Dharmasastras are not divorced from one another.

He also says that he first came to know about these neither from not from the then history books nor from his teachers in school and college, but from a book of *Paramacharya of Kancheepuram* that contains his teachings. In fact, Late *Sri T.N. Seshan*, when he was appointed as the Election Commissioner in 1990, was a bit dejected when he was appointed as Chief Election Commissioner and went and met Paramacharya who was 97 at that time. A visibly disappointed Seshan came to meet Paramacharya who 97. Paramacharya immediately sensed the cause of Seshan's disappointment and counselled him to treat the transfer as an opportunity granted by God to serve the Indian public. He had suggested Seshan visit the Uttaramerur temple and read through the details of electoral regulations prevalent in India about well over 1,000 year ago, including qualifications of candidates that can contest elections.

In the words of Sri Seshan, "The credit for Electoral reforms must go to *Kanchi Mahaswami*, but for whom this would not have been possible. At 97, He had such clarity and described minute details of the electoral rules embossed on the northern walls of the Uttaramerur temple and mentioned to me that even implementing a tenth of those reforms, would be a great service to India". The rest is history.

In the words of columnist, TJS George, "Seshan showed what one man could do to ensure that democracy did not become a hydra-headed monster. In time, Seshan retired in 1996 and the monster was set free".

In conclusion, it was wonderful that India's Prime Minister had shared on national stage, about the inscriptions on the walls of the temple in Uttaramerur temple so that everyone across the country could get the opportunity to know the richness of India's culture. The Vishnu



temple in Uttaramerur is very unique since the same was built by *Viswakarma* and it is the *first Ashtanga vimanam* to be constructed. The Vimana in the *Ashtalakshmi temple in Besantnagar*, Chennai was designed and built copying this vimanam only.

Uttaramerur is certainly a place to visit to know and understand the richness of India!!!