

# **A Comparative Analysis on Panchayats, Gamsabha and Rural Administrative System in Ancient Sri Lanka**

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The main objective of this research paper is devoted to bring to light of history, expansion, evaluation and administrative functioning of both village Panchayats (Council of Five Elders) in India and Gam Sabha or proposed Jana Sabha (Village Council – peoples' council) in Sri Lanka. Due attention was focused on the ethos and demeanors of the village people. The pattern of relationship between Panchayat Raj institutions and also village council and state Government has been a subject of controversy, which is in fact related to the nature of Panchayat Raj and village council themselves.

## **Introduction**

The word “Panchayat” literally means “Council of Five Elders” chosen to look after the welfare for the village. The leader or headman of the Panchayat is called ‘Sabhápathi’ – President and its Councilors are known as ‘Members’. An ancient village in India was considered more or less a self- supporting, miniature ‘Republic’. It produced its own food and clothing. It managed its own affairs and meted out justice to the satisfaction of villagers. The Panchayat was responsible for all round development, peace, law and order and happiness of the community. When the Panchayat decides on something, it was seldom challenged.

The ideological basis of the Panchayat Raj Institutions was provided by the Balwant Raj Mehta committee report. After evaluation of the functioning of common development programs, the committee recommended the three tier structure of Panchayat Raj. The common development programme was merged in the scope of Panchayat Raj Institutions. Now a days the Panchayat Raj Institutions are entrusted with the task of rural development. It has completed about five decades of its working. It is necessary to evaluate the working of Panchayat Raj Institutions.

The purpose, strength and success of the Panchayat Raj Institutions depend heavily on the creation and development of the right type of leadership which could hopefully achieve Panchayat Raj Institutions to benefit all people including the weaker section of the community.

### **Origin and Development of Panchayat Raj**

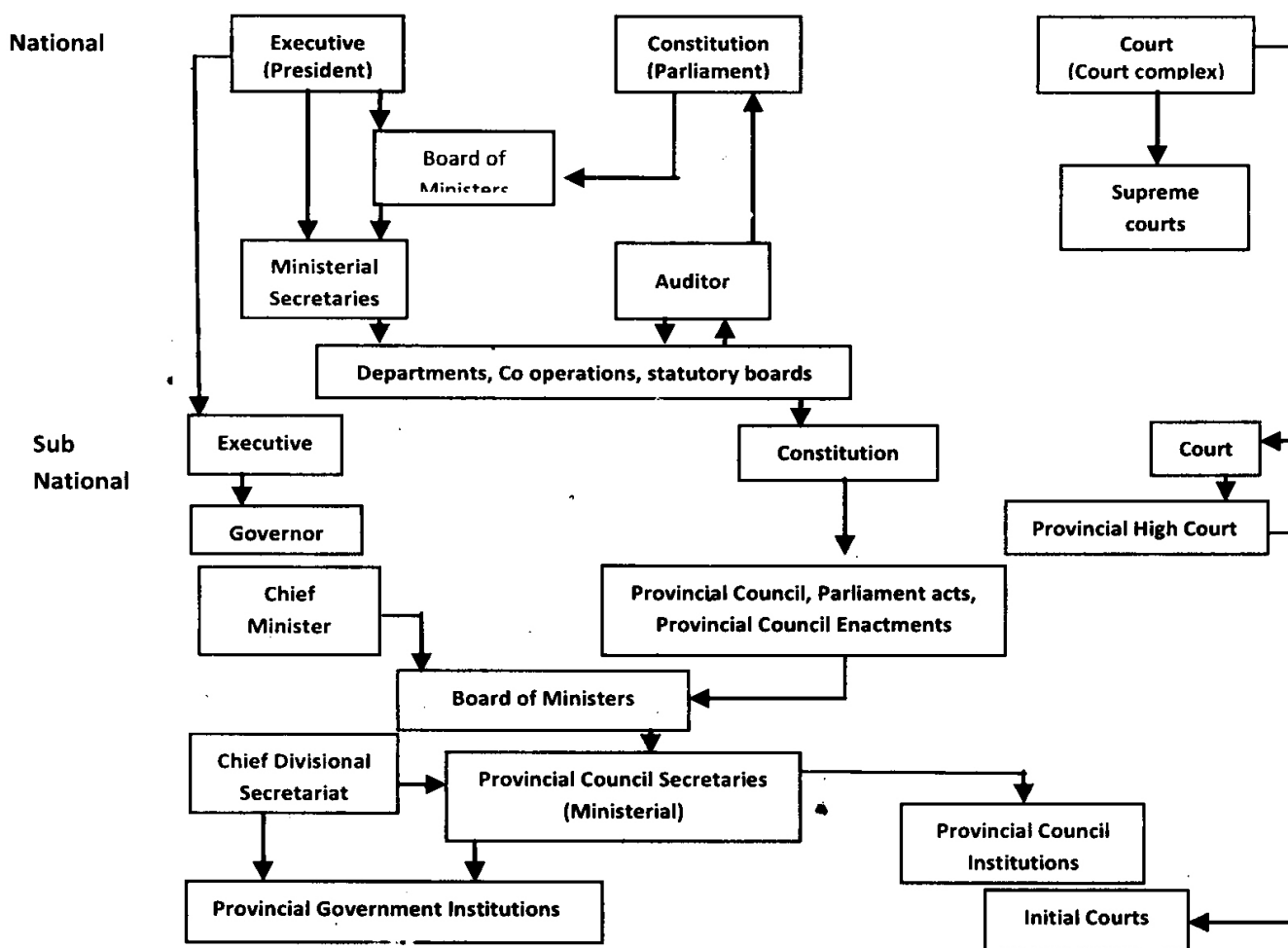
A strengthened democracy replaces a weak democracy and paves the way for good governance replacing weak governance. Though democracy as a system of government has been the concern of the scholars from very ancient times, and good governance came to the spotlight very recently, the implied demands of good governance and real democracy are not very much different, perhaps, because the defining concepts of good governance have been evolved from those of real democracy. A democratic institution is expected to respond to the people's needs. Positively and contractively, effectively and purposefully; the same is expected from a system of good governance. Active and direct participation of the people in government is a prerequisite for ensuring liberty and equality for people. (Aristotle, 1946, cha IX:163-169) Democracy as the 'rule by the people' is interpreted as a system where people are the sovereign and all citizens are politically equal (David, 2000:7-9).

Panchayat Institutions have been amongst the oldest political institutions of India and the very use of the term has deeply nostalgic association tending to take the mind to the distant past. Panchayats are bases for popular government at all levels and in many respects. Literally, a Panchayat (from Sanskrit 'panca', "five"), consists of five members, but usually there are more: the Panchayat has a policy committee, however, often numbering five.

Most Panchayat have a permanent head (Sarpanch, "Head of Five"), who is a permanent member; the position is often hereditary. Non hereditary committee members are selected on the basis of merit. Meetings are held in a ritual occasion, such as a marriage or funeral; by special summons, heralded by the caste summoner, the caste barbar on certain occasions join themselves in the annual festival.

We get glimpses of local administration in Tamilagam from the literature of the Sangam Age. Two terms Manram and Podiyil (Malaviya: 45) are referred to Tamil works. Mandram has been explained as the open place in the centre of the village, where the people meet together. Perhaps it was the public place which was called 'Poduvil' or

'Podiyil' usually conducted under the Banyan tree. Social festivities and sacrifices were given to the gods (Malaviya: 45)



**Fig. 1**  
**Graph of an approval process**

## The Vedic Age

The village during the Vedic age was administered by a respected official, advised by a council of elders. The Ramayana cites a village leader of great prestige called Gramini, who was held in high esteem “so much so that when Rama killed Ravana, the happy gods, in singing praises to him, compared him to a general and a Gramini” (The Rigveda: 309) Gramini enjoyed high status in the village and that can be noted further more at the royal consecration. So we can say that Gramini was probably

the head of the village administration. The post carried considerable prestige and is described to be the object of the highest ambition of a Vaisya. The king exercised his powers over the village through the Gramani.

### **Local Administration under the Cholas**

While the central government concerned itself with external defense, the maintenance of internal peace and order, the promotion of the general prosperity and cultural advancement of the empire rested with the village assemblies which were noted for their vigor and efficiency. One of the most striking features of the Chola organization was the efficient local administration in villages, in the towns and the districts. Ur and Sabha, denoting the village assemblies, were the common names log which they were known and this is amply proved by the large number of Chola inscriptions. The Sabha, was an assembly associated with the Brahmin villages, called "Agraharams" or "Chaturvedimangalams" 'Kudi' and 'Perungudi,' the Tamil literature, refers to 'Sabha' and 'Maha Sabha' respectively. The members of the Sabha were called 'Perumakkal'; and 'Tiruvadiyar' was another term employed for them.

On the west wall of the Vaikuntha Perumal Temple, a record of the Chola king Parakesarivarman, dated in his fourteenth year, contains a letter from the king to the villages regarding disqualifications for appointments (Rengacharga, 1938, Vol.1:390). The inscription is one of the most valuable documents in South Indian constitutional history. It throws light on the committee system of village government, the method of village administration by the assembly and the qualification for membership. Inscriptions on the South wall of the Vaikuntha Perumal Temple records the twenty first year of the Ganga Pallava King Dantivikramavarman, a resolution of the village assembly (Ibid: 194).

Inscription on the same wall, recorded in the eighth year of Chola king Raja Kesarivarman, a resolution of the village assembly is included.(Ibid) Other inscriptions on the same wall contains a record of the Rastrakuta king Kannaradeva (Krishna-III) who conquered 'Kanchi' and 'Janjai' in his twenty fifth year, and also a resolution of the village assembly, regarding fines (Ibid: 195).

The 'Ur' or 'Sabha' had an executive body known as 'Aluanganan' or the ruling group. There were learned Brahmanas or Bhattas among the ruling members of this Sabha. The village assembly functioned through its committees called 'Variyam', a word

with 'Varya' as root, meaning 'selected or chosen'. The numbers of the village Assembly differed according to the size of the village and its population. The Mahasabhas carried out many functions-fiscal, managerial and judicial. The members of the committees were not remunerated for their services. (Ibid. 144)

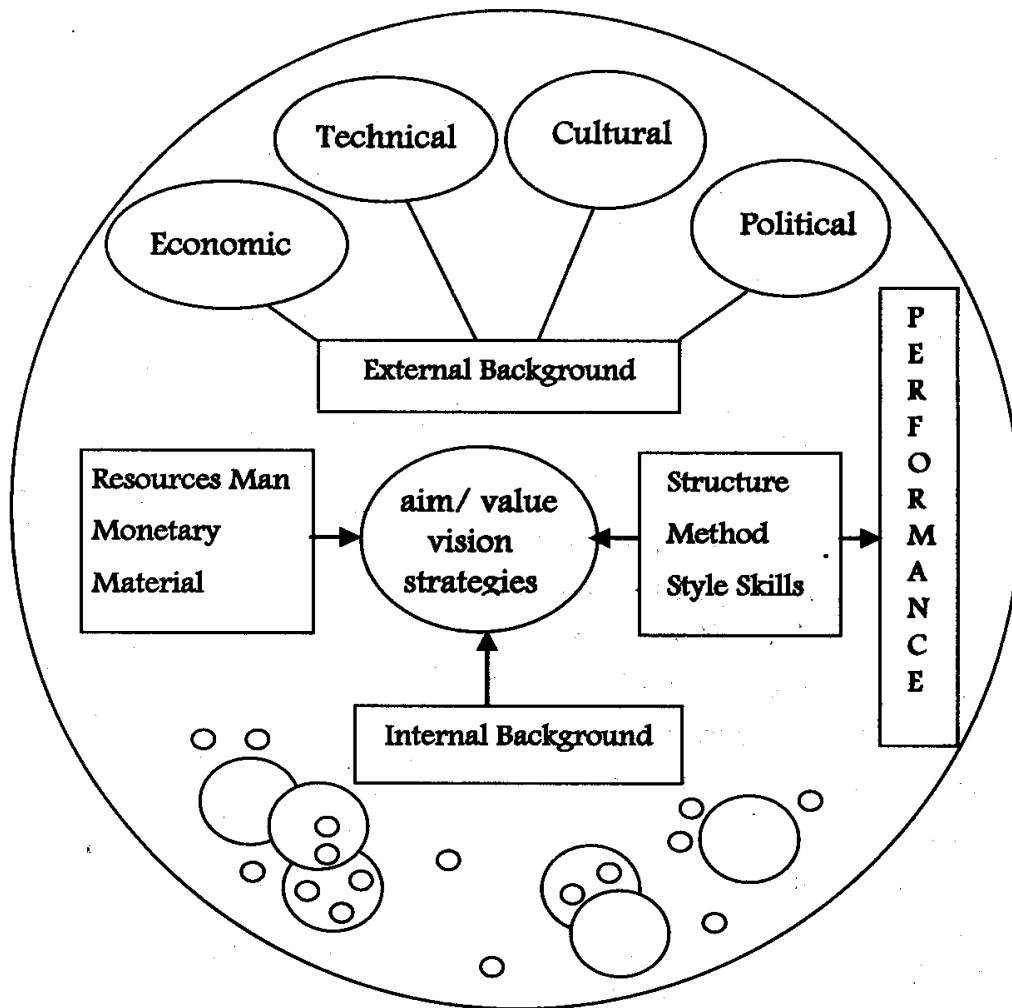
The Uttaramerur inscriptions record the resolutions of the Sabha regarding the institution of the Variyams or the Boards. We learn from these resolutions that these qualifications were prescribed for the membership of the committees. The village in that case consisted of thirty wards and members were selected of these wards on the basis of the prescribed qualifications, these qualifications related to the ownership of property, residence in the locality, age between 35 and 70, knowledge of the Vedas, age (Ibid. 13).

Among the eligible persons the selection was made by placing their names written in separate scripts of dudgeon leaves are put in a pot and a young boy picks up the leaf. The person indicated by the chosen scrip was elected and this election was chosen by lot and lot by the modern system of ballot. This system was called 'Kuilavelai'. The committees were allocated to them according to their duties and they were called Varigapperumakkal relating to one function or another.

## **Evaluation of Local self Government under British Regime**

Although the British government established its rule throughout length and breadth of the country, it weakened the age old Panchayat system. But at a later stage, with a view to preserve and stabilize its political control over rural areas, an effort was made to devalue powers to local bodies because the autonomous village is best described by Matcalf. "The village committees are little republics, having heavily everything decided within themselves. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down, revolution proceeds revolutions, but the village community remains the same. This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has considered more than any other cause to the preservation of the peoples of India and the enjoyment of freedom and independence" (Mukerji, 1939:2-4). In this regard, credit goes to governor, through his efforts could not meet with success due to opposition of his countrymen and other English Civil servants working in India. But it was the beginning of a spirit which pervaded the future course of evaluation of local self-government in India for the next half century (Nehru, 1963:320-321). As Tinker remarked "the most considerable innovation proposed by Lord Rippon in 1882 was the establishment of a network of rural local bodies.

The non-cooperation in implementation killed Rippon's proposal because these resolutions had been neglected by the ancient foundation of village system and a super structure of the rural local government was imposed from above. As the Royal commission on Decentralization (1907) said, the foundation of any stable edifice which shall associate the people with the administration must be the village, as being an area of much greater antiquity than administrative creations such as these and one in which people are known to one another and have interests which converge on definite and well recognized objects like water supply and drainage (Ibid. 4).



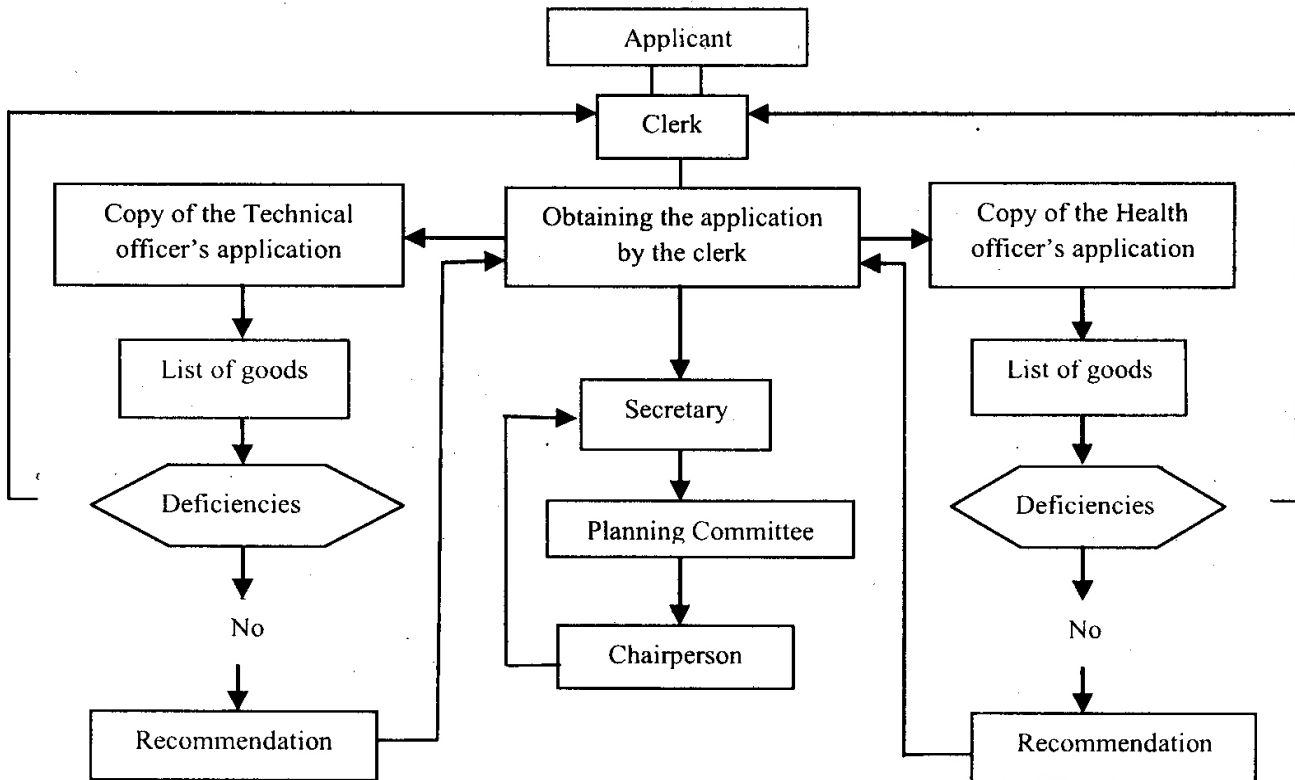
**Fig. 2**  
**Involvement of personnel, groups and sections in administration**

## **Panchayats and the Nationalist Movement**

The Indian National Congress first recognized the importance of the village Panchayats in 1909. The crucial issue of local self government was taken up in 1907 by a Royal commission on Decentralization. The secretary of state for India at that time regretted the non-implementation of the 1882 reservation on decentralization presented by the then Viceroy Lord Rippon (Ibid.31). The congress party's 24<sup>th</sup> session in December 1909 passed the following resolution.

The congress's satisfaction that the secretary of state has recognized that the Local Self- Government scheme of 1882 a trial and has pressed on the Government of India the necessity of an ineffectual advance in the direction of making Local, urban and rural bodies really self-governing and it advances the earnest hope that the Government will be pleased to take early steps to make all local bodies from village Panchayats upwards elective with elected non official Chairman and to support them with adequate financial aid(Zamova,1972:21).

The same resolution was considered to be significant in the 25<sup>th</sup> congress session at Allahabad, December 1910. At this stage, however, Panchayats' revival did not arouse enthusiasm because "The reports of speeches on the Resolution at the Allahabad Congress had more in mind the affairs of municipal and district boards, and the references of village Panchayats are only casual"(Ibid. 21). The recommendations of the Decentralization Commission were not fulfilled so that at the 28<sup>th</sup> congress session at Kanchi, December 1913, a resolution regretting the non implementation of the decision of the Commission was passed. The congress urged a new measure with powers and resources for Local units (Ibid. 22)



**Fig. 3**  
**Graph of a Body of District and Local Administrative Officers**

### **Gandhi's Concept of Village Panchayats**

In January 1915, Mahatma Gandhi arrived from South Africa after a revolt spread racism and experiments in Ahimsa. On February 14, 1916, in a Madras Missionary Conference, Gandhi for the first time referred to the Panchayat following the Swadeshi spirit, he observed, that the indigenous institutions and the village Panchayats held for the future of India great prospects. (Ibid. 21) However, congress concern for Swaraj (self-rule) and the decentralization relegated the Panchayat to the background for same time. The essential safeguard of real democracy as well as its self speeches recording to Gandhi was Panchayat Raj. He thought that this was the "self government" or "Home Rule" which was demanded by the people for ever early days of the freedom movement. "Democracy required", he said, "that Panchayats man or woman, should realize his or her own responsibility. This was meant by Panchayat Raj. When Panchayats Raj was established, the public decided that, there should not be violence further. In the Panchayat Raj, the Panchayat will be obeyed and the Panchayat can only



work through the Law of its own making". Indeed, Gandhi believed that what was good for the people could not be accomplished by legislation, or decision coming from the top. He said, "such a thing coming from below is easy to follow, coming from above, it is liable to prove a dead weight" "The centre of power", Gandhi said. "is in New Delhi or in Calcutta and Bombay in the big cities. I will distribute it among the 700,000 villages in India". This means that there is no power. Louis Fisher, who told this in 1942, was puzzled by the strangeness of this work. To explain his point, Gandhi used symbolic language. He said "I want Rs.100000 now invested in the Imperial Bank of India withdrawn and distributed among the Rs 200,000 villages. Then each village will have Rs.50 which cannot be lost" Gandhi meant that it not be lost, if there was voluntary cooperation on which his new order would rest. Louis Fisher, pursuing the idea of the symbolic Rs. 50.00 asked Gandhi "what will the villages do with the rupees?" Gandhi speaks "firstly the share holders get no return. Intermediaries take it away. If the villages are masters of their rupees they will use them as they think best. Fisher asked that "a peasant buries his money in the ground". "They will not bury their Rupees in the ground," Gandhi argued "because they will have to live. The rupees will go back to their own bank and they will utilize them under their direction for the purpose they think best. They may then build Windmills or produce electricity or whatever they like. A central government will evolve and it will act according to the wishes of the people and will be broad based on their will"

It seems that Gandhi was pulling his weight in one direction on the paradigm of forces. I think that there was more than novelty in a remark made in 1940. "Sometimes a man lives in his day dreams". I live in mind and picture the mind as full of good human beings not goody-goody human beings" (Ibid. 29).

Even before freedom was won, the Congress socialist had provided the overweight against Gandhi's anarchical ideas which had formed a consistent and coherent whole through the previous decades. In 1940, the controversy came to a mind when doubt was expressed about the interpretation of the Independence pledge. As Rammanohar Lohia interpreted it, the pledge was inclusive of the charka and for village industries and economic activities; nevertheless, it was necessary that anyone who took the pledge must be ready to express his positive faith in the principal of decentralized economy", Gandhi was asked to generally agree with Lohia, but he chose to give his interpretation in his own way as follows. "The pledge is not exhaustive. It represents the limit to which I might say the working committee with me. If I can convert the country to my point of view, the social order of the future will be based predominantly on the charka

and all in Lohia". Having said this, he explained that the pledge will include everything that promises the wellbeing of the villages "I do visualize electricity, ship-buildings, art works, and machine – making and the like, existing side by side with village crafts. But its order of dependence will be reversed. Hitherto to industrialization has been so advanced as to destroy the villages and village crafts. I do not share the socialist belief that industrialization of the production of the necessities of life will be conducive to villages' welfare, when the centralized industries are planned and owned by the state" Gandhi probably succeeded in achieving a kind of resultant of forces, because in a business vein, he said; "like the fabled men who quarreled over the division of the Swaraj before it was bough, we argue and quarrel over our different programs before Swaraj has come (Ibid. 29).

When Swaraj seemed to be round the corner, Gandhi once more reverted to the day dream of his own a decentralized economy in a decentralized policy. Power Swaraj had already revealed its ugly face in India. Dark and mighty social forces seemed to be hearing, and a strange fatality seemed to be hanging about them. He wrote his essay, content of Independence outline of a social order, in this mark atmosphere and in a mood of deep introspection. This essay was lost in the confusion of them. It deserves better attention today than it received either in 1946 or soon after independence. In my view, this essay contains the quintessence of his social philosophy. I shall quote some of his terse and luminous passages, in the order in which they appeared, with my humble running commentary providing a link in the thinking of his rigorous reasoning.

Gandhi said,

1. "Indian independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or Panchayat having powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self – sustained and capable of managing its own affairs, even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. It will be trained to perish in the attempt to defend itself against only onslaught from without".
2. Ultimately, it is the individual who is the unit. But this does not exclude dependence on the willing help from neighbors or from the world. It will be free and voluntary play of mutual forces. Gandhi was thinking of village republic, free to manage their own affairs, united by mutual aid to the extent of joint defense against any external aggression. The individual is the unit in an equalitarian organization united by natural aid to the extent of joint defense against any external aggression. The individual is the unit in an equalitarian organization and willing cooperation. The relations of the

individual as a whole with the outside world are to be governed by the same principles of solidarity. Such solidarity cannot obviously be established and sustained unless the level of consumption is such as even the humblest individual can reach.

3. "Such a society is necessarily highly cultured in which everyone knows what he or she wants, and, what is more, knows that no one should want something that the others cannot have with equal labor" we find here a definition of "culture". The essence of culture, according to Gandhi, lies in something what one really wants not a senseless pursuit of wants by others. Also, the essential point is that if one wanted anything that others cannot have with equal labor, there is exploitation and violence as well as inequality that violence helps to create and sustain.

What pattern of a large society would emerge the aggregation of village republic? Gandhi was opposed to a stratified society, structured according to the needs of concentration of economic and political power. This was contrary to Gandhi's humanist conception of freedom. Some of his observations coming next have a combination of poetic imagery and a good deal of sophistication.

In this structure composed of innumerable villages there will be ever –widening, never conceding circles. Life will not be a pyramid with apex sustained by bottom. But a will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be always ready to perish for the circle of villages till at last state becomes one life composed of individuals never aggressive in their arrogance, but they humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle, of which the integral parts therefore, the outer most circumference will not yield power to crush the inner parts, but derive its own strength from it.

A sub-urban village India was likely to be exposed to ridicule in a political atmosphere in which the urban politicians were beginning to dream of the power politics and power structure of the usual run of democracies. Who but Gandhi could at least express of the rock- bottom reality of freedom? Gandhi understood the realities of the situation. He thought he must pull his entire weight on the side of particular time of force in the parallelogram of forces. What he said clearly larded his mind "I may be taunted with the retort that this is all utopian and, nevertheless, not worth a single thought. If Euclid's point, though incapable of being drowned by any human agency, has an imperishable value, my picture has its own for the sake of living. Let India live for this true picture though never realized in its businesses. we must have a proper picture of what we want before we can have anything approaching it if ever there is to be a republic

of every village in India, but I claim to verity for my picture in which the last is equal to the first, or in other words, no one is to be the first and none the last” (Mukerji, 1953).

India became independent on August 15, 1947. A constituent Assembly was properly organized to draft a constitution for the new nation. In the first drafts of the constitution there was no mentioning of the village Panchayats. Mahatma Gandhi believed this omission and called for “immediate attention if our independence is to what the people’s voice. The greater the power of the Panchayats the better for the people” The primers of the constitution drew inspiration from Gandhi’s concept of self rule. His idea “my idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic independent of its villagers for its vital wants and yet independent for many others in which dependence is necessary. The government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons, annually elected by the adult villages, male and female, possessing prescribed qualifications. There will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual judgment.

Accordingly, a Directive principle was embodied in the Indian constitution (Article 40, pt.iv) that state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.

## **Grama Sabhā and Gamsabha**

The Grama Sabhā has been envisaged as the foundation of the Panchayat Raj system in India. It shall perform such functions and exercise such powers as may be entrusted to it by the State Legislation.

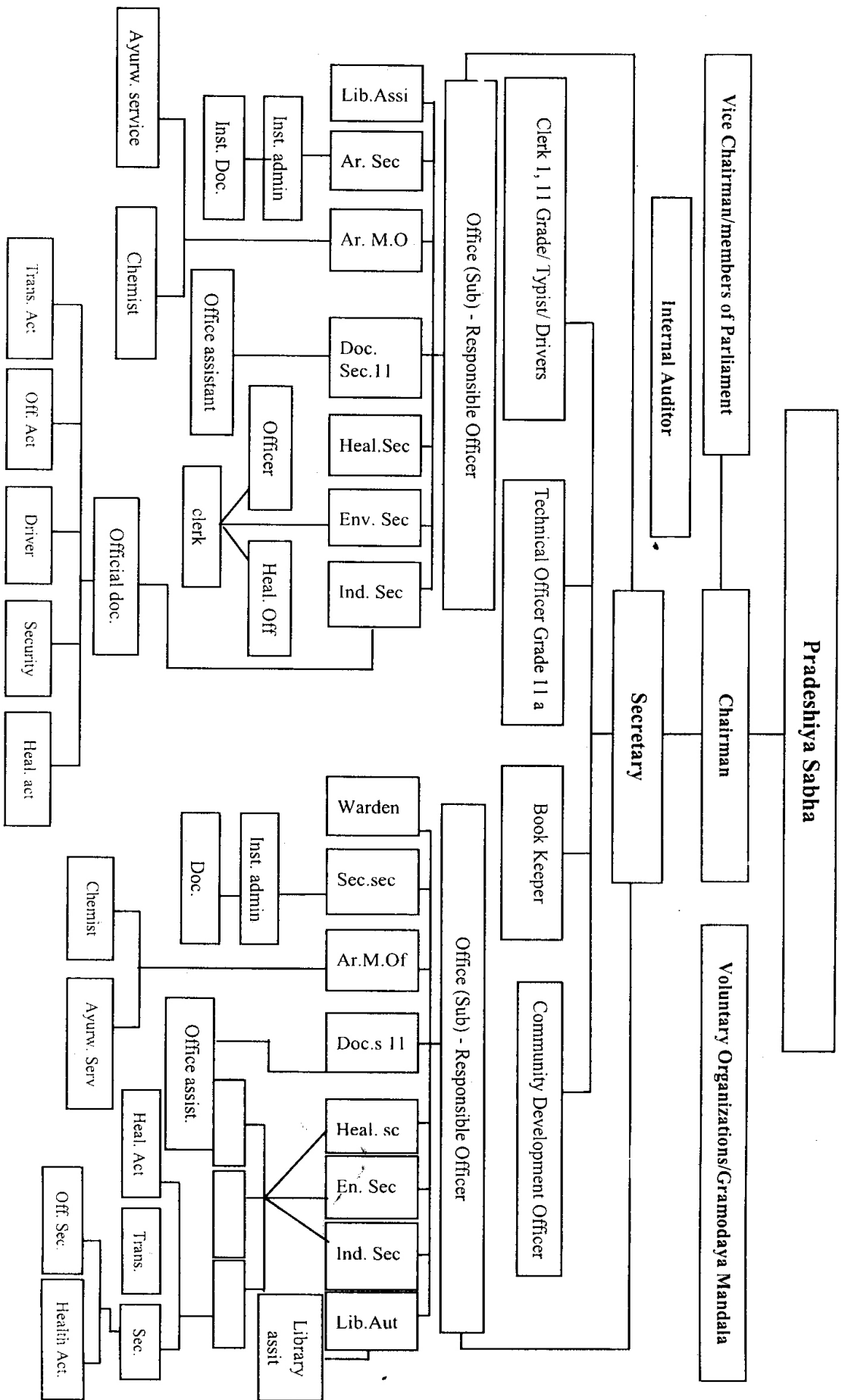
Information is available about Panchayats in India in the 7-10 Centuries A.D during the reign of Pandya, Pallava and Chola dynasties. Before that period, system of Gamsabhā was established in Sri Lanka as well.

The Literary sources of the fourth century B.C (MV,xxvi) show that Gamsabhā existed in the island in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Some of the researches conducted by Paranavitana and Nicholas reveal that lots of Brahmi inscriptions which belong to the period from 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. to 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. consist of Gamsabhā had spread all over

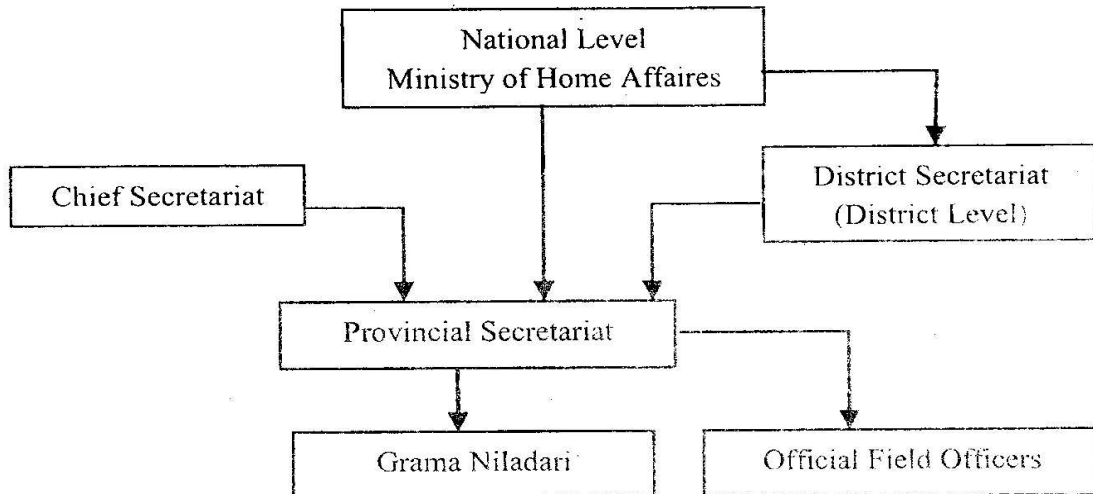
the island and that those institutions possessed lands and other properties. It also reveals that members in these institutions owned private properties and lands and they held called 'Kawaranka' (ASCAR, 1932:19). Titles known as 'Gamika' or 'Gramani' refer to chief people in a village (Paranavitana, 1931:49-53). Information indicated through inscriptions and literary sources reveal that the Gamsabhā consisted of leaders or headmen in the village and out of them too, the one who was crowned in seniority, activeness, justice, knowledge and understanding was elected as the chairman of the Gamsabha. Sometimes the post of the chairmanship was owned by descent.

Just as Panchayats in India, Gamsabhās in Sri Lanka too have sprung up and developed as rural administrative institutions from the early historical period (Andagama, 1997:3). During its historical evolution, it has faced various turning points and challenges. The responsibilities of the early Gamsabhā included irrigation, water management and provision of required services to villagers and maintenance of tanks, rivers and dams. Gamsabhā which consisted of seniors of the village had as its duties administrative affairs, preserving law and order and also protection of religion along the progress of Gamsabhā. Through those from the commencement itself, citizens and villages engaged in developmental activities practically and carried out a self government. Unfortunately only little information is available about the content, powers and duties of the Gamsabhā in Sri Lanka. Even if so, the way how villagers developed Gamsabhā from a voluntary service to a statutory board can be shown.

As mentioned above, activities conducted in Gamsabhā were launched under several sections. According to historical information, sometimes Sub-Committees have been established to relevant duties (EZ, Vol. 111, No 4:C.36-37, D 32-39). Accordingly committees had been appointed such as 'Committees of Eight People' to activate general administrative functions, Committees of Forests and Wastelands, Committees of Taxes and Fines and Committees of Paddy Fields. A similar system of such committees existed in Panchayats in India especially in periods such as those of Chola dynasty (Andagama, 1997:27) namely Committees of Administration, Committees of Gardens and of Irrigation, Committees of Paddy Fields, (lands), Committee of Budget and Committees of Roads which represent various institutions. This clearly manifests that the duties, functions and the number of officers in both Panchayat and Gamsabhā are similar to each other a greater extent.



**Fig. 4**  
**Official Structure of a Pradeshiya Sabha (of Local Nature)**



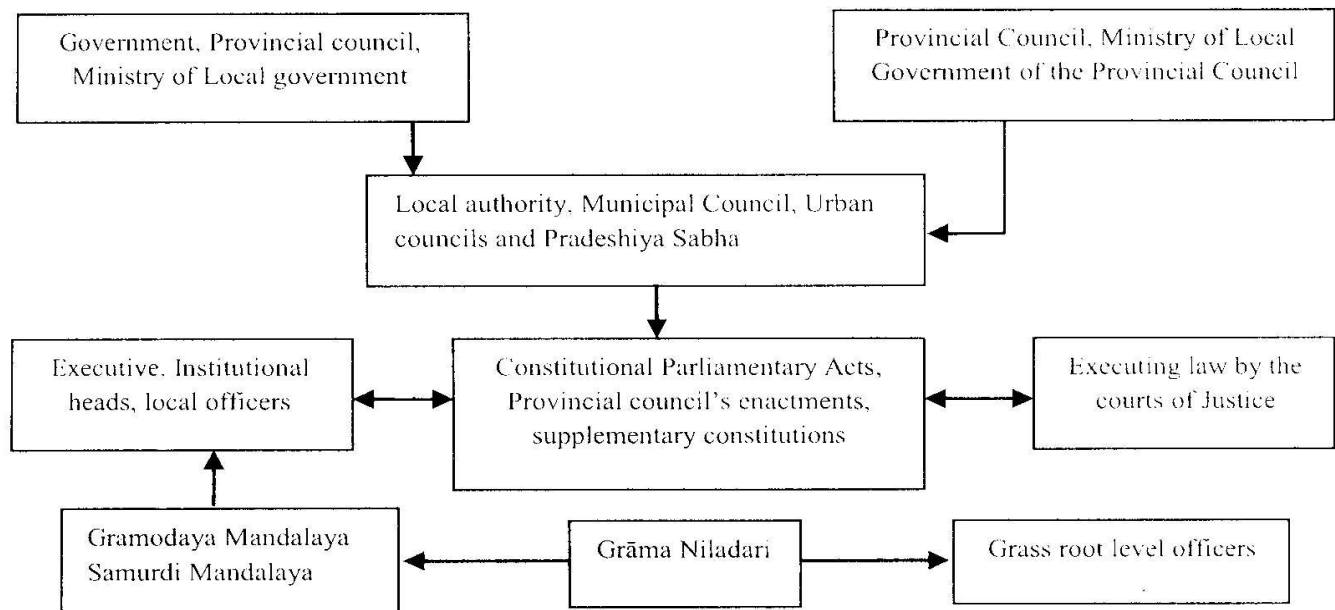
**Fig. 5**  
**District Administrative System**

A village is centered around a Wewa (manmade tank or lake) and through Gamsabhā which consisted of chief people in each village, they activated their own administrative functions without any impacts influenced from the government in the village. It was very rare for the king or the central government to involve even slightly in anything conducted by the Gamsabhā which were rural self-governing institutions for centuries. Example can be seen during the period of king Udaya III and king Mahinda IV. Even such involvement was no harm to Gamsabha and they were further strengthened and got legal power (Codrington, 1938:65). However, when the kingdom was shifted to the East, slight changes took place in Gamsabhā and Gamsabhās which were adapted to the specific needs of each village were spreading and activating. Democracy was highly maintained in the system of Gamsabhā in Sri Lanka. When it comes to the Kandyan period (16-19 centuries A.D), while the countries were divided as 'upcountry', 'Mahadisa' and 'Disa' under the rule of the king, the Gamsabhā in the village remain the same as the administrative center.

Under the British rule in 1816, the system of Gamsabha was abolished. Instead of dividing administrative institutions as four Mahadissa, nine Dissa and countries, in 1833, the entire country was directed to a rule of Disapathi (Government Agent) and later in 1948, it was divided into provinces and 19 districts. In 1861 committees of roads were appointed under the supervision of Government Agent and they were abolished in 1951. In 1866 Municipal Councils were established in Colombo and Kandy and till 1947 they developed into fourteen. In 1871 Gam Kārya Sabha were established. From 1948 till

1980 these village councils evolved as 'Gamsabhā'. In 1981 Gamsabhā were abolished and at that time 549 Gamsabhās were functioning. From then onwards 'Developmental Committees' did the job of Gamsabhā. In 1892, in small towns, Sanitary Boards were established. In 1893 Provincial Boards similar to Sanitary Boards were established. By activating the decision to remove Sanitary Boards in 1941, Small Urban Councils were established in 1946. Accordingly, twenty four Sanitary Boards became Small Urban Councils. In 1981 when the powers of Small Urban Councils were assigned to developmental boards, eighty nine Urban Councils were existing. In 1931, under the proposals of reframing Provincial Councils, twelve Urban Councils were established. They developed into 37 Urban Councils in 1997.

The above eighty three Small Urban Councils and five hundred forty nine Gamsabhās till 1981 were abolished and those administrative activities were assigned to 24 Developmental Committees. This condition led to a drawback in the arena of provincial administration in Sri Lanka. Though Grāmōdaya Mandala was established for them, they too were not successful. In 1987, local government system (see figure 2) was introduced. Yet it too did not attain a success. In 1988 Provincial Councils were introduced and they are still continuing. (Abayawardhana, 1977:2-20) At the moment, several problems have arisen about those institutions.

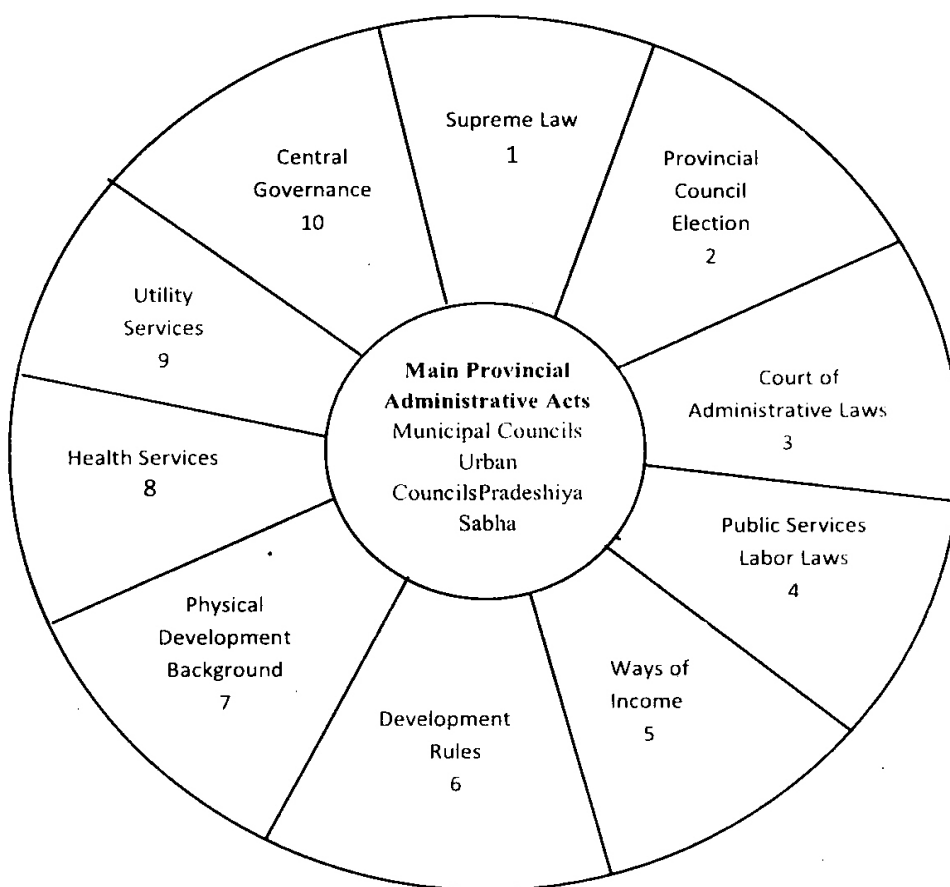


**Fig. 6**  
**Local Administrative System**



Accordingly, through the reformation of the constitution, government administrative responsibilities can be divided into five stages as national, semi-national, district, regional and villages. Among those, Provincial Councils in regional level (see figure 1 and 2) can be introduced as democratic administrative bodies. The objective was to develop the country through those institutions by providing a great service. Yet it seems that those objectives have not yet been realized as expected.

In a way, it can be expected that conflict qualities in present institutions have affected the structure of the institutions such as Gamsabhā which have adjusted to a local administrative system. Regional geophysical social units, namely villages, nagarams and cities (EZ.1:129, 11:140,141,146) which were earlier referred to as ‘Gama, Nigama (gāma), Pattagāma and Pura (cities) (MV.cha.iv:163) in sources consisted of their own characteristics. Yet they are really connected in their function. Apart from these, permanent units such as ‘Ratta’ and ‘Janapada’ which were introduced from time to time were also there. With the evolution of time, at present, these institutions have changed names but their functions remain the same. The latest institutions which were introduced for village development are Jana Sabhas or Peoples’ Councils.



**Fig. 7**  
**Legal Background for provincial governance in Sri Lanka**

The objective of setting a system of Jana Sabha Offices or Secretariats at village level is to integrate all community organizations and to facilitate the masses to become partners and actively involved in the development of the country. Also through these Secretariats, it is expected to mobilize the masses and coordinate with the grass root level officials to identify the development work and projects required in each area. Accordingly, those officers are able to closely monitor the progress and implementation of these projects and speed up the development activities. A graduate from the area will be appointed as a Jana Sabha Secretary and the other members of the Secretariat will be the Samurdhi Officer, the Village Service Officers (Grama Seva Niladhari), the Health Officer, and the Agricultural Development Officer. The Jana Sabha Secretary is required to take appropriate action for obtaining relevant approval, launch the projects and monitor implementation and commissioning in coordination with the officials. In this connection people in relevant areas are able to initiate proposals on the development needs of their areas and thus actively participate in the development of the country. Through this, only necessary activities will be planned and prevent unnecessary activities.

The Panchayats can be recognized as similar kind of organizations in India. The objective of these Panchayats is to strengthen people's participation in their own village development. Yet Jana Sabha is a purely Sri Lankan model. Some people say that a political influence can be seen in the Jana Sabha system. There's no doubt that as the every development programme and local administrative system of the country are activated by the central government the Jana Sabha system also may has a sound political relation like each and every country in the modern world.

The Indian Panchayats are totally organic formations and have absolutely no party politics. In short, the Indian Panchayats, in total contrast to these proposed Jana Sabhas, are neither politicized from the top nor politicized by the state. But it may be changed gradually in near future. All Jana Sabhas here would be indirectly centralized governing tools under the Ministry of Economic Development. All the households will be controlled from local authorities. It would be a network with a development cells in every GSN division, funded by the central government functioning good governance.

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**Figs. 1-7 Source: Abayawardhana, M.A.P. (1977)**

## Conclusion

Thus the Panchayat Raj system in India and Gamsabha system in Sri Lanka are the oldest institutions that had passed through various travels and tribulations. After independence, Indian and Sri Lankan governments have come to realize its importance and re-vitalized it for the efficient local governance through various committees.

Primarily setting up as an administrative apparatus for implementation of programmes for rural development, it now attempts to encompass all aspects of social life of the people at the grass root level. The village administrative system which was labeled under different names in different times had commenced in the pre historic period of Sri Lanka and gradually evolved according to the necessities of the country as a body to develop the village. With that feedback, the system of Jana Sabha is becoming a newly activating institution which consists of the village representatives themselves with the intention of developing the country. Accordingly, it is expected to activate developmental activities of both the village and the country formally. Yet, the system should be free of political facets if they are highly politicized.

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