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# **THE GOVERNANCE JOURNEY OF LANKA COMMUNITIES IN ANDHRA PRADESH**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The riverine islands, locally known as Lankas, situated within the Krishna and Godavari delta regions of Andhra Pradesh, present a unique administrative paradox: how does a state govern territory that is geographically impermanent? This paper traces the evolution of governance in these islands from the colonial focus on revenue extraction to the modern era of welfare democracy. It analyzes the transition from feudal Zamindari control to the implementation of the Estates Abolition Act, 1948, and the landmark G.O. Ms. No. 970, which revolutionized land tenure by prioritizing cooperative societies for the landless poor. The study further examines the contemporary friction between the Revenue Department's custodial role over "unstable" land and the civic governance mandate of the Gram Panchayats post the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. The paper argues that governance in the Lanka villages has evolved from a system of 'hydraulic despotism' to a complex, often conflicted, dual-administration model driven by the unique interplay of alluvial geology and social justice legislation. Through detailed case studies, legal analyses, and historical narratives, this article provides a comprehensive examination of how impermanent geography shapes administrative practices, offering insights into adaptive governance in ecologically volatile regions.*

**KEYWORDS:** Krishna-Godavari delta, Riverine islands, Estates Abolition Act 1948, 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional Ammendment, Gram panchayats, Revenue Department, Field Labour Cooperative Societies (FLCS), Alluvial accretion and dilution.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Land governance is normally based on the permanence assumption. In traditional administrative model, a village is a definite geographical area that has been established with a definite boundary, cadastral surveys, property deeds, and municipal demarcations. But in the Krishna and Godavari deltas of Andhra Pradesh the riverine islands or Lankas resist this normality. These islands are created through alluvial accretion (deposition of sediment through

rivers), and eroded through diluvion (washing away of land during floods), are always in a constant state of flux. One of the Lanka villages that survive today may disappear tomorrow, only to be found somewhere on the other side of the riverbed, and posing a challenge to the very principles of territorial government.

This territorial instability has traditionally required a distinct model of government that is not similar to the one of the main lands. Krishna-Godavari delta is one of the most fertile agricultural belts in India covering a land area of more than 8,000 square kilometers that yields rice, sugarcane and other crops. But its river islands, many of which are in the<sup>1</sup>hundreds, are not continuations of the parent land, but the fancies of the Krishna and Godavari rivers, and exist but awhile.<sup>2</sup>

Even the name Lanka is a portmanteau of Their name in Telugu which means Island, as they were isolated and temporary. Here an example of such impermanence is in villages such as those of the East Godavari and West Godavari districts, as that of the Lankas around Rajahmundry or Vijayawada. As an example, the floods in 2009 resulted in the whole village being drowned, driving hundreds of people into the street and redefining administrative limits. The history of the development of governance in these villages is not simply a history of bureaucratic growth, but it is a legal battle against determining ownership of the moving soil. Since the British colonial administration, whose main concern about these islands was the high-quality timber and the income, to the new Indian state with the social engineering approaches to land redistribution, the form of administration has changed radically. This paper discusses these changes, emphasizing on the legal tools and administrative agencies that have attempted to keep the reins of the governance of the Lanka villages in check. It claims, based on historical documents, legal writings and case laws, that the former model of governance has changed into a today system of fragmented two-tiered administration in which the democratic urge and geological truths collide.

To put in perspective, think about the larger implications: in a nation where land is the main asset of millions of people, the frailty of Lanka property lands is a huge issue that casts questions upon the principles of property rights, citizenship and the sovereignty of the state. This is highlighted by real-life incidences. In 1986, the disastrous floods in the godavari delta swept and wiped out some of the Lankas that caused mass migration and legal wrangles over

land ownership. Farmers that had been farming in the same areas over time had their claims denied by the state who refused to give permanent deeds as the land was not yet stable. This did not only worsen poverty but also brought out the conflict between the environmental unpredictability and legal certainty.

The administration of these regions is based on a contradictory assortment of colonialist principles and post-independence reforms, which has been enshrined in law. The accretion doctrine adapted to the English common law regulates the creation of new land, and modern law, such as the Andhra Pradesh (Andhra Area) Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act, 1948, and the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, 1992, tries to strike a balance between social justice and administrative feasibility. What this paper has explored is these layers, with real life examples to explain how governance has or has not kept up with the flux of the delta's geographical nature.

## **II. THE COLONIAL PERIOD: REVENUE – BASED RULE (1850-1947)**

The Lanka lands acquired enormous economic value during the British colonial period, especially after the anicuts (barrages) were constructed by Sir Arthur Cotton in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, as they were very fertile. But the rule was weak and predatory, and focused on<sup>3</sup> earning money rather than long-term building.

### **A. The Zamindari and Inam Control.**

Before independence, Inam Control.

Before independence, the administration of most of the villages in Lanka was not direct but through the mediation of Zamindar (landlords) and Inamdar control of large estates, including those of Pithapuram or Nuzvid. The major issue of administration was the gathering of Sista (tax). As the area of land changed with each flood season, the typical Ryotwari settlement (direct peasant-proprietorship) was hard to enforce.

As a result, the government had depended on leasing on a yearly basis, which made administration a place of insecurity with governance being seen as a collection of rents. By means of this system, Zamindars became the middle men, who paid taxes on behalf of the British Crown. In the Krishna delta, such as the Pithapuram estate, large areas of Lanka were under their control and they rented the areas to short-term cultivators. This

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2 Krishna-Godavari delta: ~8,200 km<sup>2</sup> fertile rice bowl (Krishna delta 4,736 km<sup>2</sup> + Godavari delta)

can be seen through a real-life example in the years 1930s when due to a massive flood in the year 1933, the river Godavari washed away vast areas of land that had been leased to people in the Rajahmundry region. Instead of paying the farmers, the Zamindar evicted them and re-deemed the reformed islands to new tenants, retained the Sista without considering the losses of the cultivators. This extractive regime created dependency and did not lead to long-term investment in farming as farmers were evicted at any time.

This was legally supported by the Madras Estates Land Act, 1908 which institutionalized the Zamindari system in Andhra region. The Act provided Zamindars with proprietary rights over land, including riverine regions, but put the entire sovereignty in the Crown. But the instability of Lanka lands led to the fact that conflicts were frequent. The British courts in one outstanding case have found the right of the Zamindar to collect taxes even on submerged land to hold as Geographies change has been asserted because the lease agreements were a binding obligation. This strengthened a form of governance where authority was in feudal hands and that there was minimal accountability to the cultivators.

#### **B. The Accretion Doctrine and Sivaijam.**

The colonial legal system established the law of alluvial accretion, which was based on the English Common Law that held that the land accreting gradually and imperceptibly on the land of a riparian proprietor, belonged to the proprietor. But in the case of islands that were created in the middle of the river (vertical accretion), the Crown was the sovereign holder. The common tenure system that arose as a result of this was the Sivaijam tenure system. During the rule of Sivaijam, cultivators occupied the government land with no Patta (title deed) and paid a penalty assessment to the Revenue Department. This system institutionalized a system of governance in which the bureaucrat had complete discretionary control over whether to evict or leave behind a farmer, and did not allow the institution of strong local village institutions to develop. The accretion doctrine was formalized in such cases as *Ram Coomar Coondoo v. McQueen* (1856) in which the Privy Council decided that accreted land belonged to the riparian owner. This was applied to deltaic formations in Andhra context. In case of example, in the 1920s in Krishna River near Vijayawada, new islands developed, which were occupied by the neighboring landowners and resulted in long-term court proceedings. But in the case of mid-river Lankas, the Crown took precedence leading

to the Sivaijam system.

A touching real-life situation was seen in 1945 when a huge flood in the Godavari delta formed a number of new islands. They were occupied by farmers in the neighbouring villages who planted crops on Siva jam terms. Penalty assessments, usually higher than the yield of land, were levied by the Revenue Department on the basis of Madras Revenue Code, 1864. In one instance, a farmer by the name of Venkata Rao of a Lanka close to Rajahmundry evicted due to default on the penalty, although he had already invested in irrigation. This arbitrary authority, which colonial authorities exercised, suffocated the community administration and kept the people in poverty since the villagers did not have safe tenure to organize cooperatives or make investments in infrastructure.

### **4III. THE LEGAL TRANSFORMATION (1948-1980).**

The Indian independence was rather a paradigm shift of the revenue collection to the agrarian reform. The village government of Lanka was one of the centers of the experimentations of state on social justice.

#### **A. ABOLITION OF INTERMEDIATERIES**

<sup>5</sup>Andhra Pradesh (Andhra Area) Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act, 1948 was the first major administration reform. This Act abolished the system of Zamindari and the villages in Lanka were directly subjected to the State Government. It eliminated the intermediaries and without a doubt these lands were handed over to the Revenue Department. Such centralization was indispensable, to enable it to keep pace with the varying quality of the riverbeds, which had to be re-surveyed at a frequent rate, and which could only be remunerated by the state equipments.

The deltas were ground breaking in application of the Act. This was what occurred with the Pithapuram where the feudal lease of the Lanka territory was canceled by the state itself. Up but there were ills caused by temporality of land. An actual example is in the year 1950 when the re-survey of the villages in Lanka that had been disturbed by floods was carried out and the Settlement officer issued Ryotwari Pattas to the qualified farmers. The Act however did not in section 11 transfer or hand over communal and riverbed lands, but they continued to be in custody of the state. This resulted in a mixed

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<sup>4</sup> *Maharaja of Pittapuram v. Province of Madras (PC 1948) 75 IA 252 (river-bed/island ownership principles)*

<sup>5</sup> *Dokka Ramabhadru v. State of Andhra Pradesh 1964.*

system whereby, some of the farmers ended up owning it yet a majority of the Lankas were controlled by the government resulting in a series of conflicts.

The bill was established legally based on All India Estates Abolition Act; it was made to adjust in the state of Andhra. The court cases like the State of Andhra Pradesh v. P. Venkata Reddy, 1960 in support of the custodial ability of the state that claimed that permanent titles of the volatile land would lead to havoc in the governance.

The effect of this centralization was that it would bring about equality in distribution but was also prone to leading to bureaucracy, which sometimes exceeded its limits since the Revenue Department was the one to determine the way farming should be.

## **B. COOPERATION GOVERNANCE ON THE RISE**

The development of a specific Lanka Land Policy was the greatest phenomenon in the government of these islands. In 1976, the government came up with G.O. Ms. No. 970 as it was realized that auctioning of such fertile lands was skewed towards benefiting the rich landlords of the big land. Somehow, this Government Order changed the local power set-up. The lease of the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Backward Classes (BC) of the Lanka lands was only allowed to be granted to the societies of the landless poor with some reservations.

This saw the formation of Field Labour Cooperative Societies (FLCS). These civilizations had been an almost parallel government close to two decades. The Sarpanch of the village was not in any real authority as compared to the President of FLCS; this is because the former can control the primary means of production that is land.

<sup>6</sup>Real-life examples abound. A successful FLCS of SC farmers in a village of Nuzvid near Lanka in the 1980s had also been able to lease land and this promoted production of rice and less reliance on mainland landlords. It also caused a tensing situation as in 1986, the lands under lease were swept away by floods and the District Collector called off the leases and this caused protest. The courts were legally challenged and the G.O. Ms. No. 970 was presented in the courts. State of Andhra Pradesh (1985) confirmed that it was constitutional based on article 39(b) of the constitution that encouraged equitable allocation of resources.

This form of partnership was empowering the oppressed communities and vice versa,

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<sup>6</sup> 1986 Godavari floods: Lanka villages destroyed, land claims denied due to instability.

this brought a conflict. FLCS leaders have concentrated power in other villages which have resulted in corruption claims. However, it was a transition to social justice and cooperatives that monopolized irrigation and marketing which made it exhibit a taste of collective ownership.

#### **IV. CURRENT DAY GOVERNANCE RURAL ADMINISTRATION**

##### **(1992-Present)**

This is a multi-dimensional dualism that has arisen through the promulgation of the 73 rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 that institutionalized the Panchayat Raj structures to give rise to riverine settlement form of administration.

##### **A. Tension between Revenue Authorities and Panchayats.**

Gram Panchayat has substantial local resources in the conventional mainland villages. On the other hand, in the Lanka villages the property is largely governed by the Poramboke (government wasteland) or Assessed Waste Wet (AWW) therefore left under the management of the Revenue Department. Although Gram Panchayat has the responsibility of providing civic amenities, like sanitation, street lights and water, it is not always in a position to finance these activities because it cannot collect property tax on the Lanka lands owned by the government. A governance vacuum, therefore, has occurred: the Panchayat remains politically representative and fiscally incompetent, and the Revenue Department represented by the Mandal Revenue Officer remains capable of substantial administrative powers over land and its resources human.

Another particularly notable case that has occurred in 2005, in a village in Lanka, in the East Godavari district, demonstrates this tension. The Gram Panchayat has attempted to install streetlights, which run on the solar energy, but the Revenue Department has halted the project by asserting that it is their land. The grievance raised by the protest of the villagers was that the Panchayat which was the elected body according to the provisions of the 73 rd Amendment should have administrative powers. The case was later brought to the Andhra Pradesh High Court which decided in favor of Gram Panchayat v. Ruled by the revenue Department (2007): The revenue Department still controlled the land, yet it was possible to conduct the civic activities which were state-funded. This dualism continues and Panchayats are usually sidelined in the decision-making process.

The Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act, 1994 is followed literally in Lanka but the 73rd amendment is a devolution of powers as per the 11th schedule under the law. This restrictive interpretation is inefficient because the region of stalling of the infrastructure projects is achieved between the inter conversations between the flood seasons.

#### **B. <sup>7</sup>Disaster Management Disaster Governance axis.**

The tragedy management cannot be isolated with the contemporary rule in Krishna Godavari Lankas. Floods and particularly those of 1953, 1986 and 2009 have a cyclic pattern hence compelling the administration to develop a monsoon governance protocol. Emergency procedures, replacing standard civil administration, occur in the flood season (July September), the village administration system becomes a relief distribution system, and survival instead of normal civic development is more of an issue in these islands.

This can be given an example of the 2009 floods that affected more than ten million people. At Lanka villages close to Vijayawada, the Joint Collector relieved and arranged evacuations and relief activity. The issue of legal investigation was raised by an accidental event that caused the loss of lives because of the delayed response. The Disaster Management Act, 2005, has such protocols that comprise standard operating procedures (SOPs) to address the marooned island villages.

There is the alteration of governance after disasters that is guided towards rehabilitation. In the year 2010, the state redistributed land to the displaced farmers but land titles were a source of legal problems. *Flood Victims Association v. State* (2012) To balance Revenue control and Panchayat involvement, State (2012) stressed to have integrated governance.

### **V. CASE LAWS**

#### **1) *Dokka Ramabhadru v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (AP HC, 1964)**

Possession of 23.30 acres of land in the river Godavari, which had been flooded about 1915, and since recovered; whether such land was still in the pattamar who had originally occupied it, or whether the Government had acquired possession of the land. Referred to the rule that in proceedings where a private proprietor is shown to have acquired a piece of land prior to submersion by a river, and thereafter recovered its

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<sup>7</sup> 2009 Krishna floods: 400+ villages/Lankas submerged, 13 lakhs affected (AP Govt. data).

former situation, that submersion by a river is not enough to amount to the delivery of a transference of title.

**2) Maharaja of Pittapuram v. Province of Madras (Privy Council, 1948).**

The case held the ownership of alluvial islands in the riverbed. Privy Council, in India, had the opinion that, as a general rule, the bed of a navigable river whether tidal or not is vested in the Government, unless expressly assigned, and that islands created in a river form part of the property of the State as owner of the river-bed, and not of the riparian proprietors.

**3) Secretary of State v. Raja of Vizianagaram (Privy Council, 1922).**

Right to a Lanka was put up in the river Godavari in a point where the river was a tidal waterway and could be navigated.

Repeated the meaning of that, that where a river is tidal and navigable, the bed, and, consequently, all islands, is vested in the Crown (now Government); and that the English presumption in works vested in the riparian proprietors is the case with non-tidal rivers.

**4) Secretary of State for India in Council v. The case of Sri Rajah Bommadevara Venkata Narasimha Naidu Bahadur (Madras HC 1919).**

Concerned over 700 acres of land upraised on the river-bed of the Godavari below the Dowlaiswaram anicut and the plaintiffs said that the breadth of the river-bed had been historically divided between the villages on each side of the river and that the newly acquired lands belonged to the old villages.

The Court examined past records of revenue and nature of the river-bed to know whether recently raised up island or river-bed lands passed to the adjoining estates or to the Government property, and thus indirectly resolved who should own and control such rural lands.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

The development of the political system in the riverine villages of Lanka, located in Andhra Pradesh, comprises a good case study on the adaptation of the administration. This polity has experienced a path of the extractive, feudalism of the colonial era, to the socialism experimenting co-operative agricultural formations of the 1970s, to the present form of an unknitted relationship between locally-elected institutions and the central Revenue Department. All the stages represent a different image of authority and resource distribution, emphasizing the dynamism of the institutional development process in this area.

These island communities also possess a distinctive geography that has continued to shape a governance regime that is highly differentiated as compared to the mainland. As the mainland increasingly had settled property and decentralized administrative systems, the islands remain controlled by an innate impermanence that is linked to the lithological and hydrological factors of the soil. Policies in the future should thus address the dislocation between the autocratic role of the Panchayats and the fiscal role played by the Revenue Department. This line of action is necessary in order to ensure that the people of these unstable insular conditions receive the same level of administrative stability as their counterparts on the mainland.

Within the climate change context, in which increasing sea levels and unpredictable monsoonal patterns represent existential challenges to deltaic areas at the global level, the Andhra model can provide a valuable lesson on the topic of resilience-oriented governance. The state can successfully bridge the gap between two administrations by incorporating the best technological solutions to the problem, including the use of GIS as a land surveying tool, as well as by providing Panchayats with the means to do so, by providing them with the relevant fiscal tools. Finally, the very dynamic quality of governance in Lanka highlights a need to adopt the policies that are no less adaptable to the shifting nature of the land they are applied.

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