

Research Article

# **Pāñcālī — A Local Administrative Unit of Ancient Nepal (4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.): An Inscriptional Overview**

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## **Abstract**

Licchavi kingdom was an ancient kingdom in Nepal, which existed in the Kathmandu Valley from approximately from ca. A.D. 300 to ca. 879. Centuries earlier at the start of the Buddhist era, a powerful republic known as Licchavi existed in what is today Bihar. It is to be mentioned here, some legendary sources from the Kathmandu Valley also describe the Kirātas as early rulers there, taken over from earlier Gopāls or Ābhīras, both of whom may have been cow herding tribes. In the pre Licchavi period a village administration existed in the valley of Nepal. In that village administration there were some local chief officials named *Brahmum*, *Shulham*, *Tepulam* who maintained law and orders of the villages. In the Ādī- Nārāyaṇa temple Inscription of Nepal there are 18 functionaries in which *Brahmum*, *Shulham*, *Tepulam* are mentioned. These non sanskritic terms disappeared after sometime and replaced by sanskritic terms such as *svatalasvāmī* and later *dauvārika*, a post which endured permanently in Nepal village administration. In the period of Amśuvarma we see a significant change occurred in the use of land and its administration by the ushering in of the *pāñcālīs*. *Pāñcālī* has been used in the sense of modern *Pāñcāyet*. In ancient Nepal *Pāñcālī* was a village administration and *Pāñcālīkā* is the member of the administrative body *Pāñcālī*. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss about the meaning of the term *pāñcālī*, its characteristics, responsibilities and roles in Nepal administration.

## **Keywords**

*Pāñcālīs*, *Pāñcālīkā*s, Administration, Nepal, Inscription, Village

## **1. Introduction**

The 4<sup>th</sup>- 5<sup>th</sup> century A. D. is the period when the documented history of Nepal begins. The Chāṅgu Pillar Inscription produces the first documented history of Nepal. In the pre Licchavi period a village administration existed in the valley. Before Licchavi dynasty Nepal valley was under the power of Kirātas, Mahīṣapālas and Gopālas [1]. When the Licchavis migrated from the plains of India to take up permanent residence in the Nepal valley they faced an indigenous population of a different ethnic and cultural

origin who had been living for a long time. The state machinery tried to fulfill their functions by the help of local leaders, chiefs or representatives of villages. *Brahmum*, *Shulham*, *Tepulam* are seems to be the local chiefs of the villages [2]. These terms are non-Sanskrit in etymology and the jurisdiction and authority of them was probably limited into the villages.

The non Sanskrit origin of the names suggest that in the transitional period the Licchavi kings needed some time to

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make adjustment in a large non-Aryan setting. These authorities helped them by exercising their duties. Probably the post of the officials came by hereditary so it might not be easy for the kings to withdraw the power from them immediately. Later the Licchavi kings tried to diminish the role of these officials of pre- Licchavi period and the officials holding Sanskrit names entered into the picture of the Licchavi administration such as *Pāñcālīs*, *Śaulkika*, *Gaulmika*, *Bhaṭṭādhikaraṇa* e.t.c.

## 2. The Meaning of the Term *Pāñcālī*

This term *Pāñcālī* is not found in the inscriptions of India. It is not known that whether *Pāñcālī* or *Pāñcālīkā* had any similarity with *Pāñcamāṇḍala* or *Pāñcakula* or *Pāñcoli* or *Mahāpāñcakula* [3-5].

“BhagavanlalIndraji explains the term as a technical expression corresponding to the Southern *Pañcakulīkā* and the modern ‘Panch’ with which he has found similarity with the modern temple committees called *guṭṭhi* [6]”.

According to D. Wright Aṃśuvarman placed Prayāga Bhairava in Madhyalakhu (i.e. Kailāsakūṭabhavana) and brought a band of settlers from Kanauj (Pāñcāla) and Prayāga (Allahabad) districts. “So the Pāñcālīkās, brought by Aṃśuvarman from Kanauj (or Pañcāla), may indicate *Pāñcāladeśodbhava* i.e. who were born in the country of Pāñcāla [4].”

J.F. Fleet [4] thinks *Pāñcālī* has been used in the sense of modern *Pāñcāyata*. According to Dr. Banerjee, *Pāñcālīs* are ‘a kind of village committee entrusted with the charge of the management of village affairs’ [6] which are Hindu organisations like *Sanghas* of Buddhist monks and *Pāñcālīkās* are the members of such organisations. The *Pāñcālī* was a body of land owners and cultivators to whom the king assigned specific religious and secular duties and in return for the fulfillment of which he gave them land to cultivate on easy and liberal terms. From the Naksal Narayanchaura Inscription [2] it is revealed that they had to handle civil and judicial cases also (*nyāyāvalokana*). If there was any injustice in the verdict of the *Pāñcālīkās* then an appeal could be made to the King’s *Antarāsana*. [2]

Monier- William gives as one of the meaning of the term *Pāñchāla* “an association of five guilds (carpenter, weaver, barber, washer man, and shoe-maker) [7]”.

## 3. *Pāñcālī*: In the Inscriptions of Nepal

In Nepal inscription may be *Pāñcālī* is the feminine form of *Pāñcāla*. For the first time the term *Pāñcālī* appears in Budhanilakantha Inscription [2]. The two *Pāñcālīs* are mentioned here, one *Āṅglavakaṣapita* and *Narasimha*. According to D.R. Regmi [2] *pañca* means five and *ālī* means a row, thus a *Pāñcālī* can be a group of five people sitting in a row. They dealt with cases of local importance

affecting the people in their social and cultural activities and handled criminal cases sitting in judgment over the offenders like now a day’s *Pañcāyēt*. Some inscriptions like the inscription of Bhimsen Temple Inscription of patan [2], he Inscription of Sundhara (patan) [2] and others do not mention *Pāñcālīs* or *Pāñcālīkās* but indicate about other bodies.

In some cases the *Pāñcālī* is accompanied with *Grāma* but in Budhanilakantha Inscription [2] it is only *Pāñcālī*. The people addressed are those living in these two *Pāñcālīs* named *Āṅglavakaṣapita* and *Narasimha*. No office will enter in connection with the proceedings of 5 crimes and written agreements (*lekhyadāna*), naturally these subjects fell within the jurisdiction of the *Pāñcālīs*. The last authority of course is the king himself. The *Pāñcālī* did not function in a single capacity. In some inscriptions its task is to do a job in cultural and social fields. The Harigaon Stele [2] mentions Sapelā *Pāñcālī* and *Sāmānya Pāñcālī*. It seems that in ancient Nepal there were two types of *Pāñcālīs* one local and the other a central. In the Kasaintol Inscription Madhusūdanaswamī appears as the member of *SāmānyaPāñcālīka*.

“*vrijikarathyānīvāsīmadhusūdanaswamīpāñcālīkasāmānyai ti* [2].”

Possibly He is mentioned as a representative elected from the *Vrijika-rathyā* and suggested that the *Pāñcālī* was composed of such elected representatives from different divisions.

The Bhairavadhoka Inscription [2] of Kathmandu says about *Giṭā Pāñcālīkā* in Dakṣiṇakoligrāma. This *Pāñcālīkā* was to manage the affairs of the distribution of canal water for irrigation purposes and perform repair work of the channel as the occasion arose. The significance of the prefix *Giṭā* to the word *Pāñcālīkā* is not clear. The Patan (chyasaltol) Stele [2] has several *Pāñcālīkās* figuring in the delimitation of boundary. They are *Reṭā Pāñcālī* and others. In this inscription the two *Pāñcālīs* were functioning in separate areas, one in the north of Budhanilakantha shrine and another in the south of it. This term *Pāñcālī* is apparently a local adaptation of the word *Pañcāyēt*, a body consisting of five leading citizens.

The Yangahiti Inscription of Jīṣṇugupta and Bhīmārjunadeva [2] addresses the entire *Pāñcālī* house holders (*kutumbinaḥ*) in habiting Dakṣiṇakoligrāma to inform them that the former rulers levied taxes on *malla* which amounted to 4 copper *Paṇas*. Jīṣṇugupta freed them from the *malla* tax and also from the tax on *malla* infant (*mallapotaka*). Here it seems *Pāñcālī* was a self governing unit at the lowest level. *Pāñcālī* is always seen to be associated with a *Grāma* except the two *Pāñcālīs* of the Budhanilakantha Inscription. It is revealed that *Pāñcālī* is a local administration appointed by the king to administer the village or a larger area concerned in that regard.

In the Yangahiti Inscription the term *sarvvaṇpāñcālīkūṭumbinaḥ* appears.

*Pāñcālīkūṭumbins* were the *kūṭumbins* who were members

of the administrative body (*Pāñchālī*) in the village. Regmi understands the phrase as referring to ‘householders of all *pāñchālīkās*’ [2] It is said:

Assisted by a few other specialists such as the potter, the carpenter, and the blacksmith, the village community consisted almost entirely of the farming families (*kṣetrins*) or (*kuṭumbins*) [15].

The words Āṅglavakaṣapita and Narasiṃha appear in the Budhhanilakantha Inscription. The word Āṅglavakaṣapita is not identifiable but the word Narasiṃha is known as an

epithet of god Viṣṇu. It is possible that there was a temple of Narasiṃha in the vicinity of the inscription dealt with here and the *Pāñchālī* was the committee of five members formed to look after the administration of that temple and its properties including the lands belonging to the temple.

The Reṭa *Pāñchālī* is referred in the inscription of Chyasaltol dated 713A.D [2]. The term *pāñchālī-vāṭikā*, is mentioned here. The Gigval *Pāñchālīkās*, Jajje *Pāñchālīkās*, Tegval *Pāñchālīkās*, Ila *Pāñchālīkās* are referred in the Minanath Water Conduit Inscription dated 719A.D [2].

**Table 1.** List of *Pāñchālīs* cited in the ‘Inscriptions of Nepal’ (Vol. 1) by D.R. Regmi.

NO. of Inscription [8]	Name of the <i>Pāñchālī</i>	Functions	Type of Function
LIX	it is only <i>Pāñchālī</i>	The proceedings of 5 crimes and written agreements ( <i>lekhyadāna</i> ), are the subjects which fell within the jurisdiction of the <i>Pāñchālī</i> .	Judicial and social
LXXIV	<i>Sapelā Pāñchālī</i> and <i>Sāmānya Pāñchālī</i>	The distribution of the collection of the taxes from houses and fields etc.	
CXIX	Madhusūdanaswamī appears as a ordinary( <i>Sāmānya</i> ) member of the <i>Pāñchālī</i>	Possibly all cases had to be handled by this <i>Pāñchālīkā</i> .	All types of Judicial and civil work
XCIX	Giṭā <i>Pāñchālīkā</i> in Dakṣiṇakoli grāma	The <i>Pāñchālīkā</i> had to manage the affairs of the distribution of the water of a canal and repair of it in future.	Social
CII	<i>Pāñchālīkās</i> of Jolprīṅgrāma	They had the responsibility to maintain further repair-work of the water conduit which was excavated by Jiṣṇugupta for fresh water and to maintain the management of a temple in that area.	Social and religious
CIX	<i>Pāñchālīkās</i> of Bhriṅgāra-grāma	They received a part of the amount realised as fines from offenders committing only one of the “five crimes”	civil
CXXXIX	<i>Pāñchālī</i> of Retā, <i>Pāñchālī</i> of Loprīṅg <i>Pāñchālī</i> of Punu	Possibly they maintained gardens and fields	Social
CXL	Gigvala, Jājja, Tegvala, Yugvala <i>Pāñchālīkās</i>	They were in charge of disbursement of the water of the canal of Yūpa-grāma among five <i>Pāñchālīkās</i>	Social
LXXX	Aḍhśāla <i>Pāñchālīkās</i>	They were responsible for protecting the three <i>liṅgas</i> named Śūrabhogeśvara, Laḍitamaheśvara and Dakṣiṇeśvara.	Religious
LXV	Chūḍikeśvara <i>Pāñchālīkā</i>	To maintain the worship of Lord Chūḍikeśvara.	Religious

#### 4. *Pāñchālī*: In the Inscriptions of India

The Sañchi Inscription of the time of Chandragupta II mentions the ‘*Pañchamaṇḍalī*’ [9].

It is said that “the village council (*pañcha-maṇḍalī*) looked

after village defense, settled village disputes, did works of public utility, collected government revenues and deposited them with the royal treasury. They also took care of minors. The seals of the village ‘janapada’-s of the Later Gupta age, found out at Nālandā show that the village councils in Bihar were known as ‘Janapada’-s [10].

In the South- Indian inscriptions craft guilds (blacksmiths,

goldsmiths, brass-smiths, carpenters and idol-makers are called *Pāñcālas* [3] but they are not found to maintain the same relations which the *Pāñcālīs* had with temples in Nepal. Although L. Gopal thinks “It represented the five guilds or professions who were associated with religious temples or institutions [11].”

## 5. Conclusion

At the time of 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the administration of ancient Nepal was well organized and simple. The smallest unit of administration was the village (*Grāma*) and the largest unit was probably the province (*Pradeśa*). The administrative units such as the *Pura*, *Tāla*, *Draṅga*, *Jānapada*, *Koṭṭa*, all implied a graded collection of villages or a city. Government departments and legal offices were in all probability called *adhikaraṇa* and *kaṇa*.

The administrative machinery was simple in Nepal than India. These Terms like *Adhikaraṇa*, *Viśayapati*, *Kumārāmātya* (According to Altekar, *Kumārāmātya* means ‘amātya since his youth.’) [13], *Mahādaṇḍanāyaka*, *Mahāpratihāra* (*Mahāpratihāra* was an officer in charge of the security of the royal palaces or bed chamber or head of the guards of the city gate. The qualities of a *Pratihāra* are defined in *Nītisaṃgraha*, which says that he should know all tattva-s, he should be strong, good looking, sensible, and alert.) [14], *Āyuktata*, *Śaulkika* and *Gaulmika* are similar both in Gupta inscriptions and in Nepal inscriptions. The terms *Mahābalādhikṛt*, *Sandhivigrahika*, *Uparika*, *Audraṅgika*, *Agrahārika* etc of Gupta inscriptions are not visible in Licchavi inscriptions of Nepal. On the other hand some special terms appear in the Licchavi inscriptions which are not available in Gupta inscriptions. These are-*Antarāsana* or *Paramāsana* (the king), *Aṣṭadaśaprakṛti* (might be 18 classes of officials; It is said, the term possibly refers to a division of people into eighteen sub-castes within the varṇa structure of four major caste divisions. The divisions are comparable to those of a much later tradition which divides the people of Nepal into four varṇas and thirty-six sub castes or jats.) [12], *Pāñcālī* (five members who dealt with the social, religious and criminal cases), *Goṣṭhī* (private and public trusts of different kings), etc. *Pañcamāṇḍalī* and *Pāñcālī*, is evidently the same as the *Pañcāyat* of modern times. According to A. Bhattacharya, “*Pāñcālīs* were representative committees of a single village or group of villages, responsible for the administration of local affairs, collection of taxes, maintenance and repair of temples and canals, conducting daily worship in temples, construction of water conduits for drinking water and irrigation purposes, etc. Pattern and delegation of powers, vested on them, indicate the system of local-self government, followed and initiated by the early rulers of Nepal [11].”

Nepal rulers donated lands for repairing temples, canals

etc and declared that from the earnings of the lands general people have to continue the further repairing, worship of deities etc. The tendency of Nepal rulers behind this was probably giving the free hand to local people and maintaining economical profit of state economy. *Goṣṭhīs* and *Pāñcālīs* were given the charge in this purpose. *Paramāsana* (the ruler) will enter into the matter if they (*Goṣṭhīs* and *Pāñcālīs*) failed.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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