

Temple Administration, Autonomous Decentralization, and the Limits of the Modern State

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Abstract—This article interrogates the concept of decentralisation through a historical and theoretical examination of temple administration in precolonial South India, with particular reference to the Vijayanagara Empire and the Keladi Nayakas. Using the Kapu (Kaup) Mariamma temples and the traditional Guttu system as primary case studies, it argues that precolonial decentralisation was grounded in genuine local autonomy fiscal, judicial, and social rather than in authority delegated by a centralised state. Temples functioned as autonomous corporate institutions that mediated governance through "sacral constitutionalism," customary law, and community trust. In contrast, modern decentralisation, including contemporary Panchayati Raj institutions, operates largely as a downward extension of centralisation, producing an illusion of participation without sovereignty. By applying Elinor Ostrom's framework for common-pool resource management and Burton Stein's segmentary state model, the article proposes a fundamental rethinking of decentralisation theory beyond the modern state-centric paradigm.

Index Terms—Decentralisation; Temple Administration; Vijayanagara Empire; Keladi Nayakas; Panchayati Raj; Sacral Constitutionalism; Guttu System; Political Theory; Common-Pool Resources.

I. INTRODUCTION

Decentralisation occupies a central place in contemporary political theory and public policy discourse, particularly in postcolonial democracies like India. It is widely regarded as a mechanism for deepening democracy, improving governance efficiency, and enhancing citizen participation. However, despite constitutional mandates such as the 73rd Amendment and extensive institutional reforms, decentralised governance in modern India has largely failed to deliver genuine local autonomy.

This article argues that this failure is not merely an implementation gap but a structural consequence of modern political philosophy. Modern decentralisation is conceptually framed as an administrative reform within a centralised sovereign state, where authority is "given" to lower units. In contrast, precolonial South India developed systems of "autonomous decentralisation" that were recognition-based rather than delegation-based. By examining the administrative evolution of the Kapu Mariamma temples under the Keladi Nayakas and the socio-legal infrastructure of the Tulu Nadu Guttu system, this study challenges the assumption that decentralisation must emanate from the state.

The historical trajectory of governance in South India reveals a sophisticated tension between the expansive, ritualised sovereignty of pre-colonial polities and the rigid, bureaucratic structures of the modern nation-state. Nowhere is this tension more visible than in the administrative evolution of the temple, particularly within the unique cultural and geographical enclave of Tulu Nadu. Historically, the temple was not a peripheral religious institution but a central node of "autonomous decentralisation," managing land, water, justice, and social welfare with a degree of local legitimacy that the modern state, despite legislative attempts like the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, struggles to replicate. This report examines the administrative history of the Kapu Mariamma temples and the traditional Guttu system to argue that the success of pre-colonial governance lay in its "sacral constitutionalism" a model where power was distributed, ritualised, and held accountable to a local social contract.

Theoretical Framework: Delegation versus Autonomy
Mainstream decentralisation theory treats the process as a vertical redistribution of power from a sovereign centre to subordinate units. In this model, local bodies act as implementing agencies for central mandates. This article proposes a crucial analytical distinction:

- Delegated Decentralisation (Modern): Authority flows downward, remains revocable, and is subject to strict bureaucratic supervision.
- Autonomous Decentralisation (Precolonial): Authority is socially embedded and institutionally independent of central command.

Precolonial Indian polity was built on Raj Dharma, a code of conduct superior to the monarch's will, which prevented the emergence of an absolute, unitary sovereign. Power was distributed across an ascending hierarchy of associations: the kula (clan), jati (caste), sreni (guild), and puga (village community). The temple served as the ultimate institutional manifestation of this hierarchy, functioning as a guarantor of social justice and a manager of shared resources

The Philosophical Foundations of Indian Polity: From Matsanyaya to Raj Dharma

To understand the autonomy of temple administration, one must first engage with the foundational political philosophy of ancient India. Classical texts such as the Arthashastra, Sukraniti, and the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata describe the origin of the state as a response to Matsanyaya, a condition of "anarchical disorder" where the powerful torment the powerless. In this pre-political state, individuals entered a social contract, not with a totalitarian Leviathan, but with a leader bound by Raj Dharma a code of conduct and rule of law superior to the will of any monarch.

This "Sacral Constitutionalism" ensured that while monarchy was the prevalent form of government, its character remained fundamentally democratic and decentralized. The state was conceived as an evolutionary progress, emerging from the need for cooperation in agricultural societies. This led to the formation of local assemblies like the Sabha (organization of elders) and Samiti (general assembly), which eventually culminated in a "limited or constitutional monarchy" based on local autonomy. Within this framework, power resided in an ascending order of groups: the kula (clan), jati (caste), sreni (guild), and puga or pura (village community). The

temple served as the ultimate institutional manifestation of this hierarchy, acting as the guarantor of social justice and the protector of the "Mother of Truth".

Concept	Description	Modern Equivalent
Matsanyaya	The law of the fishes; a state of anarchy where might is right.	Failed state or lawlessness.
Raj Dharma	The ethical and legal code governing the ruler's actions.	The Constitution or Rule of Law.
Sabha / Samiti	Early Vedic assemblies for elders and commoners.	Upper House / Lower House.
Vairajya	A stateless state or early phase of evolutionary polity.	Primitive communism or anarchy.
Puga / Pura	Village-level autonomous administrative units.	Gram Panchayats.

The Keladi Matrix: Military Fortifications and the Birth of Dandina Mari

The specific administrative case of Kapu (or Kaup) begins with the rule of the Keladi Nayakas, who rose to prominence as vassals of the Vijayanagara Empire. Following the fall of Vijayanagara, the Keladi rulers took control of the coastal regions of Karnataka in 1743. Basappa Nayaka, a prominent ruler of this dynasty, constructed the "Manohara Gadha" fort on the seashore and another fort in the village of Mallar. The distance between these two forts was less than three kilometers, and they were designed to house the military forces known as the Dandu.

The goddess Maariyamma entered Kapu in 1743 alongside these soldiers. Because she followed the military force, she became known as "Dandina Maari," a wartime deity worshipped by the Rana-veeraru or Ranyadavaru (warriors). The administration of her worship was intrinsically linked to the military structure of the fort. The name "Kapu" itself, meaning "to wait" or "to guard" in Tulu, reflected the dual role of the soldiers as guardians of the land and devotees of the goddess. This era established a model of "fort-temple administration" where the sacred was integrated into the primary infrastructure of security and state power.

Fortification	Purpose	Associated Administrative Unit
Manohara Gadha	Coastal defense near the Kapu lighthouse.	Central administrative hub for the seashore.
Mallar Fort	Sheltering the military force (Dandu).	Primary site for early Dandina Mari worship.
Kote Mane	The "Fort House" within the walls.	Residential administrative unit for the Servegaras.
Ranakeri	15-acre settlement for warriors.	Military cantonment under the temple's domain.

The transition from military to civil control began during the rule of Tipu Sultan (1750–1799), who encouraged soldiers to offer puja at the fort. It was during this period that Maariyamma began to be addressed as "Kapu da appe" (Mother of Kapu), shifting her identity from a martial goddess to a communal matriarch. The administration moved out of the fort to a "common place" to allow all residents to worship her as the guardian of Tulu Nadu.

The Muslim Ugrani: Pluralistic Administration and the "Voice of Maari"

One of the most profound insights into the autonomous nature of temple administration is the legend of the Muslim administrator, or Ugrani, who served under the Keladi and later Mysore rulers. Historical snippets record that this official, whose specific name is often lost to time but whose role remains central, was the first human to whom the goddess Maari spoke. One night, hearing the sound of someone bathing at the fort tank accompanied by the scent of jasmine, the Ugrani encountered a bodiless voice identifying itself as the goddess.

The goddess requested a sanctuary, and when the Ugrani humbly pointed out that he was a Muslim and questioned how he could find her a dwelling, she instructed him to unite the "four castes" of the village to build a gudi (shrine). This legend serves as an administrative cornerstone, suggesting that the "social contract" of the temple was intentionally pluralistic. The Ugrani proceeded to build the shrine, and to this day, the administration of the temple reflects this diverse heritage. The participation of Kotemane, Kote sevegara, and Ranya sects some of whom are Kannada speakers demonstrates that the goddess's power was a unifying force that brought together various linguistic

and social groups under a single administrative umbrella.

Autonomous Governance in Tulu Nadu: The Guttu System (Tulu nadu is a region located coastal area of Karnataka)

While the temple provided the ritual center, the daily administration of the villages in Tulu Nadu was managed through the Guttu system. Guttu households, or Guttumanes, were administrative manor households that functioned as the primary infrastructure for agriculture, culture, and justice. These homes were massive structures, built using mud, burnt clay, limestone, and jaggery materials that became as hard as cement over centuries. They served as the central hub for villages that were often nomadic or engaged in slash-and-burn agriculture.

A village was typically divided into four parts based on geography, each governed by a Guttu household. Twelve such villages formed a magane (collective), which reported to a magane guttu. This was a hierarchical but non-centralized system that sustained the region for over 1,300 years. The Guttu owners were entrusted with five primary responsibilities:

1. Justice: Delivering verdicts on village disputes in a quadrilateral space called the chowka.
2. Revenue: Collecting taxes from tenants cultivating lands under chaaligeni or moolageni leases.
3. Security: Maintaining a small local army to guard borders and enforce order.
4. Infrastructure: Ensuring the maintenance of water sources, roads, and irrigation.
5. Relief: Operating as granaries and refuges during wars or natural disasters.

Hierarchy Level	Title / Unit	Administrative Role
Royalty	Beedu	The royal household; ultimate symbolic authority.
Magane	Magane Guttu	Higher authority responsible for 12 villages.
Village	Guttu	Local administrative household; primary site of justice.
Subordinate	Baava	Immediate subordinate to the Guttu owner.
Ancestral	Parari	The oldest establishment in a village.

The judicial function was particularly noteworthy. Justice was delivered in the name of the guarding deity (the daiva), which ensured that the verdict was

accepted and implemented without the need for a standing police force. The daiva recognized the Guttu owner as its representative, granting him a moral authority that modern bureaucratic officials often lack.

Ritual Sovereignty: The Segmentary State and the Worshipping of the Gaddige

To understand why temple administration was so effective, one must look at Burton Stein's "Segmentary State Model". Stein argued that medieval South Indian states were not centralized monoliths but were characterized by "ritual sovereignty". While the king exercised maximum authority in the "core region" (the capital), peripheral regions were governed by semi-autonomous chieftains and local assemblies. In this model, the temple acted as the "integrative hub". The king's authority was primarily symbolic and spiritual, reinforced through the patronage of rituals and the granting of Devadana (temple lands). The Kapu Mariamma temple epitomizes this. Historically, there was no particular idol inside the temple; instead, the pooja was performed to the Gaddige (throne). Worshipping the throne is an administrative metaphor for acknowledging the seat of authority and the order it provides, rather than the person of the ruler. As years passed, a kalasha (pot) was kept on the throne and worshipped, then emptied at the end of the day a process called kalasha visarjana. This cyclical ritual emphasizes that authority is a temporary trust, not a permanent possession.

Ritual Element	Symbolism	Administrative Implication
Gaddige	The Throne / Seat of Power.	Allegiance to the office and the social order.
Kalasha	The Vessel of Life/Deity.	Recognition of the divine source of authority.
Kalasha Visarjana	Emptying the pot.	The transient nature of temporal power.
Hongaraka Wood	Temporary idol material.	Flexibility; worship adapted to specific festivals.

The "Segmentary State" allowed for a pyramidal structure where local power holders managed resources and implemented policies with minimal interference from the capital. The Mahanavami festival, where all Nayaka lords and their armies were required to attend, served as a "general muster" that ritually unified these decentralized segments into a single empire.

The Temple as a Common-Pool Resource: Insights from Elinor Ostrom

The administrative efficacy of the temple can be further explained through Elinor Ostrom's Nobel-winning work on "Governing the Commons". Ostrom showed that traditional societies can successfully govern shared resources like irrigation networks, pastures, or temple lands through self-organized horizontal associations. The temple acted as a "Common Pool Resource" (CPR) management institution, where the "appropriators" (the community) devised and monitored their own rules.

The Kapu Marigudi follows many of Ostrom's eight design principles for long-enduring institutions:

1. **Clearly Defined Boundaries:** The "four castes" and the geographical identity of Kapu defined who was entitled to the goddess's protection and the temple's resources.
2. **Congruence with Local Conditions:** Rituals were scheduled around agricultural cycles the Suggi (March), Aathi (July), and Jarde (November) Maaripoojas correspond to the planting and harvest seasons.
3. **Collective-Choice Arrangements:** The involvement of families like the Kote Servegaras and the Ranyas ensured that those affected by the rules had a hand in making them.
4. **Monitoring and Sanctions:** The social capital of the village and the "Mother of Truth" persona of the goddess provided internal accountability and "informal reputational consequences".
5. **Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms:** The Guttumane's chowka provided a "cheap and straightforward" way to resolve disputes before they escalated into the "Tragedy of the Commons".

By contrast, many modern institutional failures occur because colonial and post-colonial states did not recognize these local resource institutions, leading to the destruction of social capital that had developed over centuries.

The Encroachment of the Modern State: From Autonomy to Endowment

The transition to the modern state marked a significant shift from "autonomous decentralisation" to "guided fiscal federalism". In the post-independence era, the state sought to unify administration through the Department of Endowment. In Kapu, this led to a split:

while the "Hale" (Old) Mariamma temple remains under the administration of the Konkani Mutt (GSB community), the "Hosa" (New) Mariamma and Kalya Marigudi are under the Karnataka Government Endowment Department.

This split was driven by what historical snippets describe as a "difference of opinion and lust for administration," a classic instance where the intervention of external state structures can exacerbate local tensions. The modern state often views the temple as a "tax-collecting authority" or a provider of public services, rather than a sacred autonomous unit.

The 73rd Amendment and the Mirage of Decentralisation

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) was intended to return power to the people by institutionalizing the Panchayati Raj system. However, scholars argue that it created a system of "dependent fiscal federalism". Unlike the traditional Guttu system, which had its own revenue base through land grants (Devadana), modern Panchayats are often starved for funds.

- **Funding Gaps:** State governments frequently delay the release of Finance Commission grants to local bodies.
- **Bureaucratic Interference:** Decision-making processes in Panchayats are often overridden by political forces and state-level bureaucrats.
- **Infrastructure Deficits:** Over 50% of Panchayats lack essential administrative infrastructure, such as computers or dedicated support staff like junior engineers and data entry operators.

The "Tragedy of the Commons" in the modern era is often caused not by the users, but by the state's inability to provide the "right to organize" and the "nested networks" that Ostrom identified as critical for success.

The Ritual of Re-Construction: The Swarna Gaddige and Modern Social Welfare

Despite the encroachment of the modern state, the Kapu temples continue to practice a form of "autonomous welfare." The administrative board and Renovation Committee of the Hosa Marigudi are currently engaged in a massive project to reconstruct the sanctorum using only granite stones and slabs. This "House of Amma" project includes the "Swarna

Gaddige Samarpane" (Golden Throne Offering), where devotees contribute gold and silver to create a divine seat for the goddess.

Crucially, the temple uses its funds not just for architecture but for social justice. Financial assistance is given to the needy, and social welfare programs organized by local institutions receive constant support from the "Mother of Kapu". This demonstrates that the temple remains a "community of benefit," providing the "individual dignity" and "holistic good" that were once the core of ancient Indian democracy.

Activity	Administrative Goal	Targeted Outcome
Granite Reconstruction	Sustaining coastal architectural culture.	Aesthetic and spiritual permanence.
Swarna Gaddige	Creating a golden throne for the goddess.	Enhancing the "ritual sovereignty" of the seat.
Annadhana	Mass feeding every Tuesday.	Ensuring food security for the "ocean of devotees."
Jeernodhara Nidhi	Temple renovation donation fund.	Collective financing without state interference.
Chandika Yaga	Grand worship during Navaratri.	Spiritual integration of the village "tens."

The Limits of the Modern State: A Critique of Unitary Power

The "limits of the modern state" are most apparent in its inability to replicate the "ritual integration" and "social capital" of the temple-Guttu complex. The modern state is a "unitary" entity that seeks to homogenize administration, whereas the segmentary state of Tulu Nadu thrived on "multiplicity of tax-collecting authorities" and "locality chiefs".

When the state takes over a temple, it often replaces a "service-oriented" local board with a "procedure-oriented" bureaucracy. This shift affects the "delivery of services" and the "impact on the life of the people". The traditional leadership was decided on caste affiliation and land holding, which, while exclusionary in some ways, provided a stable and "consistent architectural style" of governance. The 73rd Amendment's "paradigm shift" toward younger leadership and reserved seats has empowered marginalized groups but has also led to a loss of the

"traditional concept of leadership" that ensured local accountability.

Synthesis: The Persistence of Sacral Autonomy

The administrative history of the Kapu Mariamma temples provides a powerful counter-narrative to the idea that the modern state is the only effective form of governance. Through the "segmentary state" model and "Ostrom's commons," we see that autonomous decentralisation was once a highly sophisticated reality. The temple was not merely a place of worship; it was a judicial court, a granary, a military headquarters, and a social welfare office.

The persistence of rituals like the Gaddige pooja and the mass participation in the Suggi Maaripooja (which attracts over a million people) suggests that the "ritual sovereignty" of the goddess is still more legitimate to many than the "administrative sovereignty" of the state. The modern state's struggle with "fiscal federalism" and "bureaucratic resistance" in the Panchayati Raj system only highlights the efficiency of the old Guttu-temple complex, which operated on "mutual monitoring" and "credible commitment".

Key Observations on the Transition of Power

Feature	Pre-Colonial Autonomous Model	Modern Centralised Model
Source of Law	Raj Dharma / Satya (Truth).	Statutes and Central Legislation.
Leadership	Guttu Owners / Ugrani (Sacral).	Elected Pradhans / IAS Officers.
Revenue Base	Local land grants (Devadana).	State/Central allocations.
Enforcement	Divine fear and social reputation.	Police and formal legal systems.
Participation	Ritual "tens" and communal Jathras.	Electoral rolls and Gram Sabhas.

II. CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE MODERN STATE-CENTRIC PARADIGM

The precolonial model of temple-centered governance succeeded because it was rooted in social trust and ritual legitimacy rather than bureaucratic efficiency. The "Keladi curse" found in inscriptions, warning against the violation of temple lands, functioned as a

medieval constitutional safeguard against state overreach.

Revisiting these historical models does not imply a desire to return to the past. Rather, it invites political theory to reconsider decentralisation as "self-rule" (Swaraj) rather than mere administrative dispersion. The success of the Kapu Mariamma temples in continuing to provide social welfare, financial assistance, and community identity today suggests that "ritual sovereignty" remains a potent and legitimate alternative to the limits of the modern state. Genuine decentralisation requires a state that is structurally capable of trusting society to govern its own commons.

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