

What does alderman mean?

January 6, 2023

In news– Recently, Delhi's Lt. Governor, VK Saxena, nominated 10 aldermen amidst significant controversy.

What is an alderman ?

- **“Alderman” refers to a member of a city council or municipal body**, with exact responsibilities depending on the location of its usage.
- Etymologically, the **word comes from the combination Old English words for “old” (Anglian, ald or West Saxon, eald)** and “man” (monn in Mercian/Anglian or mann in West Saxon).
- **“Ald/eald” referred to “antique, of ancient origin,** belonging to antiquity, primeval; long in existence or use; near the end of the normal span of life; elder, mature, experienced,” according to the Online Etymology Dictionary The term “ald” itself is derived from “al” meaning “to grow, nourish.”
- The term for man has a more contested origin, with similar root words found in languages from Sanskrit (manuh) to Russian (muzh).
- **“Aldormonn” (Mercian) or “ealdormann” (West Saxon) originally referred to elders of a clan or tribe**, though soon it became a term for king's viceroys, regardless of age.
- Soon, it denoted a more specific title – “chief magistrate of a county,” having both civic and military duties.
- As time passed, it became particularly associated with guilds with chiefs/leaders being referred to as aldormonn.
- In the 12th century CE, as guilds became increasingly associated with municipal governments, the term came to be used for officers of municipal bodies. This is the sense in which it is used till date.

Different locations, different meanings-

- Today, an alderman has different roles in different places.
- **Until the 19th century, there was no one role/definition of an alderman in Britain.**
- **Under the Municipal Reform Act 1835**, municipal borough corporations consisted of councillors and aldermen. **Aldermen would be elected not by the electorate, but by the council** (including the outgoing aldermen), for a term of six years, which allowed a party that narrowly lost an election to retain control by choosing aldermen.
- **The Local Government Act of 1972 finally abolished Aldermen** with voting rights, with effect from 1974, except in the Greater London Council and the London borough councils, where they remained a possibility until 1978.
- **In the US, depending upon the jurisdiction, an alderman could have been part of the legislative or judicial local government.**
- A “board of aldermen” is the governing executive or legislative body of many cities and towns in the United States.
- **Historically, in Canada, the term “alderman” was used for those persons elected to a municipal council to represent the wards.**
- As women were increasingly elected to the municipal office, the term “councillor” slowly replaced “alderman”, although there was some use of the term “alderperson”. Today the term is rarely used.
- **Australia and Ireland have also abolished the term and specific post of an alderman** whereas, in South Africa, the term alderman refers to senior members of municipal councils.
- In the Netherlands, the term refers to members of the municipal executive (rather than the council).