

Indian and World Social Reformers and Revolutionaries - Thought and Works

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Cholas and Irrigation System

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Introduction

The Chola Dynasty was a Tamil thalassocratic empire of southern India, one of the longest-ruling dynasties in world history. The heartland of the Cholas was the fertile valley of the Kaveri River, but they ruled a significantly larger area at the height of their power from the later half of the 9th century till the beginning of the 13th century. The whole country south of the Tungabhadra was united and held as one state for a period of three centuries and more between 907 and 1215 AD.¹ Under Rajaraja I and his successors Rajendra I, Rajadhiraja I, Rajendra II, Virarajendra, and Kulothunga Chola I, the dynasty became a military, economic and cultural powerhouse in South Asia and South-East Asia.² The power of the new empire was proclaimed to the eastern world by the expedition to the Ganges which Rajendra Chola I undertook and by naval raids on cities of the city-state of Srivijaya, as well as by the repeated embassies to China. The Chola fleet represented the zenith of ancient Indian maritime capacity.³

During the period 1010–1153, the Chola territories stretched from the islands of the Maldives in the south to as far north as the banks of the Godavari River in Andhra Pradesh. Rajaraja Chola conquered peninsular South India, annexed parts of which is now Sri Lanka and occupied the islands of the Maldives. His son Rajendra Chola sent a victorious expedition to North India that touched the river Ganges and defeated the Pala ruler of Pataliputra, Mahipala. In 1025, he also successfully invaded cities of Srivijaya of Malaysia and Indonesia.⁴ The Chola invasion ultimately failed to install direct administration over Srivijaya, since the invasion was short and only meant to plunder the wealth of Srivijaya. Chola rule or influence on Srivijaya would last until 1070 when the Cholas began to lose almost all of its overseas territories. The Later Cholas (1070-1279) would still rule portions of Southern India. The Chola dynasty went into decline at the beginning of the 13th century with the rise of the Pandyan dynasty, which ultimately caused their downfall.⁵ The Cholas succeeded in building the greatest thalassocratic empire in the history of

India, thereby leaving a lasting legacy. Their patronage of Tamil literature and their zeal in the building of temples has resulted in some great works of Tamil literature and architecture. The Chola kings were avid builders and envisioned the temples in their kingdoms not only as places of worship but also as centers of economic activity.⁶ They were also well known for their art, specifically temple sculptures and 'Chola bronzes', exquisite bronze sculptures of Hindu deities built in a lost wax process they pioneered; that continues to this day. They established a centralized form of government and a disciplined bureaucracy. The Chola school of art spread to Southeast Asia and influenced the architecture and art of Southeast Asia. The medieval Cholas are best known for the construction of the magnificent Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur, commissioned by the most famous Chola king, Rajaraja Chola in 1010 CE.⁷

Origins

There is very little written evidence for the Cholas prior to the 7th century CE. The main sources of information about the early Cholas

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are ancient Tamil literature of the oral traditions, religious texts, temple and copperplate inscriptions. Later medieval Cholas also claimed a long and ancient lineage. The Cholas are mentioned in Ashokan Edicts (inscribed 273 BCE–232 BCE) as one of the Mauryan Empire's neighbors to the South⁸ (Ashoka Major Rock Edict No.13), who, thought not subject to Ashoka, were on friendly terms with him. There are also brief references to the Chola country and its towns, ports and commerce in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (Periplus Maris Erythraei), and in the slightly later work of the geographer Ptolemy. Mahavamsa, a Buddhist text written down during the 5th century CE, recounts a number of conflicts between the inhabitants of Ceylon and Cholas in the 1st century BCE.⁹

History

The history of the Cholas falls into four periods: the Early Cholas of the Sangam literature, the interregnum between the fall of the Sangam Cholas and the rise of the Imperial medieval Cholas under Vijayalaya (c. 848), the dynasty of Vijayalaya, and finally the Later Chola dynasty of Kulothunga Chola I from the third quarter of the 11th century.¹⁰

Early Cholas

The earliest Chola kings for whom there is tangible evidence are mentioned in the Sangam literature. Scholars generally agree that this literature belongs to the late centuries before the common era and the early centuries of the common era.¹¹ The internal chronology of this literature is still far from settled, and at present a connected account of the history of the period cannot be derived. It records the names of the kings and the princes, and of the poets who extolled them.¹² The Sangam literature also records legends about mythical Chola kings.¹³ These myths speak of the Chola king Kantaman, a supposed contemporary of the sage Agastya, whose devotion brought the river Kaveri into existence. Two names are

prominent among those Chola kings known to have existed who feature in sangam literature: Karikala and Kocengannan.¹⁴ There are no sure means of settling the order of succession, of fixing their relations with one another and with many other princelings of around the same period.¹⁵ Urayur (now a part of Thiruchirapalli) was their oldest capital. Kaveripattinam also served as an early Chola capital.¹⁶ The Mahavamsa mentions that an ethnic Tamil adventurer, a Chola prince known as Ellalan, invaded the island Sri Lanka and conquered it around 235 BCE with the help of a Mysore army.¹⁷

There is not much information about the transition period of around three centuries from the end of the Sangam age (c. 300) to that in which the Pandyas and Pallavas dominated the Tamil country.¹⁸ An obscure dynasty, the Kalabhras invaded Tamil country, displaced the existing kingdoms and ruled during that time. They were displaced by the Pallava dynasty and the Pandyan dynasty in the 6th century.¹⁹ Little is known of the fate of the Cholas during the succeeding three centuries until the accession of Vijayalaya in the second quarter of the 9th century.²⁰ As per inscriptions found in and around Thanjavur, the kingdom was ruled by Mutharaiyars / Muthurajas for three centuries. Their reign was ended by Vijayalaya Chola who captured Thanjavur from Ilango Mutharaiyar between 848 and 851 CE.²¹

Epigraphy and literature provide few glimpses of the transformations that came over this line of kings during this long interval. It is certain that when the power of the Cholas fell to its lowest ebb and that of the Pandyas and Pallavas rose to the north and south of them,²² this dynasty was compelled to seek refuge and patronage under their more successful rivals.²³ The Cholas continued to rule over a diminished territory in the neighbourhood

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of Uraiyur, but only in a minor capacity. In spite of their reduced powers, the Pandyas and Pallavas accepted Chola princesses in marriage, possibly out of regard for their reputation. Numerous Pallava inscriptions of this period mention their having fought rulers of the Chola country. Despite this loss in influence and power, it is unlikely that the Cholas lost total grip of the territory around Uraiyur, their old capital, as Vijayalaya, when he rose to prominence hailed from that area.²⁴

The Chola dynasty was at the peak of its influence and power during the medieval period.²⁵ Through their leadership and vision, Chola kings expanded their territory and influence. The second Chola King, Aditya I, caused the demise of the Pallava dynasty and defeated the Pandyan dynasty of Madurai in 885, occupied large parts of the Kannada country, and had marital ties with the Western Ganga dynasty. In 925, his son Parantaka I conquered Sri Lanka (known as Ilangai). Parantaka I also defeated the Rashtrakuta dynasty under Krishna II in the battle of Vallala.²⁶ Rajaraja Chola I and Rajendra Chola I were the greatest rulers of the Chola dynasty, extending it beyond the traditional limits of a Tamil kingdom. At its peak, the Chola Empire stretched from the island of Sri Lanka in the south to the Godavari-Krishna river basin in the north, up to the Konkan coast in Bhatkal, the entire Malabar Coast (the Cher a country) in addition to Lakshadweep, and Maldives. Rajaraja Chola I was a ruler with inexhaustible energy, and he applied himself to the task of governance with the same zeal that he had shown in waging wars. He integrated his empire into a tight administrative grid under royal control, and at the same time strengthened local self-government. Therefore, he conducted a land survey in 1000 CE to effectively marshal the resources of his empire.²⁷ He also built the Brihadeeswarar Temple in 1010 CE.²⁸

Rajendra Chola I conquered Odisha and his armies continued to march further north and defeated the forces of the Pala Dynasty of Bengal and reached the Ganges river in north India. Rajendra Chola I built a new capital called Gangaikonda Cholapuram to celebrate his victories in northern India.²⁹ Rajendra Chola I successfully invaded the Srivijaya kingdom in Southeast Asia which led to the decline of the empire there.³⁰ This expedition had such a great impression to the Malay people of the medieval period that his name was mentioned in the corrupted form as Raja Chulan in the medieval Malay chronicle Sejarah Melayu.³¹ He also completed the conquest of the island of Sri Lanka and took the Sinhala king Mahinda V as a prisoner, in addition to his conquests of Rattapadi (territories of the Rashtrakutas, Chalukya country, Talakkad, and Kolar, where the Kolaramma temple still has his portrait statue) in Kannada country.³² Rajendra's territories included the area falling on the Ganges-Hooghly-Damodar basin, as well as Sri Lanka and Maldives. The kingdoms along the east coast of India up to the river Ganges acknowledged Chola suzerainty. Three diplomatic missions were sent to China in 1016, 1033, and 1077.³³

The Western Chalukya Empire under Satyashraya and Someshvara I tried to wriggle out of Chola domination from time to time, primarily due to the Chola influence in the Vengi kingdom.³⁴ The Western Chalukyas mounted several unsuccessful attempts to engage the Chola emperors in war, and except for a brief occupation of Vengi territories between 1118 and 1126, all their other attempts ended in failure with successive Chola emperors routing the armies of the Chalukyas at various places in many wars. Virarajendra Chola defeated Someshvara II of the Western Chalukya Empire and made an alliance with Prince Vikramaditya VI.³⁵ Cholas always successfully controlled the Chalukyas in the western Deccan by

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defeating them in war and levying tribute on them. Even under the emperors of the Cholas like Kulothunga I and Vikrama Chola, the wars against the Chalukyas were mainly fought in Chalukya territories in Karnataka or in the Telugu country like Vengi, Kakinada, Anantapur, or Gutti. Then the former feudatories like the Hoysalas, Yadvas, and Kakatiyas steadily increased their power and finally replaced the Chalukyas.³⁶ With the occupation of Dharwar in North Central Karnataka by the Hoysalas under Vishnuvardhana, where he based himself with his son Narasimha I in-charge at the Hoysala capital Dwarasamudra around 1149, and with the Kalachuris occupying the Chalukyan capital for over 35 years from around 1150–1151, the Chalukya kingdom was already starting to dissolve.³⁷

The Cholas under Kulothunga Chola III collaborated to the herald the dissolution of the Chalukyas by aiding Hoysalas under Veera Ballala II, the son-in-law of the Chola monarch, and defeated the Western Chalukyas in a series of wars with Someshvara IV between 1185 and 1190. The last Chalukya king's territories did not even include the erstwhile Chalukyan capitals Badami, Manyakheta or Kalyani. That was the final dissolution of Chalukyan power though the Chalukyas existed only in name since 1135–1140. But the Cholas remained stable until 1215, were absorbed by the Pandyan empire and ceased to exist by 1279.³⁸ On the other hand, throughout the period from 1150 to 1280, the staunchest opponents of the Cholas were Pandya princes who tried to win independence for their traditional territories. This period saw constant warfare between the Cholas and the Pandyas. The Cholas also fought regular wars with the Eastern Gangas of Kalinga, protected Vengi though it remained largely independent under Chola control, and had domination of the entire eastern coast with their feudatories the Telugu Cholas, Velananti

Cholas, Renandu Cholas etc. who also always aided the Cholas in their successful campaigns against the Chalukyas and levying tribute on the Kannada kingdoms and fought constantly with the Sinhalas, who attempted to overthrow the Chola occupation of Lanka, but until the time of the Later Chola king Kulottunga I the Cholas had firm control over Lanka. A Later Chola king, Rajadhiraja Chola II, was strong enough to prevail over a confederation of five Pandya princes who were aided by their traditional friend, the king of Lanka, this once again gave control of Lanka to the Cholas despite the fact that they were not strong under the resolute Rajadhiraja Chola II. However, his successor, the last great Chola monarch Kulottunga Chola III reinforced the hold of the Cholas by quelling rebellion and disturbances in Lanka and Madurai, defeated Hoysala generals under Veera Ballala II in Karuvur, in addition to holding on to his traditional territories in Tamil country, Eastern Gangavadi, Draksharama, Vengi and Kalinga. After this, he entered into a marital alliance with Veera Ballala II (with Ballala's marriage to a Chola princess) and his relationship with Hoysalas seems to have become friendlier.³⁹

During the reign of Rajaraja Chola I and his successors Rajendra Chola I, Virarajendra Chola and Kulothunga Chola I the Chola armies invaded Sri Lanka, the Maldives and parts of Southeast Asia like Malaysia, Indonesia and Southern Thailand of the Srivijaya Empire in the 11th century. Rajaraja Chola I launched several naval campaigns that resulted in the capture of Sri Lanka, Maldives and the Malabar Coast.⁴⁰ In 1025, Rajendra Chola launched naval raids on ports of Srivijaya and against the Burmese kingdom of Pegu.⁴¹ A Chola inscription states that he captured or plundered 14 places, which have been identified with Palembang, Tambralinga and Kedah among others.⁴¹ A second invasion was led by Virarajendra Chola, who

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conquered Kedah in Malaysia of Srivijaya in the late 11th century. Chola invasion ultimately failed to install direct administration over Srivijaya, since the invasion was short and only meant to plunder the wealth of Srivijaya. However, this invasion gravely weakened the Srivijayan hegemony and enabled the formation of regional kingdoms. Although the invasion was not followed by direct Cholan occupation and the region was unchanged geographically, there were huge consequences in trade. Tamil traders encroached on the Srivijayan realm traditionally controlled by Malay traders and the Tamil guilds' influence increased on the Malay Peninsula and north coast of Sumatra.⁴²

The Later Chola dynasty was led by capable rulers such as Kulothunga Chola I, his son Vikrama Chola, other successors like Rajaraja Chola II, Rajadhiraja Chola II, and Kulothunga Chola III, who conquered Kalinga, Ilam, and Kataha. However, the rule of the later Cholas between 1218, starting with Rajaraja Chola II, to the last emperor Rajendra Chola III was not as strong as those of the emperors between 850 and 1215. Around 1118, they lost control of Vengi to the Western Chalukya and Gangavadi (southern Mysore districts) to the Hoysala Empire. However, these were only temporary setbacks, because immediately following the accession of king Vikrama Chola, the son and successor of Kulothunga Chola I, the Cholas lost no time in recovering the province of Vengi by defeating Chalukya Someshvara III and also recovering Gangavadi from the Hoysalas. The Chola Empire, though not as strong as between 850 and 1150, was still largely territorially intact under Rajaraja Chola II (1146–1175) a fact attested by the construction and completion of the third grand Chola architectural marvel, the chariot-shaped Airavatesvara Temple at Dharasuram on the outskirts of modern Kumbakonam. Chola administration and

territorial integrity until the rule of Kulothunga Chola III was stable and very prosperous up to 1215, but during his rule itself, the decline of the Chola power started following his defeat by Maravarman Sundara Pandiyan II in 1215–16. Subsequently, the Cholas also lost control of the island of Lanka and were driven out by the revival of Sinhala power.⁴³

In continuation of the decline, also marked by the resurgence of the Pandyan dynasty as the most powerful rulers in South India, a lack of a controlling central administration in its erstwhile-Pandyan territories prompted a number of claimants to the Pandya throne to cause a civil war in which the Sinhalas and the Cholas were involved by proxy. Details of the Pandyan civil war and the role played by the Cholas and Sinhalas, are present in the Mahavamsa as well as the Pallavarayanpettai Inscriptions.⁴⁴

According to Tamil tradition, the Chola country comprised the region that includes the modern-day Tiruchirapalli District, Tiruvarur District, Nagapattinam District, Ariyalur District, Perambalur district, Pudukkottai district, Thanjavur District in Tamil Nadu and Karaikal District. The river Kaveri and its tributaries dominate this landscape of generally flat country that gradually slopes towards the sea, unbroken by major hills or valleys. The river, which is also known as the Ponni (Golden) river, had a special place in the culture of Cholas.⁴⁵ The annual floods in the Kaveri marked an occasion for celebration, known as Adiperukku, in which the whole nation took part. Kaveripoompattinam on the coast near the Kaveri delta was a major port town. Ptolemy knew of this, which he called Khaberis, and the other port town of Nagappattinam as the most important centers of Cholas. These two towns became hubs of trade and commerce and attracted many religious faiths, including Buddhism. Roman ships found their way into these ports. Roman coins dating from

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the early centuries of the common era have been found near the Kaveri delta. The other major towns were Thanjavur, Uraiyur and Kudanthai, now known as Kumbakonam. After Rajendra Chola moved his capital to Gangaikonda Cholapuram, Thanjavur lost its importance.⁴⁵

Canals and water tanks

There was tremendous agrarian expansion during the rule of the imperial Chola Dynasty (c. 900-1270 AD) all over Tamil Nadu and particularly in the Kaveri Basin. Most of the canals of the Kaveri River belongs to this period e.g., Uyyakondan canal, Rajendran vaykkal, Sembian Mahadegvi vaykkal. There was a well-developed and highly efficient system of water management from the village level upwards. The increase in the royal patronage and also the number of devadana and bramadeya lands which increased the role of the temples and village assemblies in the field. Committees like erivariyam (tank-committee) and totta-variam (garden committees) were active as also the temples with their vast resources in land, men and money. The water tanks that came up during the Chola period are too many to be listed here. But a few most outstanding may be briefly mentioned. Rajendra Chola built a huge tank named Solagangam in his capital city Gangaikonda Solapuram and was described as the liquid pillar of victory. About 16 miles long, it was provided with sluices and canals for irrigating the lands in the neighbouring areas. Another very large lake of this period, which even today seems an important source of irrigation was the Viranameri near Kattumannarkoil in South Arcot district founded by Parantaka Chola. Other famous lakes of this period are Madurantakam, Sundra-cholapereri, Kundavai-Pereri (after a Chola queen). Chola dynasty, Chola also spelled Cola, South Indian Tamil rulers of unknown antiquity, antedating the early Sangam poems (c. 200 CE). The dynasty originated in the rich Kaveri

(Cauvery) River valley. Uraiyur (now Tiruchchirappalli) was its oldest capital.⁴⁶

In those days, the mighty Kaveri river gushed unharnessed from the Western Ghats (mountain ranges) with untamed force. Near Thanjavur, Karikalan built a dam made of gigantic stones across the turgid river. Called “Kallanai” — meaning “stone-dam” — it is 329 Metres long and 20 Metres wide. Two millennia ago, building a dam of that size while the river was in flow, was a technological marvel. It is one of the world’s most ancient irrigation projects. This dam changed the economy of the Chola kingdom forever: it irrigated about 1 million acres, converting it to the “Rice Bowl” of the South! Nearly 1700 years later, when the British built another dam across the neighbouring River Kollidam, this dam was said to be their inspiration.⁴⁷

River Cauvery

From the days of the early Chola king Karikalan, meticulous planning went into the construction of irrigation works on both sides of the river Cauvery. Large number of wells were dug and tanks constructed to assist farmers. Stone dams were put up across rivers like Cauvery, to use water for agriculture. Channels carried water from such dams to distant farms. Artificial lakes were also common, which were fed by water from the rivers. To improve agriculture during Chola rule, the empire improved the irrigation facilities for better production by constructing tanks, canals etc. A good portion of income was spent on improving the irrigation. The Chola rulers paid attention to their irrigation system and it was important for them to maintain because they were more inclined towards agriculture and during the fifth and sixth century the agricultural needs became higher. The irrigation works developed in the Tamil region were – wells tanks to collect rainwater and river channels. A variety of methods were

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used; canal systems, stone dams, bunds and wells were dug to help farmers and other agriculturists and tanks were built for collections and storage. A distinctive part was the emphasis on artificial irrigation and lakes.⁴⁸

Most of the achievements of the Cholas were possible via the new developments in Agriculture. River Kaveri branched off into several small channels before emptying into the Bay of Bengal. Water from the channels also provides the necessary moisture for agriculture, particularly the cultivation of rice.^{29-Oct-2017}. The forests are cleared in few places and some regions, and the land was done leveled in that areas for the agriculture. In few areas, the well was dug. Tanks had constructed for collecting the rainwater. The early Tamils raised crops, domesticated cattle for farm use and developed suitable farming implements. They had also adopted tank irrigation of their lands and whenever the monsoon failed and tank got dried up, they led dug wells for tapping sub-soil water. The entire Chola kingdom was facilitated by the river Cauvery and the farmers were completely depended on.⁴⁹

Agriculture and Irrigation

The Kaveri breaks into many channels before emptying itself in the Bay of Bengal. These branches were flooded by rains and deposited fertile soil on the banks which in turn helped the agriculture in this region. By the 5th and 6th century large scale cultivation started in the Kaveri valley as forests were cleared and levelled for creating more cultivable land. In the delta region embankments were built to prevent flooding and canals were constructed to carry water to the fields. Artificial irrigation took place with the construction of wells and water tanks. The Cholas ruled over southern India from 3 BCE to 1279 CE. During the rule of the Cholas, farmers were considered highly by the rulers and the society alike. At a time when farming was the main occupation of

most people, farmers held some of the highest positions in society. Agriculture and irrigation received good support from the Chola kings. Large number of wells were dug and tanks constructed to assist farmers. Stone dams were put up across rivers like Cauvery, to use water for agriculture. Channels carried water from such dams to distant farms. Artificial lakes were also common, which were fed by water from the rivers.⁵⁰

Most of the achievements of the Cholas were possible via the new developments in Agriculture. River Kaveri branched off into several small channels before emptying into the Bay of Bengal. These channels overflow frequently, depositing fertile soil on their banks. Water from the channels also provides the necessary moisture for agriculture, particularly the cultivation of rice. Although agriculture had developed earlier in other parts of Tamil Nadu, it was only from the 5th or 6th century that this area was opened up for large-scale cultivation. Forests had to be cleared in some regions, while the land had to be levelled in other areas. In the delta, region embankments had to be built to prevent flooding and canals had to be constructed to carry water to the fields. In many areas, two crops were grown in a year. In many cases, it was necessary to water crops artificially. A variety of methods were used for irrigation. In some areas, wells were dug. In other places, huge tanks were constructed to collect rainwater.⁵¹

Conclusion

The Cholas are remembered as one of the longest ruling dynasties in the southern regions of India. This section of the timeline witnesses the onset of a new culture and art flourishes like never before. Thus, the Cholas and their reign mark a remarkable period of medieval history that saw a massive cultural spurt along with a growth in civilization and its meaning. It symbolizes not only a period of rapid advancement but

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also a magnificent time to look back at and learn from.

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