

## Analysing the Cholas

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The **Cholas** were the most dominant rulers in South India from 9th to the 13th century whose core of political authority lay in the Kaveri basin. In the study of the South Indian state, the Chola state has been a major concern among historians due to the nature of the evidence from the rich inscriptional material available.

The Chola state, according to **Nilkanta Sastri**, was characterized as 'the almost **Byzantine** royalty of the Rajaraja and his successors with its numerous palaces, officials and ceremonials, and its majestic display of the concentrated resources of an extensive empire differing from the simple, personal rule of the earlier time'. He characterized the South Indian State under the Cholas as highly **centralised**, with a well developed bureaucracy, army and navy, as well as a full-fledged revenue system, while ignoring the peasant region called the *nadu* and its organisation but it simultaneously emphasised the democratic and autonomous functioning of local or village organisations/ assemblies. Although Sastri does go into the divisions of clusters of villages which form the *Nadu* and the *Nadus* which form *Vallanadu*, he basically comes back to state that all of these territorial units were ultimately controlled by the king because of the high degree of central authority. **T.V. Mahalingam** and **A.Appadorai** later on followed his line of argument.

The Cholas evolved different structures of control in different eco-zones and in different politico-cultural sub-regions. The *valanadu*, an artificial revenue/political unit, was created by the will of a political authority and super-imposed as a larger revenue unit over the *nadus* after a reorganization and grouping of *nadus* during the revenue survey and assessment of the early 11th century under Rajaraja I, later repeated by Kulottunga I. The concept of the *mandalam*, also an innovation of the Cholas to designate the traditional geographical and cultural regions, points to a reorganisation of the entire territory and the hinterland. The revenue collection was entrusted to the officials of the area.

The purpose must have been to weaken the local magnates' powers based on kinship and regional ties. (Karashima)

The *Perilama nadus* were created for the brahmana landlords who were connected to *brahmadeyas*. Another mechanism of control was the stationing of *Nilalppadai* (army camps) in strategic areas, building up lines of communication and armies were placed in charge of huge temple centres and trade centres. The hinterland and the city evolved almost simultaneously with the city and its expansion, both in physical and functional terms.

Cholas had a well developed bureaucracy for revenue collection. The revenue department was called *puravuvvari* which had various offices and functions. In the *Karandai* copper-plate inscription of Rajendra I, we find the names of revenue officials with their titles. There is a mention of over 40 officials which clearly proves the existence of a well developed officialdom. The modes of revenue collection would seem to have varied depending upon the resource sought to be appropriated. For example *kadamai* or land revenue and its uniform occurrence in different wet zones indicate the uniform pattern of land revenue collections. (Champakalaxmi)

Although it's not easy to get accurate information about revenue, we can understand it by collating information about tax terms from inscriptions. The number of terms which relates to a tax or due collected from Chola inscriptions recording a land grant or taxation/exemption from two core *Mandalam* amounts to 422 which suggests that Chola taxation was arbitrary. The Chola state and economy depended heavily on agrarian production and cultivation of rice and other crops was encouraged. *Corvee* or forced labour was used for the maintenance of irrigation facilities.

There are other important officials who worked as secretaries to the king of which the high ranking ones called *adhikari* had some imposing titles prefixed by the king's name. Military chiefs called *Senapati* and *Dandanayaka* along with *Sreekariyam* who supervised temple affairs for the state were hierarchically graded. The Thanjavur inscription records some names of the regiments composing the military which records donations of money by the servicemen to the deities in the temple by the royal family. A classification of officers of the army into *perundaram* (higher) and *ciru-taram* (lower) points to a graded hierarchy among the army officers and troops, although the evidence is meagre. There is a controversy whether the Cholas had a standing army or depended on mercenaries.

The research of **Karashima** indicates that several titles in Chola inscriptions refer to administrative offices and that the Chola kings made certain attempts to centralize their administration. The *nadu* and *ur* played an important role as local administration helping the government to collect tax.

Rajaraja I also conducted land surveys by introducing a standard land measurement unit about which we find references to in his inscriptions. Rajaraja I controlled the northern part of Sri Lanka and Rajendra I attacked Srivijaya in the Malacca straits area by dispatching a naval expedition and both sent envoys to the Chinese court to control the East-West maritime trade in the Indian Ocean. Lesser chieftains in the Chola polity representing distinct levels of intermediate strata played a significant role in building up Chola power. Therefore, it is clear that the Cholas were building a centralized and powerful state

Second state model is **Feudal** given by **R.S. Sharma** and **D.N. Jha, B.N.S. Yadav and R.N. Nandi** focused on production relations in the fief and the decline of trade in the medieval period. According to Sharma, a major cause of feudalism in India was the land grants to Brahmans, religious institutions and officials with the given rights of ownership with legal action and freedom from taxation and is further aggravated by a decline of urbanism and trade. It was characterized by a continuous process of fragmentation and decentralization where Brahmans were akin to the feudal lords of Europe.

**D.C. Sirkar** critiques the model by stating that Brahmans provided legitimisation to their rulers in several ways and performed the similar tasks as military lords in Europe but with a different approach.

**Burton Stein** gave the **segmentary state** model in which the Chola state was characterized by limited territorial authority as one moved from the core to the periphery, through the intermediate zone. In this system of replication of uniformity across the numerous peasant locality units or *nadus* the Chola centre had no monopoly of legitimate state authority. Stein makes a distinction between political authority and ritual sovereignty, and it is the latter that the Chola kings are supposed to have exercised. Their political competence and precedence was linked to their patronage of Rajarajeshvara or Brihadeshvara at Thanjavur, who enjoyed a preeminent position in relation to the other deities and cults at various levels in the region. The land grant charters with their long prashastis seem to have spread the message of royal greatness and augmented the constitution of ritual sovereignty. The perception of the *nadus* as unchanging, autonomous, harmonious peasant units, characterized by a brahmana-peasant alliance has been criticized.

**Southall** criticized him by saying that the king has political authority combined with his ritual authority in the case of Hindu Kingdoms.

Stein understood the problems inherent in dichotomizing ritual and political sovereignty. He admitted that in the Indian situation the statement had to be modified because kingship combined both ritual and political authority. Again, he conceded ground on the question of the supposedly unchanging *nadus*.

**Karashima** criticizes Stein for failing to take note of the changing internal structure of the *nadus*, the structure of land rights and tenure as well as erosion of its kinship based organization.

**Champakalaxmi** argues that between the pre-Chola and the *nadu* of the Chola period, important differences exist, which were overlooked by the segmentary state perspective. These differences lay in the significant change that it underwent due to the institutional re-organisation through *Brahmadeyas* and temples between the 9th and 11th centuries C.E.

In this theory, the king enjoyed only limited territorial sovereignty. The element of centrality existed only in the core area even where the presence of semi-autonomous foci of administration was tolerated by the Cholas. The real foci of power are suggested to have been the locality level centres or *Nadus*. He also denied the existence of a Chola standing army, arguing that military power was distributed among various groups including peasants,

merchants and artisans. There was an absence of an organized central system of taxation as war loot was the main source of the state's income.

**Karashima** says that Private landholding in the *ur* was absent during the early Chola period but is evident during the later periods. Although *Brahmadeyas* existed, land was collectively owned by the *sabha* members. Inscriptions record land transfers from one individual to another in the later period. The Chola kings too started granting land during the middle period to the high officials and it led to land transfers between the individuals and resulted in individual landholding in *urs* in the later periods. The trend became stronger and there are references of sale of entire villages by individuals. Overseas trade caused a change in the characteristics of *Nagaram* which became vibrant after the eleventh century. An inscription from kovilpatti records a charity deed decided in the *ainmurrugar* assembly.

The peasant society of the Cholas which was presented as a united structured one, on the primary bonds of kinship and marriage, was an extremely stratified society, vertically divided into numerous segments. These segments created a highly pyramidal series which encouraged the series of relationships between the centre and the peripheries. Each of these segments had a specialised administrative staff. It also had a large number of centres, and all the features of a dual sovereignty consisting of political as well as ritual sovereignty.

Stein's description of the peasant society is questionable and seems to represent an extreme reaction to the idea of a highly centralized monarch. The existence of corporate village organizations does not indicate that peasants exercised political power at a high level.

The theory of peasant state and society, based on *nadu's* autonomy, subsumes the idea of free peasantry holding mastery over the means and processes of production, although within the social context of communal property relations at the production base.

**Narayanan Jha** questions the assumptions of peasant's mastery over the cultivation process and political management and absence of class conflicts and social tensions and existence of a free peasantry in the absence of an exploiting class.

**Hermann Kulke** has questioned Stein's concept of ritual sovereignty. According to him, in a traditional society, particularly in India, ritual sovereignty seems to be an integral part and sometimes even a pacemaker of political power.

**B.D. Chattopadhyaya** gave the **integrated polity model** in which he interprets the early medieval period as a 'period of state formation' not disintegration. It means the transformation of pre-state polities into state polities. He further argued that while land grants were important, they did not mean breakdown of imperial authority.

**James Heitzman** and **Y. Subbarayalu** preferred to call the Chola state an 'Early State'. According to this model, the Chola state was a centralised socio-political organisation, in a complex stratified and extremely unequal society, which consisted of the rulers and the ruled.

The decline of chola state is attributed to its inability to cope up with the changes in two phases of segmentary organization and imperial phase of centralization in the face of decreasing revenue flows and diminishing officialdom

( Karshima, Subbarayalu, Heitzmen).

Therefore, there are many scholars who do commit themselves to a single specific model and we should be cautious while applying these models to south indian history as said by **Karashima**.

According to **Champakalaxmi**, the views of Sastri and Stein are extremist and static and have no use for the dialectic of change. The centre oriented approach had some problems of describing the Chola monarchy as all powerful and Byzantine, overlooking the contradiction in its simultaneous acceptance of locally autonomous administration in the *Brahmadeyas*, due to its inability to relate the locality's administration to a strong centre.

The periphery oriented formulation erred by emphasizing the autonomy of the locality, the segment in the segmentary state conception, by using what has been criticised as "hastily grafted" concepts and models drawn from political anthropology of the Africanist variety, in its search for alternative tools of analysis.

Thus, the Chola state evolved as a regional polity with greater uniformity of structures and sub-systems integrating different sub-regions and thereby differs from all other regional polities of the pre-Chola period in Tamil Nadu, other Deccan polities of the early medieval period and the Vijayanagara state.

We cannot rely on any one model to completely understand the nature of Chola state but we need to corroborate it with evidence available and models to enhance our understanding.

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