

The Medieval India – South India and the Cholas

The Cholas – Sources

The southern part of the Indian peninsula is mainly inhabited by the Dravidians. Three powerful kingdoms ruled South India in the ancient period. They were the Cheras, the Pandyas and the Cholas. The Cholas emerged as the most powerful of all. The Chera kingdom was one of the earliest kingdoms in South India. They were later defeated by the Pallavas in the 4th century AD. In the 10th century, the Cholas became a powerful kingdom in the South.

Literary Sources

- There was a growth of classical Tamil literature during the Chola period. Kuttan, the court poet Vikrama Chola, Kulottunga II and Rajaraja II wrote about the war of Vikrama Chola.
- Pulgalendi was a contemporary of Kuttan who wrote *Nalavenba*. Sekkilar composed the famous poem *Periya Puranam* during the reign of Kulottunga II.
- *Kalingattuparani* was a poem written by Jayankondar, the court poet of Kulottunga I. This poem celebrates the victory of Kulottunga Chola I over the king of Kalinga during a war. In this poem, Jayankondar has mentioned details about the lineage of the king, his birth, his family and his accession to the throne. The poem is regarded as one of the masterpieces of Tamil literature.

Archaeological Sources

Archaeological sources of the period include inscriptions and monuments.

- We get information about the Chola period from various inscriptions. The inscriptions of the Cholas are mainly in the form of copper plate grants and stone and wall inscriptions.
- The copper plate inscriptions contained details such as the origin of the Chola dynasty and the land grants made during the period. The copper plate inscriptions are important sources because of the following reasons:
 - They shed light on the Chola administration.
 - They are a record of the land endowments and gifts made to the Brahmins and the temples by kings.
 - They tell us about the construction of temples.
 - Copper plate inscriptions contain details of royal orders or decrees pertaining to the matter of public importance such as land revenue and judgments delivered against thefts and murder.
- Monuments are mainly in the form of temples, sculptured halls and towers. These monuments depict the art and architecture of the Cholas, their religious beliefs and socioeconomic conditions. Some famous temples are the Brihadeshwara and Gangaikonda Cholapuram temples in Thanjavur and the Koranganatha temple in Trichinopoly.
- The Brihadeshwara temple also known as Rajarajeshwara temple was built by Rajaraja Chola in 10th century AD. The temple has a great tower consisting of 13 storeys rising to 190 feet. The main shrine of the temple houses a large Shiva lingam which is cut in a monolithic rock and is about 8.87 metres high.
- The Brihadeshwara temple is a splendid specimen of Tamil architecture. It has been declared as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

The Reign of the Chola Kings

- The Chola rule was established by **Vijayalaya Chola** in AD 846. He made Thanjavur as his capital. He was succeeded by his grandson, **Parantaka I**. He annexed Madurai and defeated the Pandyas and the rulers of Lanka.
- **Rajaraja I** was one of the greatest kings of the Chola dynasty. He attacked the Pandyas and the Cheras. He annexed the parts of the territories of Mysore, Travancore and Coorg.
- Rajaraja realised the importance of sea trade in the economy of India and thus led a naval expedition and attacked Sri Lanka and Maldives. However, he could not control them. In the North, Rajaraja conquered the northwest parts of Ganga. The Cholas became a great power under his rule.
- He built Rajarajeshwara temple dedicated to Lord Shiva at Thanjavur.
- **Rajendra Chola**, the son of Rajaraja, ruled from AD 1012 to AD 1044. He continued the expansionist policies of his father.
- The Chola army under him defeated Mahipala, the king of Bengal. To celebrate the occasion, he adopted the title of Gangaikonda and built a new capital Gangaikonda Cholapuram.
- He led one of the famous campaigns in Southeast Asia. Indian merchants were trading with various parts of Southeast Asia and southern China through the straits of Malacca which was under the control of Shrivijaya (modern Indonesia). When the merchants of Shrivijaya began to create problems for the Indian merchants, the latter appealed to Rajendra Chola for help. As a result, Rajendra Chola sent a huge army and defeated the king of Shrivijaya.
- He built many beautiful temples in his new capital Gangaikonda Cholapuram.
- **Rajadhiraj Chola** was the last great ruler of this dynasty. He died during the battle of Koppam against the Chalukyas in AD 1052. After his death, the Chola kingdom began to disintegrate.
- After the disintegration of the Chola kingdom, the independent kingdoms of the Pandyas, Cheras and Hoysalas began to emerge. The Chola kingdom totally disintegrated after Malik Kafur, a general of Alauddin Khilji invaded the south.



A famous temple built by the Cholas in Gangaikonda Cholapuram

The Chola Administration

The Cholas had a highly organised system of administration.

Central Government

- The king governed the territories with the help of his council of ministers. He often toured the country to keep a check on the administration.
- The royal princes were appointed to look after the administration of various units and were engaged in activities of peace and war.
- The central government was responsible for promoting peace and order, prosperity and cultural progress of the empire.

Provincial Government

- The Chola Empire was divided into mandalams and provinces. Mandalams were further divided into valanadu and nadu.
- The princes of the royal family were appointed as governors of these provinces.

Local Self-Government

- The Cholas believed in the principle of local self-government. In many villages, the administration was carried out by villagers and not by government officials.
- There were three types of village assemblies—*ur*, *sabha* and *nagaram*.
- The *ur* was a common village assembly of the people who were the owners of the land. The *sabha* was an assembly of the Brahmins who owned lands. The *nagaram* was an assembly of merchants in the cities or towns where they were in dominant positions.
- The villagers who owned the land were chosen by voting to the council. Administration of villages such as collection of taxes, settlement of disputes and allocation of water resources were looked after by the council.

The Revenue

- Revenues of the Cholas mainly came from taxes levied on land, its produce and trade. While a part of the revenue was kept aside for the king, the rest was spent on public works such as building of dams and roads.
- The taxes on land were collected by officials from the village councils.

The Chola Art

- The Chola rulers built several temples, canals, roads, cities and palaces. They built most temples in the Dravidian style.
- Earlier they built simple structures, but later, temples began to be constructed on a magnificent and grand scale.
- While the gateway of the temple was known as *gopuram*, the main shrine of the temple was known as *garbhagriha*. The images of gods and goddess were kept in the *garbhagriha*.
- Massive towers or *vimanas* were the main features of the Chola architecture. The best example of such temples was the Brihadeshwara or the Shiva temple at Thanjavur.
- The temples built in the capital Gangaikonda Cholapuram were magnificent and are fine examples of Chola architecture.
- The Cholas seemed perfect in making the images of gods and goddess. Many bronze images were made during this period.
- The bronze image of Lord Shiva as *Natraja* or the Lord of Dance is an excellent work of art. The image of *Natraja* has been described as the cultural epitome of the Chola Period.



A deity made of bronze during the Chola dynasty

Society

- The temple in the Chola kingdom was the main centre of social activity. It was not only a place of worship but also a place where people gathered.
- The wealthy and richer section of society gave donations to the temples.
- Some temples also owned lands and participated in inland and overseas trade. Sometimes, instead of giving land grants, land revenues of certain villages were assigned to the temples and the villagers had to pay the revenue to the temples.
- The temples employed people in large numbers and were the biggest employer after the state. The temple authorities also looked after the necessities of the people and arranged education for children and built hospitals.

Education

- The temple was not only a place of worship but also a place of imparting education. The priests taught the children mainly in Tamil and Sanskrit.
- They taught Vedas in Sanskrit. Several local works were taught in Tamil.

Literature

- The Chola period is known for developments made in Tamil and is known as the 'Golden Age of Tamil literature.
- Kamban was a great writer who lived in the 11th century. He wrote Tamil Ramayana. Many writers wrote stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata.
- Pugalandi composed *Nala Venba* which was a love story of Nala Damyanti.
- In the 12th century, the works of Tamil writers were collected in eleven volumes known as Tirumurais. These are considered sacred texts.
- Kalingattuparani was a poem written by Jayankondar which describes the second war of Kulothunga against Sri Lanka.
- Buddhamitra and Rawankashi wrote treatises on grammar. A Jain poet Amrit Sagar wrote several books which have enriched Tamil literature.

The Chola kingdom began to decline by the end of the 13th century AD. Continuous wars against the neighbouring kingdoms made the kingdom weak. Apart from it, internal conflicts also further weakened the kingdom.