Study of Inscriptions: Chola Era

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Among the dynasties that ruled in India, Cholas/Cōḻarkaḷ /Cōḻarkaḷ played an important role in the history of south India. The Cholas/Cōḻarkaḷ have established their history in form of inscriptions which are recorded on rocks and temples. Unlike many other contemporary civilisations, Cholas/Cōḻarkaḷ placed utmost importance on recording their accomplishments, which help us understand our history.

The empire is most exciting to deal with, (and what is going to be dealt with here) as it has overshadowed the other empires in terms of achievements, success and their contribution towards architecture, especially, building temples.

We will be concentrating on the later Cholas/Cōḻarkaḷ, who built number of temples during their reign. From these inscriptions we can infer how the later Cholas/Cōḻarkaḷ came into power, their lifestyles, the people's lifestyles and well-defined, centralised idea about how their empire was. We also get to know about their culture which has always remained as an integral part of our life.

Among the temples they built, the Brihadeshwara/Bṛihádīśvara temple is one of the most prominent temples and the one we will be focusing on too. We will be concentrating on the inscriptions from different temples, what they convey, and the language in which it was written.

INTRODUCTION

The Cholas/Cōḻarkaḷ are remembered as one of the longest ruling dynasties in South India. They are one of the famous kingdoms alongside of Pandyas/Pāṇṭiyarkaḷ and Cheras/Cērar. They have contributed extensively to the field of art and architecture through the magnificent temples they have built.

The reign of the Cholas/Cōḻarkaḷ was said to have begun in the 9th century when they defeated the Pallavas. They were divided as early Cholas/Cōḻarkaḷ and later Cholas/Cōḻarkaḷ - the ones who grew into power during the onset of the Sangam literature and later during the medieval period which saw the absolute development of the Chola power.

Development of the dynasty took place when kings like Aditya I/Ātityā and Parantaka I/Parāntaka I ruled. Kings like Rajaraja Chola /Rājarāja cōḻar and Rajendra Chola/Rājēntira cōḻar further expanded the kingdom into the Tamil region. Later Kulothunga Chola/Kulōttuṅka cōḻar took over Kalinga/Kaliṅkā to establish a strong rule. This magnificence lasted until the arrival of the Pandyas/Pāṇṭiyarkaḷ in the early 13th century.[1]

The Cholas/Cōḻarkaḷ, Cheras/Cērar/Cērar, Pandyas/Pāṇṭiyarkaḷ and many older dynasties that ruled in the past were adept at many skills and many of their great kings were able to make sure their respective empires were sustained throughout their lifetimes and also kept enemies at bay. Ironically, we find some tasks that they managed to perform without technology herculean, while we have all the resources to easily accomplish our tasks. Among those tasks at which these respective empires were adept in were making sure that their lifestyles, monuments and their achievements were preserved for many centuries and have housed inscriptions, which are the source for finding how the temple was built and contain an incredible amount of detail.

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[1] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/desires-of-a-modern-indian/brief-history-of-chola-dynasty/ (accessed on 7th November 2019)

How they came to power:

The founder of the Chola Empire was Vijayalaya/Vijayālayac, who was the major enemy of the Pallavas of Kanchi. He captured Tanjore/Tañcāvūr in 850 A.D. He built a temple for goddess Durga in Tanjore to mark their victory. Aditya I/Ātityā, his successor helped his ruler, the Pallava king Aparajita against the Pandyas/Pāṇṭiyarkaḷ but soon defeated him and annexed the whole of the Pallava kingdom.

By the end of the ninth century, the Cholas/Cōḻarkaḷ had defeated the Pallavas completely and weakened the Pandyas/Pāṇṭiyarkaḷ capturing the Tamil country Tondaimandalam and including it under their domination He then became a sovereign ruler.[2]

Parantaka I/Parāntaka I was one of the most prominent rulers of the Chola Dynasty. He ruled for almost half a century. His reign is recognised by the conquest of the Pandyas/Pāṇṭiyarkaḷ territory and capital Madurai. Thus, he assumed the title 'Madurai-konda' the one who captured Madurai.The campaign against the Pandyas/Pāṇṭiyarkaḷ brought him closer to Sri Lanka, as the Pandyan ruler at that time Maravarman Rajasimha II sought for aid from Ceylon ruler Kassapa V. These continuous hostilities lasted for several decades. Parantaka I/Parāntaka I was successfully able to resist the invasions till he was defeated by the Rashtrakutas who succeeded in occupying the northern half of Chola Empire.[3]

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[2] http://www.historydiscussion.net/empires/the-history-of-chola-empire-indian-history/718 (accessed on 15th December 2019)

[3] http://www.ancient-civilizations.com/chola-dynasty/ (accessed on 21st December 2019)

EXTENT OF THE DYNASTY :

By 1044, Rajendra Chola had pushed the borders north to the Ganges River (Ganga), conquering the rulers of Bihar and Bengal, and he had also taken coastal Myanmar (Burma), the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and key ports in the Indonesian archipelago and Malay Peninsula. It was the first true maritime empire based in India. The Chola Empire under Rajendra even exacted tribute from Siam (Thailand) and Cambodia. Cultural and artistic influences flowed in both directions between Indo-china and the Indian mainland. The Chola Empire left a rich legacy in the Tamil country. Cultural properties also found their way into the Southeast Asian artistic lexicon, influencing religious art and literature from Cambodia to Java.[4]

Figure 1

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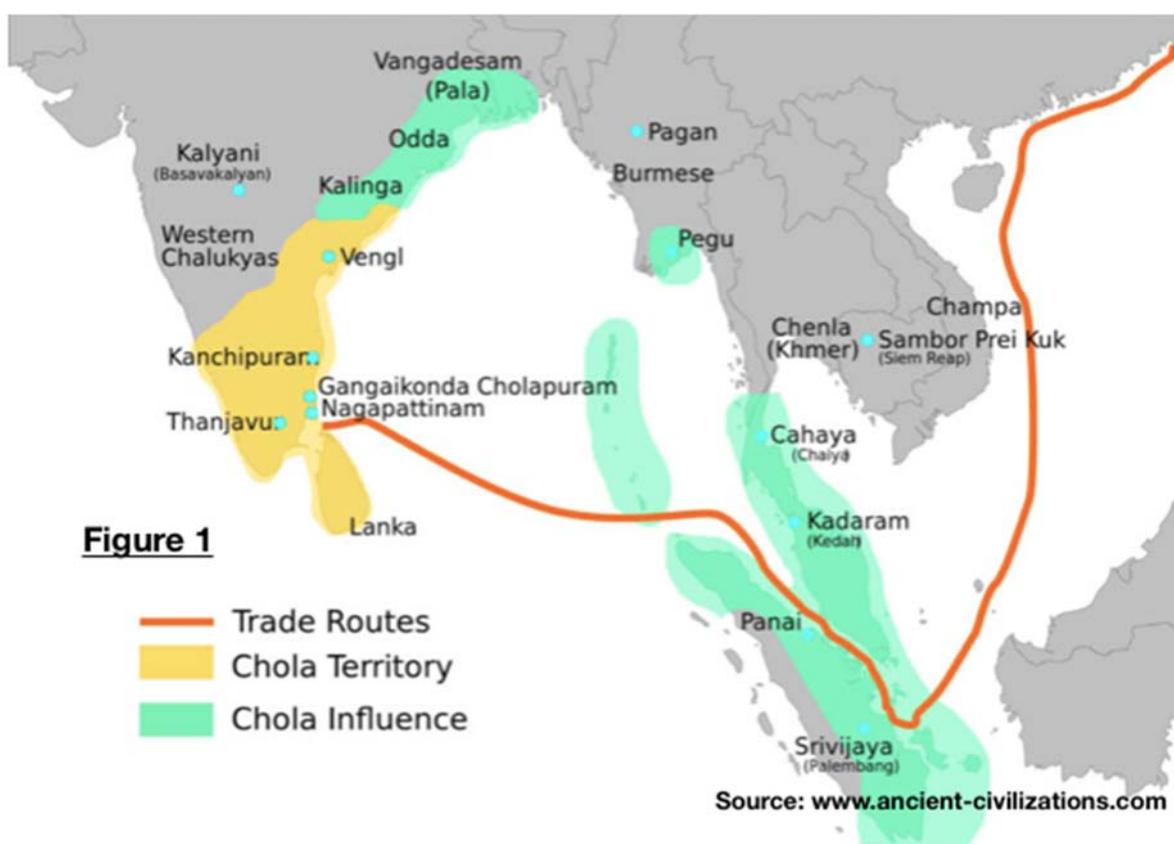
[4] Szczepanski, Kallie. "History of India's Chola Empire." ThoughtCo, Jul. 3, 2019, thoughtco.com/the-chola-empire-195485. (accessed on 24th December 2019)

ARCHITECTURE

KEY FEATURES OF CHOLA ARCHITECTURE:

The Dvarapalas, or guardian figures, at the entrance to the Mandapam, or hall which started from the Pallava period became a unique feature of the Cholas.[5]

The base of their temples include figures such as, 'Yazhi'/ Yaali which is part lion, part elephant, goat, horse, etc.

Figure 2 : Yazhi
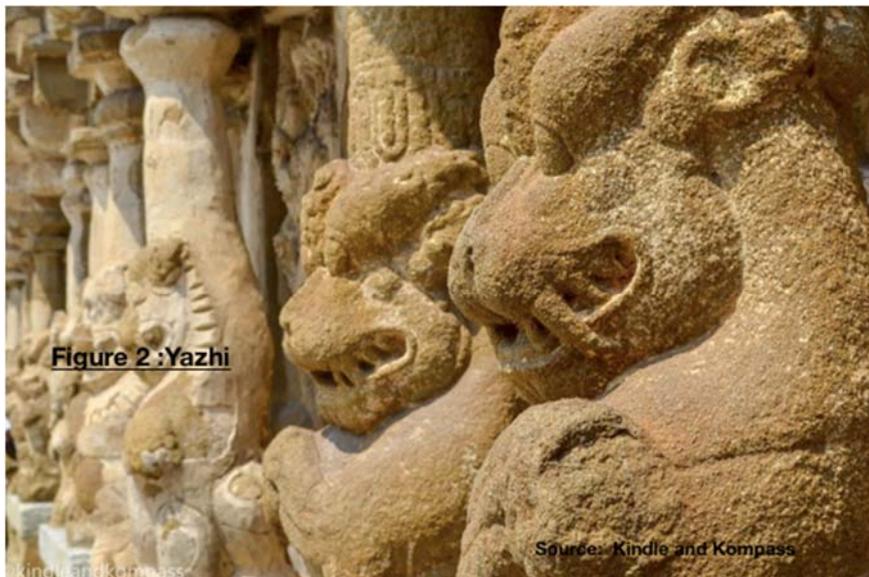
MAJOR ARCHITECTURAL CONTRIBUTION

1. Founder of Chola Dynasty Vijayalaya built the Vijayalaya Cholisvara Temple at Tanjore

2. Parantaka I/Parāntaka I/Parāntaka Chola built the Koranganatha Temple, Srinivasanallur at Trichy

3. Brihadeshwara/Bṛihádīśvara Temple by Raja Raja Chola I at Tanjore

4. Brihadeshwara/Bṛihádīśvara Temple by Rajendra Chola I at Gangaikonda Cholapuram

5. Airavateswara temple at Darasuram, near Kumbakonam by Raja Raja Chola II

6. Moovar temple near Pudukottai by a 10th century Chola general Boothi Vikramakesari

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[5] https://www.gktoday.in/gk/chola-architecture/ (accessed on 23rd December 2019)

INSCRIPTIONS

Most of their inscriptions are written in Tamil, some are in Sanskrit and others in Grantham, they are readable and their script is decipherable even centuries later which could only be possible if the languages were passed down from centuries or, if the language and every aspect required to learn the language was also inscribed on walls or stones of a temple, the latter of which seems to be the more likely case.

MAJOR INFERENCE FROM THEIR INSCRIPTIONS

1.Contributions: Uttaramerur inscriptions speak about Parantaka I/Parāntaka I and his victory over Madurai. They also speak about gifts of land made by two individuals, one from a temple musician and the other from a trader. Another inscription of Rajakesari (Sundara Chola or Rajaraja I) throws light on the gift made by Nakkan Paavai alias Vallanaipaka Thalaikkoli, who considered herself as the daughter of the presiding deity of the temple. A piece of land was purchased out of the 7 kalanju of gold she had gifted and the produce was used to light a day lamp in the temple.

'Thalaikkoli' was the highest distinction conferred on highly skilled temple dancers. It is equally interesting to note that three dancers of this temple were taken into the fold of the famous Thalichcheri Pendukal settled at the residential quarters of Rajarajisvaram at Thanjavur during the rule of the great king Rajaraja I. A fragmentary inscription of 9th century CE and another one, in which the name of the king is lost, record endowments made for lighting of a lamp at the temple.[6]

The Thiruvotriyur temple inscriptions refer to an endowment given by Maran Parameswaran. On his return from Andhra Pradesh after winning a battle against a Chalukya king, capturing Seetpuli and Nellore, he donated a perpetually burning lamp and lands to the Adigramam temple. The commander-in-chief was awarded the title Sembian Chola Varaiyan by the Chola King. In the inscriptions of Rajaraja Chola in the Big Temple, it has been stated that one of the recipients of the 48 cows as endow-

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[6] https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Tiruchirapalli/inscriptions-from-pallava-chola-periods-found/article17817540.ece/amp/ (accessed on 18th December 2019)

ment in return to the supply of ghee for lighting lamps in the temple, is named as "Rajaraja Valanattu Poyyil Kutrathu Sirukulathur Puliyan Chootri". The inscriptions in the Sankaranathar temple belong to the same Chola period. An officer by name Madhuranthaka Pallavarayan donated 428 Sri Lankan coins as loan to the Sirukulathur Sabaiyar. In return, the villagers had to a maintain the irrigation tank of the village every year.[7]

2. Wars fought: Attacks on south Kerala regions are mentioned in the inscriptions discovered from the temples at Cholapuram, Kanyakumari, Darsanam Koppu, Thirunanthikarai and Sucheendram. The Thirallaisthanam inscription reveals the friendship between Aditya I/Ātityā Cholan and Sthanuravi. Rajendra Chola's (AD 1012-1044) Thiruvalangad inscription has mentioned about the Chola attack on Vizhinjam. The Cholapuram inscription is about the retreat of Kulothunga Cholan to Kottattu.[8]

3. Divisions: Siva temple at Visalur village near Keeranur in Kulathur taluk was an early Chola edifice, attributed to the period of Parantaka I/Parāntaka I/. Some inscriptions throw light on the Chola administration. The Chola empire was divided into Mandalams (zones) and Valanadus (a group of villages). Visalur was situated in the Jayasingakulakala valanadu in Mel Sengilinadu as learnt through the inscription of Raja Raja I in the year 997 AD. This inscription describes the large extent of land gifted by villagers, its measurement, boundaries, quantum of paddy to be used in each ritual and puja and festivals to be celebrated.[9]

4. Brihadeshwara/Bṛihádīśvara temple: It is a temple dedicated to lord Shiva and it is a huge temple. According to Dr. R. Nagaswamy, former Director of Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department, it is the only temple in India where the king specifically talks in an inscription that he built the temple only with stones and that the king uses the word "katrali"– kal and thali in Tamil mean a temple built of stone. This epic inscrip-

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[7] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/inscriptions-throw-light-on-chola-period/article4379622.ece (accessed on 13th December 2019)

[8] http://www.keralaculture.org/chola-plates/314 (accessed on 13th December 2019)

[9] https://www.news18.com/news/india/tn-18-chola-inscriptions-found-in-pudukottai-shrine-486116.html (accessed on 13th December 2019)

tion, running to 107 paragraphs, describes how Rajaraja Chola, seated in the royal bathing hall on the eastern side of his palace, ordered that it be inscribed on the base of the temple's Vimana, how he followed through with his temple plan, a list of the gifts that he, his sister ("em akkan") Kundavai, his queens and others gave the temple, and so on.[10]

The inscriptions in the temple encompass all activities of Rajaraja Chola's kingdom – the administrative machinery, economic transactions, survey of lands, irrigation system, taxation, accounting, organisation of a huge army, rituals, music, dance, the king's fondness for Tamil and Sanskrit literature, and so on. They also show that he had defined and classified the duties, responsibilities, qualifications and service tenure of each functionary of the temple. The inscriptions provide interesting information on drummers, tailors, physicians, surgeons, carriers of flags and parasols during festivals, torchbearers, cleaners and sweepers. The temple had singers of Tamil hymns (called "Devaram") and Sanskrit hymns, and a large number of vocal and instrumental musicians. It had on its rolls 400 accomplished danseuses called "talippendir" to perform dances during daily temple rituals and in festival processions.[11]


Figure 3: Inscription of Raja Raja I

Source: D.Krishnan for The Hindu

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[10] https://frontline.thehindu.com/static/html/fl2713/stories/20100702271312300.htm (accessed 23rd December 2019)

[11] Nagaswamy.R. Bṛhadīśvara Temple: Form and Meaning,Aryan Books International,India 2010 (accessed 22nd December 2019)

5.Thiruchendurai Temple: This temple is situated on the Trichy-Karur highway. It was built by Poodhi Aditha Pidari, queen of Arinchaya Chola. One inscription shows the vows taken by two bodyguards of a local feudal ruler, Mikaman. It was considered a sin to live after the death of their benefactor. So, once they take up the job of bodyguard they used to take vows in front of the God declaring that they will not live after the demise of their Lord. The second Inscription engraved talks about the royal order of the king remitting certain taxes on the lands of both Siva and Vishnu Temples of the Cholamandalam.[12] These were deciphered by R. Kalaikkovan, Director of Dr. M. Rajamanikkanar Centre for Historical Research.

6. Attack on Kerala: Attacks on south Kerala regions are mentioned in the inscriptions discovered from the temples at Cholapuram, Kanyakumari, Darsanam Koppu, Thirunanthikarai and Sucheendram. The Thirallaisthanam inscription reveals the friendship between Aditya Cholan and Sthanuravi. Rajendra Chola's (AD 1012-1044) Thiruvalangadu inscription has mentioned about the Chola attack on Vizhinjam. The Cholapuram inscription is about the retreat of Kulothunga Cholan to Kottattu.[13]

Figure 4:Inscriptions at Tiruchendur.
Source: Sakshi Singh for 5th Voice

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[12] https://5thvoice.news/legalnews/MzMzNQ==/Inscription-of-Later-Chola-period-found-at-Thiruchendurai-temple# (Accessed on 24th December 2019)
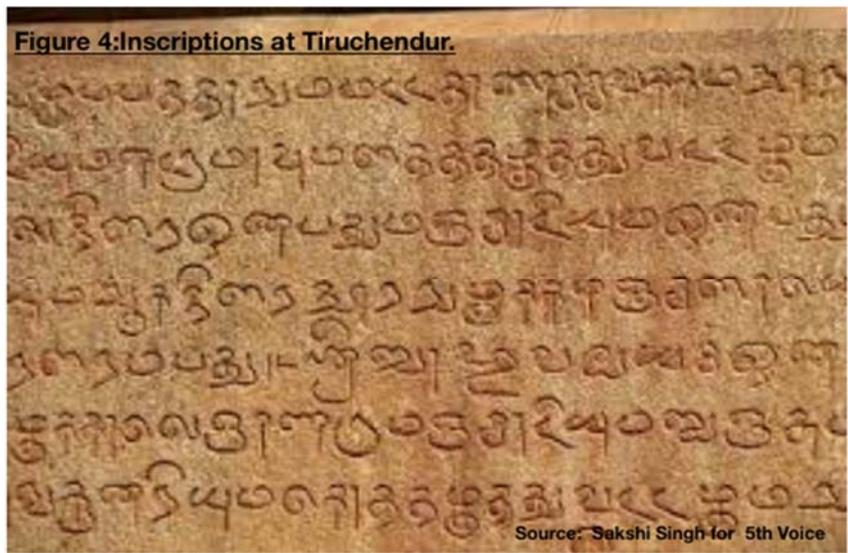
[13] http://www.keralaculture.org/chola-plates/314 (Accessed on 24th December 2019)

CONCLUSION

We chose to research on the Cholas because of their lifestyles, achievements and due to the fact that they were able to hold their dominions for 400 years amongst rival kings such as the Pandyas, who had equal amounts of prestige and power. They have left behind temples which hold a myriad of inscriptions and give greater insights to our culture and heritage, enabling us to observe our strong cultural roots in which many meaningful practices, thoughts and ideas are present. The inscriptions talk about their victories and losses and list the achievements of each individual king, which may be lengthy or short, in parts of inscriptions known as that king's *meikirthi*. A primary source of such bounties of inscriptions is an architectural marvel of the Cholas that has stood for about 1,000 years, the Brihadeshwara/Bṛihádīśvara Temple, whose inscriptions talk about the impact the temple has had on community, the other uses of the temple, the gifts and donations made by the Chola kings to the temple, shares of land which were donated to the people who contributed to the construction of the temple, among many more details, which can be uncovered in the inscriptions that are too long to list. We get to know about the contraptions used during the time of when the temple was built and after. This research project has helped us gain valuable insights about our culture, history and heritage.

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