

# Chola's Naval Supremacy for Developing Trade with China

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## Abstract

Trade between countries have experienced numerous acid tests and have developed itself according to many circumstances and political will of each nation from time to time. Since ancient times, there were many kingdoms in South India. The Chola dynasty is one of the top prominent Tamil dynasties in Indian history. The olden times of the Cholas Dynasty fall into three periods: the early Cholas of the Sangam literature, the rise of the medieval Cholas under Vijayalaya (c. 848), and finally the late Chola dynasty of Kulothunga Chola I from the third quarter of the eleventh century [10]. Historians ponder it to be one of the most prominent dynasties in Indian history. The ancient Tamil (dravidian) kings of the Chola dynasty who once ruled most parts of the Southeast Asia, had upheld a very good relationship with the Chinese. Collections of ancient Chinese coins have been found in recent years at several places in the present Thanjavur, Tiruvarur, and Pudukottai districts of Tamil Nadu, which are well-thought-out to be the homeland of the Cholas. This approves that trade relationship existed between the Cholas and the Chinese. The first part of this paper will discuss the close diplomatic tie between the Song dynasty of China and the Medieval Cholas reached Chinese shores to travel both ways through many technological innovations. The second part of the paper gives glimpses of the victorious expedition of Rajendra Chola towards South East Asia. And the third part exposes some of the important aspects relating to the shipping, shipbuilding and naval capabilities of the Cholas and its effect on India's trade with China. This study also reveals whether the naval capabilities of the Cholas conquered the trade with China

**Key Words:** Naval Supremacy, Trade, India, China, Cholas

## Introduction

Man has passed through innumerable phases while trudging headed for ethnic expansion. He stimulated from hunting, food gathering, fishing, cattle rearing, food producing, transporting and intensifying trade contacts between groups, then between communities, then between societies and finally between countries and tread out towards civilization and culture. An individual needs the goods, which another one has. He needs the service of others to get it. This need is the real beginning of trade. Thus trade in the form of

exchange of goods for goods came into existence. This is referred in Tolkappiyam as Vanigam. It is otherwise called as business, which means service, buying and selling. This facilitates the trading community to strengthen their relationship internally and externally. Trade was one of the major means of contact between nations. It has undergone various acid tests and has improved itself according to various situations and political will of each country from time to time.

### **The Beginning of India -China Trade Relations**

India has a civilization as ancient as most ancient civilizations across the world. The history of the sub-continent dates back to five thousand years ago, when the inhabitants of the Indus Valley Civilization had developed an urban culture based on commerce and sustained by agricultural trade. Amongst the world's oldest, richest and most diverse cultures, India's unique ethos is rooted in its ethnic, cultural and religious diversity which was made up of countless kingdoms with fluctuating boundaries during ancient and medieval India. Thus the beginning of India and China trade relation go far back in history and also based on geo-strategic scenario.

There is no clear proof about when exactly the trade relationship started between the two countries. The histories of both nations contribute much to the understanding of the historical trade relations between them. India and China are home to the world's oldest civilizations and they share a long land border but remain separated by the Himalayas. Yet, they have managed to interact with each other across the snowy ranges that separate them. India's unique ethos is rooted in its ethnic, cultural and religious diversity which was made up of countless kingdoms with fluctuating boundaries during ancient and medieval India. The history of Tamil literature provides evidences about the social, political, commercial and cultural trends of Tamil Nadu at various periods and also about the great traders, their caravans, markets, marts, and the guilds of great traders. But all of them were inland traders, catering to local needs of the people.

Since ancient times, there were many kingdoms in South India. The Chola dynasty is one of the most prominent Tamil dynasties in Indian history. The history of the Cholas Dynasty falls into three periods: the early Cholas of the Sangam literature, the rise of the medieval Cholas under Vijayalaya (c. 848), and finally the late Chola dynasty of Kulothunga Chola I from the third quarter of the eleventh century [10]. Historians consider it to be one of the most prominent dynasties in Indian history. The Cholas dynasty was at the peak of its influence and power during the medieval period. The navy grew both in size and status during the Medieval Cholas reign. Rajaraja Chola I (or Rajaraja I) was one of the greatest kings of this southern dynasty. He trailed a policy of conquest because he wished to control the trade routes to South East Asia. The Cholas also combated sea piracy successfully in Malayan archipelago, and had a close trade with the Song dynasty in China, that led to advances in ship building [12] The Cholas period would be noted for its

emphasis on maritime trade and conquests. The ancient Tamil (dravidian) kings of the Chola dynasty who ruled most parts of the South East Asia, had maintained a very good relationship with the Chinese.

### **Economic Policy of Chinese Song Dynasty and Chola dynasty**

Song dynasty played a significant role in linking the markets of China to the rest of the world and paved the way for the emergence of a world market. The market structure and economic policies of the Chola dynasty were more conducive to a large-scale, cross-regional market trade than those enacted by the Chinese Song Dynasty. A Chola record gives their justification for rendezvous in foreign trade. "Make the merchants of distant foreign countries who import elephants and good horses attach to you by providing them with villages and decent dwellings in the city, by affording them daily audience, presents and allowing those profits. Then those articles will never go to your enemies." Song dynasty reports record that an embassy from Chulian (Chola) reached the Chinese court in 1077, and that the king of the Chulian at the time, Kulothunga I, was called Ti-hua-kia-lo. This embassy was a trading venture and was highly profitable to the visitors, who returned with copper coins in exchange for articles of tribute, including glass and spices. Probably, the motive behind Rajendra's expedition to Srivijaya was the protection of the merchants' interests.

### **Rationale of the Study**

The Cholas widened their power through overseas trade to China and Southeast Asia towards the end of the 9th century. The best known South Indian trade guilds or Tamil merchant associations such as Manigramam and Ayyavole played a major role and encouraged the Chola navy in interregional and overseas trade. Several Historians gave a detailed account of the civilization, generally, and the culture and the supremacy of art in ship building, construction of largest number of temples of South India by Cholas emperors. They focused mainly on cultural and religious connections, sea expeditions and conquering of Southeast Asian countries by Cholas Emperors but doubting their purpose of travel. Therefore, a critical study is made in this paper to analyze the shipping, shipbuilding and naval capabilities of the Cholas. Hence there is an inquest to have deeper understanding about Cholas's Naval Supremacy for developing trade with China.

### **Review of Literature**

An extensive study of relevant books, journals, websites and documents was undertaken to explore the extent of work already done in relation to India's trade relations with China during Chola dynasty. In this connection, the following literature merits a special mention.

Bhat M. K.(2015), in his book "International Trade and Financial Environment" provides a glimpse of the factors that lead to trade among nations, theory of international trade, recent trends in international trade, different aspects of Indian Policy, export procedures, challenges in India's foreign trade and financial

arrangements available to Indian exporters [1]. This helps the researcher to gain a profound understanding of the need for interdependence and international trade.

Jayapalan.N.( 2008), in his book “Economic History of India, Ancient to Present Day” captures all the significant elements of India’s economic history from pre historic period, up to 2008 A.D. In this book the author mentions that South Indian traders had trade contact with Malaya, Indonesia and China in order to meet the growing demand of medieval Europe for the eastern products. This book helps the researcher to gain knowledge about the economic conditions of India in the past and also after the economic reforms of India [2].

Jayapalan N.(1988) in his book An Outline of History of TamilNadu Till 1987 A.D, describes how extensive trade with foreign countries from very early times was carried out by different rulers under different periods. India possesses certain commodities which have always been in great demand in foreign market. This book also outlined about the trading activities of the Tamil merchants with foreign countries from early times in Tamilaham. This gave insight to the researcher how Tamil merchants acted as an intermediary to supply the Indian products which were in great demand in the crowded bazaar of foreign lands [3].

Chellam,V.T. (1985), in her book “A History of Tamil Nadu,” presents a picture of history of Tamil Nadu, from pre-history of Tamil country up to 1967 A.D. She also gives a detailed report about the different types of trade which was carried out by the merchant community. Tamilaham had played a vital role in the history of overseas trade even before Christen era and Tamils went to overseas lands alone without taking their womenfolk. The Tamil merchants sent pepper and cardamom to China at least from the seventh century CE and imported silk from China. There was a Chinese colony in the West coast and also at Nagapattinam. This books helps the authors to understand a wide range of historical problems, and maritime activities concerning India and China during the Chola dynasty [4].

Balasubrahmanyam S.R., (1975), in his book, Middle Chola Temples – Rajaraja I to Kulothunga I (985-1070), gives a detailed account of the civilization, generally, and the culture and the supremacy of art in building largest number of temples of South India by Cholas emperors. He argues that Cholas art may be said to have become family legacy. He also emphasizes that the art of dancing were inseparable in the cultural life of Cholas [6].

### **Chola Empire ~ 1050**

**K. V. Raman** [15], in the context, just points out the Cholas" trade relation with China and SEA countries without going into the naval aspect. P. Venkatesan [16], though deals with “Naval Battles and Shipwrecks Referred to in Tamil Epigraphs”, he repeats the details from the inscriptions of Rajaraja and Rajendra, again

not explaining about naval details. But, there have been depiction of ships not only in hero-stones, but also on the coins of Satavahanas, Salankayanas, Pallavas and others and such coins are in fact known as "ship-type" coins

### **Research Gap**

Though, many references had been made about the maritime activities, import and export of goods, movement of people-groups with religious beliefs [8] between India and China since the beginning of the Christian era by the non-Indian researchers, their studies have not explored significantly about the contribution of Chola's naval supremacy for developing trade with China. Hence an attempt is made to demonstrate whether or not naval capabilities of the Cholas contribute much to the development of trade with China.

### **Significance of the Study**

Some historians believe that trade relations between India and China could be traced back to the time of the Chola dynasty in South India from first CE. Then the two countries were trading in different goods. From then on, some sort of trade relations continued between ancient India and ancient China. Buddhism played an important role to develop trade relations by exchanging religion related products during this period [8]. Another favourable factor that strengthened the relations between India and China during medieval period under Cholas dynasty is the absence of competitive position between the Kingdoms of the two countries because Cholas taught the art of shipbuilding to Chinese who outtripped her craftsmen in the art of shipbuilding. The study is significant in the present context as it provides insight to the younger generation about the trade relations between ancient India and ancient China which continued as of now.

### **Objectives**

To know the root of Cholas dynasty and the history of China during medieval period,

To understand a wide range of Chola's naval supremacy and its influence on one another for developing trade with China.

### **Hypotheses**

HO: The Navel supremacy of Imperial Chola do not help to expand trade with China.

HO: The market structure and economic policies of the Chinese Song Dynasty and Chola dynasty were not conducive to a large-scale, cross-regional market trade

## Discussion

South India was a flourishing country in civilization and commerce during Cholas period. In fact, trade began in south India as a matter of necessity. Historians lack knowledge of the exact reasons for the Chola to march to China through Southeast Asian regions. Her geographical features helped her to become a commercial country as a large part of Tamil peninsular India is near the sea. During the medieval Chola period, Rajaraja I and Rajendra I had conquered several countries in southeast Asian regions. Though the purpose of invasion was expansion of their territorial boundaries, several changes in the cultural, religious, and trade practices among people in these place had taken place. Buddhism, though originated from India, had become the religion of China and several Southeast Asian countries. Hinduism has been imparted to places like Malay, Java, KedAram and Sumatra and trading in these places, happened to be natural consequence of invasion by Chola emperors. Trade between India and these places continued since then. The Buddhist monks, the merchant guilds and the Navel supremacy of medieval Chola period played significant role in promoting trade and commercial relations between India and China. A series of exchange of products between the traders belonging to India and China had deepened strategic mutual trust among merchants and chart the course of the future development of trade relationship between India and China during Chola dynasty. The geostrategic position of India had helped her to integrate western world such as Greece, Rome, and Africa with eastern countries like Ceylon, Java, Sumatra, and China. This could, perhaps, have paved the way for the process of globalization as early as the 9th century. The accumulated experiences and the heritage of the past make this study of history meaningful and help to make one to realize a thing of the past and induce him to be more sensible and wise. The Navel supremacy of medieval Chola helped to expand their territorial boundaries, and do not pave the way for the process of globalization as early as the 9th century. Actually, historians can find no contemporary records to explain the nature of and the reason for that naval expedition.

Historians lack knowledge of the exact cause of the quarrel that caused the naval war between Cholas and Srivijaya. The Cholas had an active trade relationship with the eastern island. Moreover, the Srivijaya kingdom and the South Indian empires had been the intermediaries in the trade between China and the countries of the Western world. Both the Srivijaya and Cholas had active dialog with the Chinese and sent diplomatic missions to China. The Chinese records of the Song dynasty show that first mission to China from Chu-lien (Chola) reached that country in 1015 AD. and the king of their country had been Lo-ts'a-lo-ts'a (Rajaraja). Another embassy from Shi-lo-cha Yin-to-loChu-lo (Sri Rajendra Chola) reached China in 1033 AD. The commercial intercourse between Cholas and the Chinese had been continuous and extensive. There could have been a trade dispute stemming from some attempts by Srivijaya to throw some obstacle between the flourishing trade between China and the Cholas. This might have been more compelling for Rajendra to attack the Sri Vijaya empire rather than marching back to north towards Gangetic plains.

The Arabs and Cholas traded with Chinese directly using Sri Vijaya as a port of call and replenishment hub. Realizing their potential, the Sri Vijaya empire began to encourage the sea piracy surrounding the area. The benefits were twofold, the loot from piracy was a good bounty and it ensured their sovereignty and cooperation from all the trading parties. Piracy also grew stronger due to a conflict of succession in Sri Vijaya, when two princes fought for the throne and in turn, relied on the loot from the sea-piracy for their civil war. The pirate menace grew to unprecedented levels. Sea trade with China was virtually impossible without the loss of 1/3 of the convoy for every voyage. Even escorted convoys came under attacks, which was a new factor. Repeated diplomatic missions urged the Sri Vijaya empire to curb the piracy, with little effect. With the rise in piracy, and in the absence of Chinese commodity, the Arabs, on whom the Cholas were dependent of horses for their cavalry corps, began to demand high prices for their trade. This led to a slew of reduction in the Chola army. The Chinese were equally infuriated by the piracy menace, as they too were losing revenue. This might have been made the south-east expedition more important for the Chola's than conquering the Indo-Gangetic plains. We can also see that at the end of the war, Sangaram Vijayatungavarman was given the throne at his agreement to pay periodic tribute to Rajendra. This indicates that Cholas were not interested in permanently occupying the territory, but they wanted to solve the internal dispute in the Sri Vijaya kingdom so that the piracy will get reduced.

Availability of a Strong Navy : Cholas had a strong navy even during the period of Raja Raja Chola. During the period of Rajendra, Chola navy almost grew to an imperial navy with blue water capabilities. Hence, Rajendra might have been more confident over his naval power than his cavalry army. This might have made him concentrate more on coastal regions and south east nations.

In this paper, the study of History has taken new course and the instigation on commerce in history got widened and its study gained momentum. Although many references had been made in Tamil literature on the historical events and personalities it has not been accepted as a reliable source of history by many historians because of the inclusion of many exaggerated events and achievements to the ancient Tamil kings.

## Conclusion

There are various arguments regarding Chola's Naval Supremacy for developing trade with China. It described the events in the three Tamil kingdoms of the ancient era. Historians do not deny the prevalence of a network of trade between India and China during ancient and medieval period. The Naval supremacy of Imperial and medial Chola period played significant role in promoting trade and commercial relations between India and China. A series of exchange of products between the traders belonging to India and China had deepened strategic mutual trust among merchants and chart the course of the future development of trade relationship between India and China during Chola dynasty. It is not the imaginary record of the dead past but Chola's used their naval supremacy as a mechanism to minimize sea pirates and also to

expand their territorial boundaries. It is Concluded that the merchant guilds helped the Chola armies to expand their trade with China through south east Asia sea shore. In recent times, both India and China have become known for its entrepreneurial energy, information technology industry and a largely free society. They have much to learn from each other and many synergies to explore. Ironically, Atul Singh [8] wittingly quotes, “After all, the Buddha remains popular in China while Chinese food is widely popular in India.”

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