

TRADE AND COMMERCE UNDER THE IMPERIAL CHOLAS

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Introduction:

The Cholas were the first dynasty who tried to bring the entire south India under a common rule and to a great extent succeeded in their efforts. Although the form and protocols of the government cannot be compared to a contemporary form of government, the history of the Chola Empire belongs to a significant age in their history and great things were achieved by the rulers and the people.¹ The copper plates which have been recovered from the Chola kingdom give information about the Chola kings. The Chola kings were acclaimed as the descendants of God. Altogether the Chola monarchs have been chronologically earmarked from the nineteen copper plates so far recovered. In 850 A.D. Vijayalaya started from “Chenthalai” and attacked the Mutharayar in Thanjavur. Mutharayars were defeated and Vijayalaya captured Thanjavur and since then Thanjavur became the capital of the Imperial Cholas.² Each ruler contributed to the development of the town in a unique way.

From the inscriptions, it can be ascertained that prior to the Cholas, Thanjavur was the capital of the Mutharayar. Vijayalaya who was reigning in Palayarai as a local chieftain moved towards Thanjavur and captured it from the Mutharayar. After the capture of Thanjavur, Vijayalaya constructed a temple for the goddess Nirumpasudhani. The information is derived from Thiruvallankadu copper plates.³ Vijayalayan had to consolidate his newly constituted Chola kingdom. So his whole reign was fully engrossed in war with the Pandyas. The southern portion of the former Chola empire was now under the control of the Pandyan king Srimara Srivallabhan. In 854 A.D. there erupted a war between the Pandyan king Srimara Srivallabhan and the Pallava king Nandivarman at Kudamukku. With the intention of annexing the southern Cholamandalam, Vijayalayan began to help Nandivarman against Srimara Srivallabhan. But the Pandyas and Vijayalaya could not achieve a feat against Nandivarman.⁴

Adithya - I (871-907 A.D.)

Adithya Varma who was familiarly known as “*Kothandaraman*” ascended the throne in 871A.D.after the demise of his father Vijayalayan. After the battle of Thiruppurampiam, Adithya annexed Thondainadu. That is inferred from Thiruvankadu copper plates. Thirukkazhukunram inscription also confirms the above information. Adithya conquered Kongu country. That achievement of Adithya is confirmed by the accounts *Kongu Thesa Rajakal*. Nambi Andar Nambi in his accounts, *Thiruthondar Thiruvanthathi* also revealed the fact. Adithya I erected Siva temples along both the banks of river Cauvery.⁵

Parantaka I (907-953 A.D.)

After Adithya, his son Parantaka ascended the Chola throne. During his early period, the territories, viz., Cholamandalam, Tondaimandalam and Kongu country were under his suzerainty. His inscriptions acclaim him as “*Madurai Konda Kopperum Kesari*”. During that period Pandyan kingdom was administered by Raja Simha. Raja Simha obtained the support of the king of Ceylon, Kasipa V who sent an army in support of Raja Simha. Parantaka I and Raja Simha met a battle at Velloor in which the later was defeated. The commander of the Ceylon army, Chakkasenapathy died at the battle field. The Ceylon army ran away in different directions from the battle field. The above fact is provided by the Ceylonese historical account Mahavamsam.⁶

Kandaradithya (950-957A.D.)

After the death of Parantaka - I in 950A.D. his second son Kandaradithya ascended the throne. The ascendancy of Kandaradithya is acclaimed by Anaimangalam copper plates and Thiruvankadu copper plates.⁷ The expansion of Rashtrakutas empire under Krishna - III to a considerable extent eclipsed the Chola empire. Because Krishna - III had captured Thondaimandalam and Thirumunaippadinadu from the Cholas. In addition to that Kandaradithya devoted his attention fully to religious activities and hence the protection of the Chola empire was neglected, consequently paved the way for the expansion of the Rashtrakutas at the cost of the Cholas. Though Kandaradithya was not a commander, he was much interested in composing hymns glorifying Lord Siva in the temple at Chidambaram.

Arinjaya (956-957A.D.)

After the demise of Kandaradithyan his brother Arinjaya came to power. His sole aim was to recover Thondaimandalam and Thirumunaippadi from the Rashtrakutas. Rashtrakuta king who had captured those territories had authorized “*Vikramadithya Vaithumban*” as his regent in these territories.

This information is obtained from the inscription at Keezhur. To strengthen his power against the Rashtrakutas Arinjaya gave his daughter Arinjikai in marriage to one Vaanvar king. After having strengthened his power, Arinjayan proceeded against the Rashtrakutas.⁸ But he could not achieve anything because he died prior to any achievement.

Sundara Chola (957-970A.D.)

After the death of Arinjaya his son Sundara Chola became the king of the Chola empire in 957A.D. He was other way known as Parantaka II, who wanted to continue the policy of his father Arijayan. He authorised his eldest son Adithya to set out an expedition against Virapandyan. Taking orders from his father, Adithya defeated Vira Pandyan at the battle of Sevur in 962 A.D. But Adithya drove out the Sinhalese army also. Through this victory Aditya earned the title *Madurai Kondan*. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri is of opinion that Adithya killed Virapandyan in the battle of Sevur. Dr. K.K. Pillay in his history of Tamilnadu confirms the fact. Sundara Chola also conquered Thondaimandalam from Rashtrakutas and he spent his last days in Kanchipuram. While his son Adithya was crowning with victory after victory over the Pandyas and the Rashtrakutas, a sudden shock over the murder of Adithya snatched away his life.⁹

Uttama Chola (970-985 A.D.)

After the death of Parantaka II (Sundara Chola) the people of the Cholamandalam insisted that Rajaraja, the second son of Sundara Chola should be allowed to become the king. But Rajaraja was magnanimous that Uttama Chola, the son of his elder paternal uncle (Kandaradithyan) should become the next king because it was due to Uttama Chola. Accordingly Rajaraja took steps for the coronation of Uttama Chola who became the king Cholamandalam in 970 A.D. Uttama Chola assumed the title *Parakesari* and began to reign the Chola kingdom.¹⁰

Raja Raja Chola I (985-1014 A.D.)

Raja Raja Chola I popularly known as Raja Raja the Great, is one of the greatest emperors of the Chola dynasty, who ruled between 985 and 1014 A.D. He established the Chola empire by conquering the kingdoms of southern India expanding the Chola empire as far as Sri Lanka in the south, and Kalinga (Orissa) in the northeast. He fought many battles with the Chalukyas in the north and the Pandyas in the south. By conquering Vengi, Rajaraja laid the foundations for the Later Chola dynasty. He invaded Sri Lanka and started a century-long Chola occupation of the island. Rajaraja came to power after the demise of Uttama Chola in 984A.D.¹¹ Rajaraja familiarly and popularly was known as *Arulmozhivarman*.

Rajaraja was born to Sundara Chola (Paranthaka-II) and Vaanavan-Madevi in the Tamil Month of *Ayppasi* during the *sadhayam* star. He was brought up by Sembian-Madevi (wife of Kandarthithyan) and Kundavai, his own sister. Sembian-Madevi was a staunch Saivite and the characteristics of Sembian-Madevi were observed by Rajaraja.

Rajendra I (1012-1044A.D.)

Rajendra Chola, the illustrious son was born to Rajaraja and Vanavan- Madevi. Kanyakumari inscriptions and Thiruvallankadu copper plates provide sufficient information about the historic events of this emperor. His empire extended upto Tungabhadra river. He helped his nephew, Rajaraja Narendra, the son of his sister Kundavai and got the Vengi throne to Rajaraja Narendra. His expeditions towards the Ganges have been resisted in his *Meikeerthi*. The expedition is believed to have been necessitated by a succession dispute in the Eastern Chalukya kingdom where the claims of Rajaraja Narendra, the son of Vimaladitya, the previous king, and his queen Kundavai, were contested by Vishnuvardana Vijayaditya VII, a son of Vimaladitya through another wife. Vishnuvardhana Vijayaditya VII was supported by the Western Chalukya king Jayasimha II and the king of Kalinga gave a serious threat to Rajaraja Narendra.¹²

Trade and Commerce:

During the period of the Imperial Cholas trade highly developed and the economy of the Chola kingdom seemed to be well advanced. During the period when barter system was prevalent, the Chola coins were received with high expectation by the people who brought materials from abroad. The Chola coins were mostly gold coins and in turn for the goods they supplied they received gold coins. The Chola coin had the weight of 5 grams. *kasu* was another coin which was in circulation during the period of Rajaraja I and Rajendra. This coin was in circulation till the period of Kulothunga I. One *kasu* has half *Kalanji* measure which means one *kasu* had the weight of 2½ grams. The *kasu* issued by Rajaraja and Rajendra were known as old *kasu* during the period of Kulothunga I.¹³ South India exported textiles, spices, drugs, jewels, ivory, horn, ebony and camphor, elephants, cardamom, cotton, textile were exported. Arabian horses were imported. Mahabalipuram, Kavirippumpattinam, and Korkai were Chola ports which were useful for foreign trade.

Economic Organization:

The Chola emperor encouraged economic organization and individual enterprises. The liberal taxation policies of King Kulothunga I encouraged both internal and foreign trade. Internal and foreign trade led to the economic, cultural and religious developments in Chola territory. Kulothunga I became popular by abolishing tolls and earned the title *Sungam Tavirtta Cholan*. Trade with foreign countries was an important feature of the Cholas mercantile activities. According to Ibin Batuta and Marcobolo, the Cholas had trade relationship with China and other South east Asian countries.¹⁴ The Cholas, being in possession of both the west and the east coasts of peninsular India were at the forefront of these ventures. In the entire maritime history and heritage of India, the most glorious chapters are those that deal with the maritime ventures of Chola rulers. Several inscriptions and copper plates testify to this. Merchant guilds flourished as the Chola rulers expanded their reign beyond the shores of India.

Trade with Abroad:

Till about the 12th Century, the Tamil Country, with its long sea front, enjoyed sea trade with both the East and the West. The Chung dynasty that followed the Tang dynasty made the situation more normal and the trade began to flourish once more. Cholas were eager to exploit this opportunity and sent several trade missions to China. In fact, 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 Chung court. The Chinese Chung dynasty reports record that an embassy from *Chulian* (Chola) reached the Chinese court in the year 1077 A.D. and the king of the Chulien at that time was called *Ti-hua-kia-lo*. It is possible that these syllables denote "*Deva Kulotunga*" (Kulothunga Chola I). This embassy was a trading venture and ended very profitable to the visitors. They returned with 81,800 strings of copper coins in return of some articles of tributes including glass articles, and spices. Technicians of a particular trade joined together and formed Association. The association of a particular trade was known as "*Guild*". The Guild system of different trade was formed and they were involved in the expansion of internal and external trade.¹⁵

The external guild organization was consisting of 500 members. They were in Tamil known as "*Noottuvar*" (Five hundred) and very honest in their trade dealings with foreign countries, especially the South eastern countries of Java, Sumatra and Borneo. There is an argument that the Chola emperors fitted out expeditions towards the South eastern countries mainly with the intention of developing trade activities and to encourage the guild system. In 1033 A.D. Rajendra I also sent a trade commission to

China to maintain trade relations with China. At the top of the economic pyramid was the elite merchant group, *samayam*, who organized and dominated the regions and the international maritime trade.¹⁶ The Chola emperors made expeditions towards south eastern countries and the goods produced in the Chola empire were also exported to south eastern countries. Towards the end of ninth century A.D., the countries of southern India had developed extensive maritime and commercial activity.

During the trouble developed at the decline of the Tang dynasty, China became dangerous for foreign traders and the Srivijaya empire benefited from the shifting trade from China and acted as the clearing house for Tamil trade. Several trade delegates were sent to many countries including the Chola offering profitable licenses. The Chola dynasty played a significant role in linking the markets of China to the rest of the world. A fragmentary Tamil inscription found in Sumatra mentions the name of a merchant guild *Nanadesa Tisaiyayirattu Ainnutruvar* (The Five Hundred from the four countries and the thousand directions) who were a merchant guild famous in the Chola country. The inscriptions is dated 1088 A.D., clearly proving that there was an active overseas trade during the Chola period. The Chola kings wanted to have trade contacts with south eastern countries. But they never wanted the Chola trade to be a dominant factor in those countries. Traders of the Chola kingdom visited many of the Eastern kingdoms. Members of different religions joined together and carried on trade with other countries without any religious difference. The traders were members of the *Ur Mantam* (Village Council).¹⁷ They got profit in the trade within the country and outside the country. The profit was spent for the poor people and for the renovation of temples. The Chola kings had direct trade relations with the Eastern Kings. Rajaraja I sent a trade commission to China to maintain trade relations with the king of China. The existence of a brisk internal trade in several articles is indicated by the evidence of the movements of individual merchants and the highly organised state of the mercantile corporations in various parts of the country.

Industries:

The Chola rulers contributed more for the development of industries. Metal in and utensils were made in gold, silver, bronze, copper, brass etc., The art of jewelry was famous. Gold and pearl were used in making jewels and ornaments. Kanchipuram was an important centre of textile industry. The weavers of Kanchipuram were recognized by the king and they had the privilege of making royal robes to the king Uttama Chola. In most of the common industries the rule was production for the local market. The existence of a brisk internal trade in several articles is indicated by the evidence of the movements of individual merchants and the highly organised state of the mercantile corporations in various parts of the

country. The metal industries and the jewelers, art had reached a high state of perfection. Household utensils made of metal were apparently confined to the rich, earthen ware being often mentioned in connection with cooking and eating in sales, charitable feeding halls. The detailed descriptions of the images and utensils of the Thanjavur temple recorded in the inscriptions, and the bronzes of the period that have survived to this day give proof of the mastery attained by the braziers of the time in the art of manipulating alloys of metals and casting them into the most elaborate and graceful forms. Copper, bronze and brass were employed in such work, besides gold and silver. The variety of jewels and ornaments of gold and precious stones and the careful record of the number and classes of the stones and pearls mounted on each of these would be enough to enable a modern jeweler to reproduce most of them if only he knew their general formation.

The Thanjavur inscriptions however enable one to see that the jewellers art reached its high-water mark under the Cholas, and that the Thanjavur jeweler's produced the most pleasing results by studying the dispositions of precious stones and pearls with a view to their colour effect. The manufacture of sea-salt was carried on under government supervision and control and subject to considerable imposts in kind and money, local and central. The salt-pans of Marakkanam, Kanyakumari, Variyur and Ayturai were among the more important centre of salt manufacture which was a widespread industry all along the seacoast. The conspicuous example of particular industries obtaining special recognition in court or in a big temple is furnished by the weavers of Kanchipuram.¹⁸ There were four wards (Padis) of the city inhabited by the class of weavers known as *Pattaslins* and they had the distinction of being appointed weaves of royal garments and Uttama Chola appointed them to the management of the financial affairs of the temple of *Uragam in Kanchipuram*.

Trade Committees:

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Conclusion:

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dominant factor in those countries. The Chola kings had direct trade relations with the Eastern Kings. South India exported textiles, spices, drugs, jewels, ivory, horn, ebony and camphor, elephants, cardamom, cotton, textile were exported. Arabian horses were imported. Mahabalipuram, Kaverippumpattinam, and Korkai were Chola ports which were useful for foreign trade. Trade brought considerable prestige and affluence to the Cholas.

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