

CHAPTER 7

Medieval India (A) The Cholas

SYLLABUS

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Sources: *Inscriptions, Brihadeshwara Temple.*

Political history and administration (Rajaraja I, Rajendra I).



The inscriptions of the Cholas are in the form of Copper-plate grants, stone inscriptions and inscriptions made on the walls and pillars of temples. The Copper-plate grants known as Anbil and Karandi as well as the Kanyakumari stone inscription give a long list of rulers indicating the origin of the Chola dynasty. Another set of Copper-plate contains 31 copper sheets. These plates are written in Sanskrit and Tamil. They record a grant made to a temple by Rajendra Chola I.

The inscriptions provide the following information about the Cholas.

(i) They tell us about the Chola administration. For example, the Uttaramerur inscription gives information on the village administration, taxation and land revenue.

(ii) They record gifts and endowments to temples and brahmanas. Copper-plate inscriptions are the records of grants of villages, plots of land or other privileges to individuals or institutions by the Cholas. For example, the Leyden grant (so called as they are preserved in the Museum of Leyden in Holland) of Parantaka

The southern part of the Indian peninsula situated south of the Krishna river was inhabited by the Dravidians. They had their own language and culture. This region was home to three powerful kingdoms—the Cheras, the Pandyas and the Cholas. The most powerful of the three were the Cholas.

The Chola Empire which arose in the ninth century, brought under its control a large part of the peninsula. The Cholas developed a powerful navy which enabled them to develop India's sea-trade in the Indian Ocean and to conquer Sri Lanka and the Maldives Islands. By the end of the 9th century, the Cholas defeated the Pallavas of Kanchi and weakened the Pandyans bringing the Tamil country (Tondamandala) under their control.

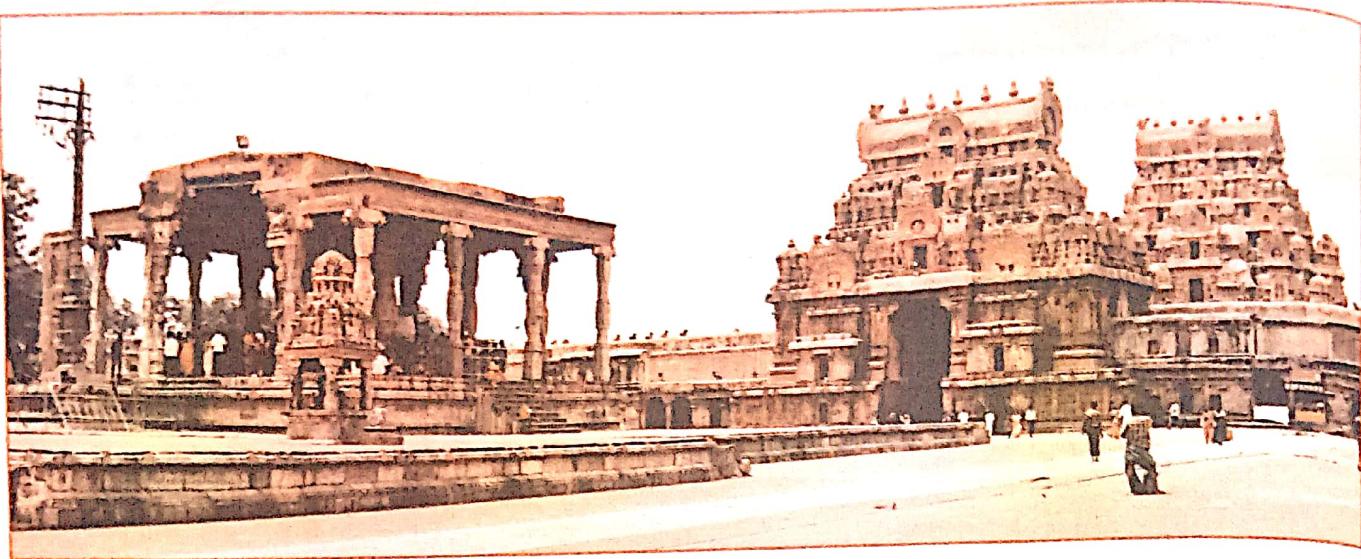
SOURCES

The important sources of information about the Cholas are the following:

1. **Inscriptions:** The main source of information for the history of the Chola period is the large number of inscriptions of that period. Rajaraja I conceived the idea of prefixing to his inscriptions the main achievements of his reign. The example of Rajaraja was followed by his successors as well. Consequently, there exists a formal record of the transactions made by each Chola ruler.



Copper-plate Inscriptions



Brihadishwara Temple

Chola and those of Parakesari Uttama Chola are among the most important.

(iii) They inform us about the construction of a temple or the setting up of a new image of the deity.

(iv) Some inscriptions have royal orders on taxation and land revenue, resolutions of village assemblies, judgements delivered against persons guilty of theft, murder and other crimes.

(v) Inscriptions on temple walls served the purpose of public registrations such as the record of sales, mortgages and other forms of transfers of property rights in village lands.

2. The Brihadishwara temple: The Cholas built a number of temples. The gateway of the temple was called 'gopuram'. The main shrine was known as the 'garbhagriha'. Here, the images of gods and goddesses were kept. These images were made either of stone or bronze. The 'mandapa' or the audience hall, was a place where people gathered for prayers. It was built in front of the main shrine.

The chief features of Chola temples are their massive vimanas or towers and spacious courtyards. The best example of Chola temple is the *Brihadishwara*, also known as *Rajarajeshwara* temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva. It is located at Thanjavur and was built by the Chola king, Rajaraja I. It is one of the best specimens of Dravidian style of architecture. The main structure of the temple

has a great vimana or tower which rises to a height of 66 metres. It is crowned by a massive dome consisting of a single block of stone, 7.6 metres high and weighing about 80 tons. The main temple is built of 130,000 tons of granite. The massive temple building is covered from the base to the top with sculptures and decorative mouldings. The shrine houses a gigantic *Shiva Lingam*, cut in a monolithic rock about 8.87 metres high. The temple has many structures such as a Nandi Pavilion, a pillared portico and a large assembly hall. The Brihadishwara temple is the finest monument of a splendid period of South Indian history and the most beautiful specimen of Tamil architecture. The temple has been declared as a *World Heritage Site* by UNESCO. The Brihadishwara temple provides the following information:

- The temple has a portrait of Rajaraja Chola paying obeisance to Lord Nataraja. This is undoubtedly, the first ever instance of a royal portrait.
- Inscriptions in the temple point towards Rajaraja as the chief architect of the temple.
- Depictions of dancers showing eighty one of hundred and eight karanas (synchronised movements of hands and feet) in Bharata Natyam are carved here. It shows that the temple was a platform for talented dancers to showcase their talent. These depictions are first of their kind.

Founder: Vijayalaya

Parantaka I

Rajaraja I

Rajendra Chola

- (iv) The inscriptions mention the different kinds of jewels used in the Chola period. A total of twenty three different types of pearls, eleven varieties of diamonds and rubies are mentioned in these inscriptions.
- (v) It is one of the few temples that have Ashta-dikpaalakas (Guardians of the eight directions) idols.

POLITICAL HISTORY

Chola ruler Vijayalaya established Chola rule in Tamil land, with Thanjavur as his capital, during the middle of the ninth century. After his death, his grandson, Parantaka I, became the king. He conquered Madurai and defeated the Pandyas and the rulers of Lanka. By the 11th century AD the Chola power had reached the height of its glory. Rajaraja I and his son, Rajendra Chola were the two prominent rulers of this dynasty.

Rajaraja I: Rajaraja I was a brilliant general and campaigned in many directions. He attacked the kingdoms of the Pandyas and the Cheras as well as parts of Mysore. Rajaraja annexed parts of Deccan and overran Vengi. He did this in order to prove the strength of the Chola power. He took some territories of Mysore, Travancore and Coorg.

The coasts of Kerala, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the Maldives Islands had become rich through the money that came to them from overseas trade. India sent textiles, spices and precious stones to the West Asian countries. The people who came from Western Asia to trade in these goods were the Arab merchants, who exchanged money for goods. Foreigners brought wealth to India through their trade.

Rajaraja was aware of the importance of controlling the sea. He decided to show his strength along the coasts of South India. So, he took out a naval expedition and attacked both Sri Lanka and the Maldives Islands. He conquered the northern half of Sri Lanka.

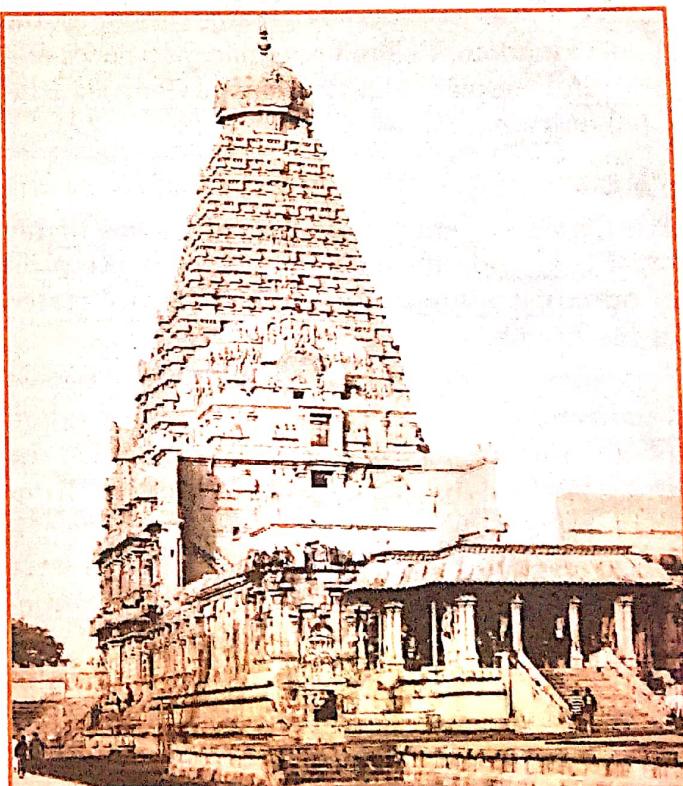
He built the Rajarajeshwara temple of Lord Shiva at Thanjavur. On the walls of this temple are inscribed the main works of Rajaraja I. Under his rule, the Cholas became the supreme power in Southern India. The increase in trade brought

prosperity to their kingdom, Cholamandal. In fact, the word, Coromandel has been derived from Cholamandal.

Rajendra Chola: Rajendra succeeded his father, Rajaraja I. He continued his father's policies. He invaded and annexed the whole island of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was not able to free herself from the Chola control for another 50 years.

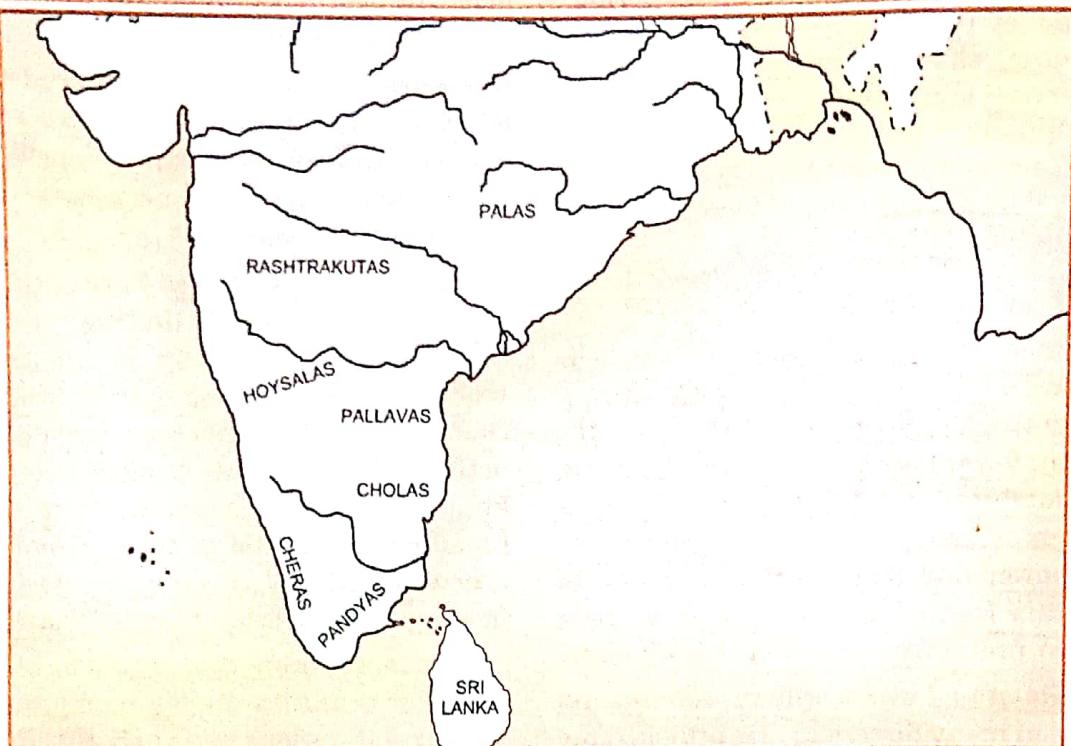
Rajendra's campaigns were daring. Once his armies marched up to the east coast of India, through Odisha, and up to the Ganga river. Rajendra Chola himself led the army up to the Godavari and thereafter his generals took charge of the army. The Chola army defeated Mahipala, king of Bengal. To commemorate this victory, he adopted the title of Gangaikonda and built a new capital called Gangaikonda-Cholapuram in the present State of Tamil Nadu.

His most daring campaign was in South-East Asia. For centuries, Indian merchants had been trading with various parts of South-East Asia and southern China, through the Straits of Malacca, which was held by the kingdom of Srivijaya (modern day Indonesia). As the merchants of Srivijaya began creating problems for the Indian



Vimana of Brihadeeswara Temple

SOUTH INDIA (AD 800-1200)



merchants, the Indian merchants appealed to Rajendra Chola for help. He sent out a huge navy and defeated the Srivijaya king. As a result, Indian trade with South-East Asia and southern China continued, thereby greatly enriching the Chola kingdom. He built magnificent palaces and beautiful temples at his new capital Gangaikondacholapuram.

THE CHOLA ADMINISTRATION

The Chola system of administration was highly organised and efficient. The king was the pivot of administration and all the authority rested in his hands.

Central Government: The king was the most important person in the Chola administration as all authority was vested in him. But he had Council of Ministers to advise him. The king often went on tours in order to keep a check on the administration. The officers were paid by giving them assignments in revenue-bearing lands. The princes were associated with the ruling sovereigns and actively employed in peace and war. The Central government looked after external defence, internal peace and order, promotion of general prosperity and cultural progress of the empire.

Provincial Government: The Chola empire was divided into mandalams or provinces. These were further divided into valanadu and nadu. Princes of the royal family were appointed governors of provinces.

Local Self-Government: The Cholas were good administrators. They believed in local self-government. In many of the villages the administration was carried out, not by the government officials but by the villagers themselves. These villages had three types of village assemblies, namely, the *ur*, the *sabha* and the *nagaram*. There are long inscriptions on the walls of some of the village temples giving details of how the *ur* and *sabha* were organised.

The *ur* was the common type of assembly of the villages where the land was held by all classes of people who were, therefore, members of the local assembly. The *sabha* was an exclusively Brahmin assembly of the villages, where all the land belonged to the Brahmins. The *nagaram* was an assembly of merchants and belonged to localities where traders and merchants were in a dominant position. Villagers who owned land were chosen by a vote to the council. The life and the work of the villages were discussed in these councils. This was a source of popular

strength because it united the people. All affairs concerning the village, such as, collection of taxes, settlement of disputes and allocation of water were looked after by the committees.

The temple in the Chola kingdom was the centre of social activity. It was not only a place of worship, but was also a place where people gathered.

Some temples owned huge lands and participated in inland and overseas trade. The lands donated to the temples were known as the devadaya or devadana. In some cases, instead of giving land to temples, land-revenue of certain villages was assigned to the temple and the concerned villagers were instructed to pay land-revenue in produce and in gold to the temple treasury. The temples were also the biggest employers after the State, providing work and means of livelihood to a large number of people. The temples used to take care of the welfare of its workers by providing food, clothing and housing facilities and by arranging proper education and establishing hospitals.

The temple was also a centre for education. The priests of the temple were the local teachers as there were no separate schools. The schools were housed in the temple courtyard. The students learnt their lessons in two languages — Sanskrit and Tamil. The religious teaching was in Sanskrit since texts such as the Vedas had to be studied. The students learnt Tamil, the language which was widely spoken in the Chola kingdom.



Nataraja

THINK ABOUT IT.

According to leading Archeometallurgist Sharada Srinivasan "In terms of the scale of accomplishments in art and architecture and the wealth of writing and epigraphic records, the Cholas would come across as one of the richest dynasties in South Indian history... There is a profusion of inscriptions that give meticulous details about administration, social life, and material culture... The Brihadeshwara Temple alone that was consecrated in 1010 CE by Rajaraja I has nearly a hundred inscriptions... the Cholas were also the first empire with grand commercial and territorial ambitions outside of the Indian subcontinent with a maritime outreach of expeditions, conquests or trade to Sri Lanka, the Maldives, China, Java/ Sumatra and southeast Asia." What was the effect of this grand empire on Sri Lanka and South-East Asia? Do we have evidence of the same?

Tamil was influenced by Sanskrit and gradually incorporated a number of Sanskrit words.

The Revenue: The revenue of the Chola kingdom came from — taxes on land and the produce of the land, and tax on trade. Part of the revenue was kept for the king. The rest was used on public works, such as the building of roads and tanks, on salaries of officials, on paying for the upkeep of the army, and on the building of temples. The taxes on land were collected by the officials from the village councils.

The Chola Art: The Chola rulers were great conquerors and efficient administrators. They loved art and architecture. They built temples, canals, roads, cities and palaces. Most of the Chola temples were built in the Dravidian style. Early Chola temples were simple structures. Later, temples became bigger and more grand.

The art of making stone and metal images had made rapid progress under the Chola rulers.

The Cholas excelled in making images of gods and goddesses. The bronze image of Lord Shiva as 'Nataraja'—Lord of Dance, is an excellent work of art. The image of Nataraja has been described as the "cultural epitome" of the Chola period.

EXERCISES

I. Multiple-Choice Questions

A. Choose the correct answers to the questions from the given options.

1. Inscriptions of the Cholas are in which forms?

(a) Stone inscriptions	(b) Copper-plate grants
(c) Inscriptions on temple pillars	(d) All of the above.
 2. What are the chief features of Chola temples?

(a) Audience halls	(b) Large vimanas and courtyards
(c) Images of deities	(d) All of the above.
 3. The main shrine in the Brihadeeshwara Temple was called:

(a) Gopuram	(b) Garbhagriha
(c) Lingam	(d) Mandapa
 4. What information do the inscriptions provide about the Cholas?

(a) Chola administration	(b) Public registrations
(c) Taxation	(d) All of the above.
 5. Which of the following represents the timeline for the reign of famous Chola rulers?

(a) Parantaka I - Vijayal - Rajaraja I.	(b) Rajaraja I - Parantaka I - Rajendra Chola
(c) Vijayalaya - Parantaka I - Rajaraja I.	(d) Rajaraja II - Parantaka I - Vijayalaya.
 6. Which of the following territories did NOT form a part of the Chola kingdom?

(a) Malaysia	(b) Mysore
(c) Sri Lanka	(d) Odisha.
 7. Rajendra Chola adopted the title Gangaikonda to commemorate which victory?

(a) Odisha	(b) Bengal
(c) Sri Lanka	(d) Mysore
 8. The Chola empire was divided into _____ and further into _____.

(a) Mandalams, ur and sabha	(b) Mandalams, Valanadu and nadu
(c) Sabha, nagarams	(d) Sabha, ur and nagarams
 9. Under whose rule did the Cholas become the supreme power in Southern India?

(a) Parantaka I	(b) Parantaka II
(c) Rajaraja I	(d) Rajendra Chola
 10. Which of the following pairs is incorrect?

(a) urs : all classes	(b) sabha : Brahmins
(c) nagaram : merchants	(d) urs : landless
 11. What of the following did not contribute to the revenue?

(a) Overseas trade	(b) taxes on land
(c) trade-tax	(d) taxes on produce
- B. Read the two statements given below and select the option that shows the correct relationship between (A) and (B).**
1. (A) The southern part of the Indian peninsula was home to three powerful kingdoms, namely, the Cheras, the Pandyas and the Cholas.
 (B) These kingdoms were located north of the Krishna river.

(a) (B) contradicts (A)	(b) (B) is the reason for (A)
(c) (A) is true but (B) is false	(d) (A) and (B) are independent of each other.

2. (A) The Brihadeshwara temple is the first example of having a portrait of a ruler, i.e., Rajaraja Chola.
 (B) It has been declared as a World Heritage site by UNESCO.
 (a) (B) contradicts (A) (b) (B) is the reason for (A)
 (c) (A) is true but (B) is false (d) (A) and (B) are independent of each other.
3. (A) Chola ruler Rajaraja I took out a naval expedition and attacked both Sri Lanka and Maldives.
 (B) Rajaraja I established Chola rule during the middle of ninth century.
 (a) (B) contradicts (A) (b) (B) is the reason for (A)
 (c) (A) is true but (B) is false (d) (A) and (B) are independent of each other.
4. (A) Under Rajendra Chola's command, the Chola army defeated Mahipala, the king of Bengal.
 (B) To commemorate his victory, Rajendra Chola adopted the title Gangaikonda and built his no capital, called Gangaikonda-Cholapuram.
 (a) (B) contradicts (A) (b) (A) is the reason for (B)
 (c) (A) is true but (B) is false (d) (A) and (B) are independent of each other.
5. (A) On the complaint of Indian merchants, Rajendra Chola sent out a huge army and defeated Shrivijaya, the ruler of present day Indonesia.
 (B) Shrivijaya was creating problems for Indian merchants who had been trading with various parts of South-East Asia and Southern China.
 (a) (B) contradicts (A) (b) (B) is the reason for (A)
 (c) (A) is true but (B) is false (d) (A) and (B) are independent of each other.
6. (A) The Cholas established local self-government in villages.
 (B) The 'ur' was the local assembly, with all the villagers as members.
 (a) (B) contradicts (A) (b) (B) is the reason for (A)
 (c) (A) is true but (B) is false (d) (A) and (B) are independent of each other.
7. (A) The temples were centres of education in the Chola kingdom.
 (B) The students learnt their lessons in two languages, i.e., Hindi and Sanskrit.
 (a) (B) contradicts (A) (b) (B) is the reason for (A)
 (c) (A) is true but (B) is false (d) (A) and (B) are independent of each other.

II. Short Answer Questions

- State two significant features of inscriptions for providing information about the Cholas.
- Who established the rule of the Cholas? Name the capital of his empire.
- Why did Rajaraja undertake a naval expedition against Ceylon and Maldives?
- Name any two great rulers of the Chola dynasty. *Rajaraja I & Rajendra Chola*
- Give any two achievements of Rajendra Chola.
- Name the new capital built by Rajendra Chola. In which present-day state is it situated? *Tamil Nadu - Gangaikonda-Cholapuram*
- Why did the Cholas build a strong naval fleet?
- What made the Chola administration strong and effective?
- Name the two languages promoted by the Cholas. *Sanskrit & Tamil*
- Name any two features of temples built by the Cholas.

- Which is the best example of Chola temples? Give one reason.
- What is known as the 'gopuram'? Name another feature of temples built during the Chola period.

III. Structured Questions

- With reference to the sources of information about the Cholas, briefly answer the following:
 - List the forms of Chola inscriptions.
 - What was the special feature of the inscriptions? Who conceptualised the idea? Name one temple built by him.
 - Mention the significance of Brihadeshwara Temple.
- With reference to the Chola period explain the following:
 - Taxes imposed by the Cholas.
 - Administration of the Kingdom.
 - The three types of village assemblies.
- With reference to the Chola Administration, write short notes on:
 - The King, the chief administrator.
 - Local Self-Government.
 - Temples as the centre of social activity.
- Study the picture and answer the following questions:
 - Name the temple given in the picture. Who built this temple? Where is it located?
 - To which deity is the temple dedicated? Mention two special features of this temple.
 - What were the following features of temples known as?
 - Gateway
 - Shrine
 - Audience Hall
 - Towers



IV. Thinking Skills

- What do you think would have been the reason for the Chola rulers to issue large number of inscriptions, especially on copper-plates?
- The temple in the Chola Kingdom was the centre of social activity, besides being a place of worship. How did the temples gain this position of eminence?
- Recently a movie — a magnum opus based on a fictional account of a Chola kingdom — was released. How authentic do you think it was with respect to the life of rulers and the ruled?

