

Cholas

Introduction

The Cholas who ruled from the ninth century to thirteenth century CE (850 – 1279 CE) played a very important part in the political and cultural history of South India. The core region of their control- Cholamandalam - was the area around Tanjore upto East Coast, the Coromandal of later times. The Chola period of south Indian history with its impressive corpus of inscriptions has been widely discussed in recent years. There have been diverse theories and many new interpretations drew less on political authority and more on institutions established at this time, together with the articulations of cultural forms. The standards established in society, religion and fine arts during this period were regarded as classical and came to dominate the patterns of the living in the south and also influenced and modified at certain levels in the patterns existing elsewhere in Peninsula. There was also an active intervention in south-east Asia to a greater degree than before, in the commerce and in its cultural forms.

Early Cholas

The Cholas, as rulers, are known to have existed from remote antiquity. They are mentioned, for the first time in II and XIII Rock Edicts of Ashoka along with the Pandyas and Cheras. According to this inscription the Cholas were a friendly power in the south beyond the pale of Mauryan Suzerainty. The Sangam literature also furnishes much on Chola chiefdoms. Karikala Chola was the greatest early Chola king. He is credited with the foundation of the city of Puhar at the mouth of river Cauvery and with the construction of an embankment along that river. He also showed much interest in the land reclamation and in improving the irrigational facilities. Though Chola kings are known from the Mauryan period, their post-Sangam history is unclear, as is their connection with the Cholas of early medieval times.

Imperial Cholas

The founder and first king of the Imperial Chola dynasty of Tanjore was Vijayalaya (850 - 871 CE) He established his power in the area around Uraiyur, captured Tanjore from the Muttaraiyar chieftains, an ally of the Pandyas and extended his kingdom along the lower Kaveri. Vijayalaya accepted the over lordship of Pallavas and began his rule around 850 CE. Vijayalaya is credited with founding of the temple of Nishumbhasudini.

Aditya I (871-907)

The successor of Vijayalaya, achieved significant military successes and expanded the Chola kingdom. He defeated the last Pallava overlord Aparajita in 893. This victory gave him control over Tondamandalam. Thereafter, he went on to conquer Kongudesu (Corresponding to Coimbatore and Salem) from the Pandyas. He also claims to have captured Talakad,

capital of the Western Gangas. Aditya I entered into matrimonial alliance with the Pallavas by marrying Pallava princess.

Parantaka I (907 - 953 CE)

The first important ruler of the Chola dynasty, Parantaka I, came to power and ruled almost half a century. He was considered the real founder of the Chola empire in south India. He secured the northern frontier of the kingdom by campaigning against the Pandyas and capturing their capital Madurai after which he assumed the title of 'Maduraikonda' (Conqueror of Madurai). Rajasimha, the Pandyan ruler who faced defeat at the hands of Parantaka, left his kingdom and took shelter in the court of the Ceylonese king. He defeated the combined forces of the Pandyas and the king of Srilanka in the battle of Vellur, and the Pandyan territories fell into Chola hands. During the closing years of Parantaka I, the Rashtrakuta king Krishna III defeated Parantaka in the famous battle of Takkolam near Arkonam in 949 CE and succeeded in occupying the large part of the northern half of the Chola empire.

Parantaka I was a great builder of temples. He also provided the Vimana of the famous Nataraja temple at Chidambaram with a golden roof. The two famous Uttarameruru inscriptions that give a detailed account of the village administration under the Cholas belong to his reign. After the death of Parantaka 953 CE the history of Cholas for the next three decades in which a succession of weak kings brought about a decline in the power of the Cholas.

The Chola power was firmly established with the accession of Rajaraja I and his son and successor Rajendra I, which allowed about half a century for the Chola kingdom to be consolidated and stabilized.

Rajaraja I (985 CE – 1014 CE)

The Chola power reached its peak during the reign of Arumolivarman, who assumed the title Rajaraja I on his accession to throne. It was he who laid the foundation of a mighty empire and also provided an excellent administrative set up to it. He was the son of Parantaka II. His military campaigns and the regions occupied and annexed into his empire are recorded in his Tanjore inscriptions.