How Cholas Laid The Groundwork For Microlocal Governance In Southeast Asia

ndtv.com/opinion/how-cholas-laid-the-groundwork-for-microlocal-governance-in-southeast-asia-8981781

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The Chola Dynasty, which has often been relegated to cognitive oblivion, is back in the news. The debate on whether this resurrected focus is merely political or has some substantive value for historiographers is bound to stay. Nevertheless, its return to public discourse begs an analysis of whether - and to what extent - the Cholas truly deserve the credit of being the pioneers of democracy in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

A Dense Historiography

Public discussions around emotively volatile issues, like the one at hand, often undermine the fact that political and electoral rhetoric piggybacks - and even tends to conceal - on historiography painstakingly built by scholars whose names are overshadowed in ideological cacophony. A wide array of scholarship has examined the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of the Chola Empire. These include K.A.N. Sastri's *The Colas* (1935-37) and *A History of South India from Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar* (1955) to R. Champakalakshmi's *Trade Ideology and Urbanization in South India 300 BC to AD 1300* (1996) and R. Chakravarti's well-regarded lecture, 'The Pull of the Coast' (2011). These have been handsomely complemented by K.R. Srinivasan's *Temples of South India* (1972), Y. Subbarayulu's *The Political Geography of the Chola Country* (1973), B.D. Chattopadhyaya's *Coins and Currency Systems in South India* (1977), Jonathan Heitzman's *Gifts of Power: Lordship in an Early Indian State* (1997), Hermann Kulke's *The Naval Expeditions of the Cholas in the Context of Asian History* (2010), V. Sakhuja and S. Sakhuja's *Rajendra Chola I's Expedition to Southeast Asia: A Nautical*

Perspective (2010), T. Sen's *The Military Campaigns of Rajendra Chola and the Chola-Sri Vijaya-China Triangle* (2010), and Rakesh Mahalakshmi's more recent, and highly instructive essay *Chola (Cola) Empire*, in the edited collection, *The Encyclopedia of Empire* (2016; edited by John M. MacKenzie).

Unprecedented Territorial Expansion

The Cholas ruled roughly between 850 and 1280 AD. They reigned over South India, present-day Sri Lanka, and coastal Southeast Asia. Under the reigns of Raja Raja I (985-1014 AD) and Rajendra I (1012-1044 AD), the Chola Empire charted an unprecedented territorial expanse, hitherto virtually unknown in India; from Bengal to the Malay Peninsula, as the saying goes. As has been argued on the basis of strong Vedic and Puranic scholarship, during the rule of Raja Raja I, the supposed location of the preeminent Ram Setu was possibly shifted from Korkai Harbour to its currently recognised location, at Adam's Bridge, to mark a ceremonial march by the ruler on the putative footsteps of Lord Ram. Further, the Chola polity's capital, Gangaikonda Cholapuram, established by Rajendra I in 1025 AD, whose name literally signified the city of the Chola(s) who had conquered the Ganga, was itself an extraordinary feat of public communication and political symbolism, arbitrated through urban planning and monumental architecture. It also signifies, then, that, at its peak, the Chola polity was structured as a highly centralised bureaucratic and military state.

Nevertheless, there were several exceptions to this aura of the Cholas' governance. By the late tenth century, the Cholas had established an elaborate revenue and administrative apparatus. There were tentatively two broad classes of officials under the Chola regime, including proto-bureaucratic elites (who wielded local influence) and state-appointed bureaucrats ("nam karumam arayum", meaning, "those following the king's orders") who conducted state affairs. According to the pathbreaking research of Sastri back in the 1930s, at the apex of this hierarchy stood the 'vellala' (or the landowning elites) and Brahmin officials, bearing royal sobriquets like Muvendavelan and Brahmarayan. These appointments point to a governance model based on pedigrees determined by nobility and titles, whereby political and administrative power was consolidated in the hands of chosen kinships and elites who sided with royal authority.

Blazing The Trail For Participatory Governance

All the same, Chola models of governance played a significant role in opening up a participatory democratic structure within local contexts. For instance, every Chola 'nadu' (locality of peasants) and 'ur' (village or rural township) possessed assemblies, known as 'nattar' and 'sabha', constituted by local elites and Brahminical settlers. Chola inscriptions have left records of the method of elections of these assemblies ('kudavolai'), with nominations drawn from 30 wards ('kudumbus') culminating in a lottery-based selection. It is this electoral model that is likely hailed by some modern commentators as an early form of Indian democratic practice. Nonetheless, such assemblies functioned within strict parameters of centralised policies. The supervisory presence of state-appointed nadu

officials - such as the 'naduvagai ceyvar' (accountant) and 'kankani nayakam' (overseer of land transactions) - ensured that royal frameworks influenced local governance structures. During the later Chola period, the emergence of the 'madhyasta' office (meant for arbitration) can be seen as evidence of an increasing need for mediation, likely arising out of tensions between community-based decisions and centralised demands of state revenue extraction. This may be, in modern-day terms, somewhat loosely analogised to federal functioning crises.

The Cholas are generally credited by historians for institutionalising temples as economic factors, alongside religion. Temple sabhas mirrored village assemblies. Their 'variyams' (specialised committees) oversaw the upkeep of tanks, stores, and treasury. Though ecclesiastical in origin, temple bodies managed land leases and grants, craft productions, and redistribution of deeds and gifts, testifying to the Chola penchant for integrating religion with administrative infrastructure. While fostering participatory governance, this ecclesiastical infrastructure also strengthened royally sanctioned hierarchical social structures, as temple nobles - often Brahminical elites - were seen to exercise control over agricultural and craft resources.

This is all the more crucial since, by the tenth century, the Chola state's agrarian and fiscal policies had acquired great complexity, comprising a taxonomy of land classifications - one-crop, two-crop, wet, dry, and improved lands - subject to specific revenues. Local dues ('vettinai') required peasants to perform irrigation and maintenance work, which meant that fiscal obligations were enforced through communal labour rather than individual taxation. While such systems could be seen today as negotiated norms between state and society, they may not necessarily stand the test of modern-day standards of consent-based taxation expected of democratic societies.

An Early Blueprint For Panchayti Raj Institutions

Even so, it would be an exaggeration to find fault with the celebration of the Cholas as pioneers of democracy. Mahalakshmi, for instance, invokes, "the office of the nadalvan, one who governs the nadu or region, appears to be conspicuous in the last stage of Chola rule, leading us to the conclusion that community-centric decision making had given way to individuals exercising power", especially the early thirteenth century onwards. But, if the revival of the Cholas' importance is seen in the spirit of an overdue recognition, their conceptualisation of structured village assemblies and lottery-based committee selections can carve a genealogy for postcolonial India's Panchayati Raj institutions. Strong evidence from archaeology - a discipline that gets a lot of flak in recent times for driving state-based narratives - also buttresses the existence of 'kudavolai'-type lotteries during the Chola reign. These nuances indeed support an emotionally persuasive narrative of microlocal governance in medieval India.

Whether we call them experiments in local governance under the aegis of imperial frameworks or embryonic democratic models that were overshadowed by the colonial prowess of the Cholas, well-meaning commentators should observe caution lest they deprive Indians of this legitimate chance to cherish the legacy of a magnificent antiquity.

One wonders, though, now that the Cholas of Tamil Nadu are back in the news, is it time for the Pala Dynasty of Bengal, who, too, have faced similar periods of oblivion in public memory, to be resurrected, too?

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