

Polity or Administrative System of the Cholas

The Central Government

The Cholas were well known in history as efficient and enlightened administrators. The Cholas polity was humane, benevolent and democratic. The form of Government of the Cholas was monarchy. Kings assumed the title 'Chakravartigal'. He played the role of *Devaraj*, god king. He was not absolute. The king was assisted by an assembly of officers called 'adhigarigal'. There were also officials of higher nobility. The royal princes actively engaged in civil and military duties. The royal household was run on an elaborate scale and royal patronage was lavish.

The political role of the *purohita* (priest) i.e., the *raja-guru* of the Cholas became a confident and confessor in addition to being the advisor in all matters temporal and sacred.

The Cholas maintained not only the army but also a navy.

The king was the head of the both armed and naval forces. The army consisted of elephants, cavalry and infantry. Proper training was given to the soldiers. Strict discipline was also enforced. The *Senapatis* headed the divisions of the army. Many of them belonged to the Brahmin class. The army was stationed in cantonments *i.e.*, *Kadagams* all over the empire. The *Kaikkolas* were the royal troops. Commanders were given the ranks of *nayaka*, *senapati* or *mahadandanayaka*. The *velaikkaras* were the emperor's personal bodyguards. The soldiers and the officers, who distinguished themselves in war were given titles like *Kshatriya sikhamani*. But, the Cholas did not observe the Hindu morality of warfare *i.e.*, *Dharma Yudha*. The Chola army caused much injury to the civil population, including women. The soldiers engaged themselves in loot, destruction, killing of civil population and dishonouring of women during warfare. Costly Arabian horses were imported in large numbers. The Chola navy made notable gains during this period. The Cholas controlled the Coromandel and Malabar coasts, as well as the Bay of Bengal.

The King's officers of all ranks were generally referred to by *Karumigal* and *Panimakkal*. The king's oral orders were written by an officer. They were compared by three officers. The orders were entered in the record books. They were attested by the superintendents and other officers. The process of the royal order becoming a statute was narrated in an inscription of Vira Rajendra.

The judicial administration of the Cholas was according to the Dharmasastras. The Cholas maintained efficient system of judiciary. Most of the disputes were settled by judicial committee of the village. The penal code was not severe. There was a jury system during the Chola period. The king personally looked into offences against him.

State officers were often paid through land grants and bestowed with titles as a mark of honour. Sometimes the salaries of the officials were paid in cash or in any kind.

The Chola government had maintained revenue records. The central office had control over the entire kingdom, which conducted land surveys and supervised audit. Land revenue surveys were conducted throughout the kingdom, during the reign of Cholas.

Land revenue was the main source of income to the state. It could be paid either in cash or in kind. Land revenue was fixed after an elaborate survey of land and on the fertility and yield of the soil. One third of the gross produce was fixed as land revenue. Besides land tax, the state derived income

from tolls on trade and professions. However, the taxation was heavy under the Cholas.

Besides temple construction, the Cholas undertook vast public works, excavating tanks, sinking wells, and constructing dams across the river Kaveri and other rivers, and cutting channels to transport water for irrigation purposes. The artificial lake dug by Rajendra I near his capital had embankments sixteen miles in length as well as stone sluices and channels. The Cholas also constructed grand roads to facilitate commerce and communication, as also the movement of troops. They built great cities like Tanjore, Kanchi and Gangaikonda Cholapuram.

Local Administration of Cholas

The Chola kingdom was divided into provinces (Mandalam) there being generally eight or nine of these. They were ruled by the princes or royal blood or Viceroy. Each *Mandalam* was divided into *Valanadus* or districts. These in turn were sub-divided into groups of villages varingly called *Kurram*, *Nadu* or *Kottam*. Occasionally a very large village would be administered as a single unit, and this was called a *Taniyur*.

The *Nadu* was a large area. It was a unit having racial and language coherence. Later the *Nadus* were reorganised as a result of major revenue surveys. The *Nadus* varied in size and in population. This was on the basis of the nearness or the distance of the river systems. The *Nadus* were dominated by the *Vellalas*. They controlled the land. During the 12th and 13th centuries, there was a change in agrarian order. In this period the mercantile groups and weavers acquired lands. They participated in the administration of the *Nadu*. The agricultural and mercantile interests and their administration was integrated by the village assemblies. The chiefs of the *Nadu* were called "udain" "kilavan" and "nalavan".

In the *Nadu*, *Brahmadeyas* played an important role. The 'Sabha' one of the village assemblies was located mainly in *Brahmadeya* villages, where at least to begin with, Brahmins were the principal land holders.

Village Administration

The administrative unit was the village. The villagers themselves administered the village and the Chola officials participated in village affairs more as advisers and observers than as administrators. There emerged village autonomy and the power vested in the village assembly. In the larger villages

where rural organization was more complex, there was a variety of assemblies. A village could be divided into wards and each ward could call an assembly of its members. Relationships between these various groups were basic to the social life of the village.

The most notable feature of the Chola polity was the democratic functioning of the village administration. Each village was administered by two bodies namely, (i) Village Assemblies, and (ii) Village committees. It is possible to form an idea of at least three types of assemblies that functioned at the local level, the *ur*, the *sabha* or *mahasabha*, and the *nagaram*. The *ur* was the common form of assembly in villages of non-brahmin peasants and included all classes of people who held land. The *sabha* was the assembly of Brahmins only and it existed in *agraharams* or *brahmadeya* villages. The *nagaram* was the Assembly of merchants and traders. The number of the members of the Assembly varied from village to village. The Village Assembly was called 'perunguri'. Generally it met in a local temple and took decisions about the village polity.

Ur

The *ur* Assembly was open to all the male adults, but the older members played a prominent role. The *ur* had an executive body called a *Lungaman*.

Sabha

The Sabha was the assembly of the Brahmadeyas. There were more than 300 Brahmadeyas in the Chola kingdom. Some of them were important and others were lesser ones. In course of times, the Brahmadeyas had grown. The *uttramerur Brahmadeya* consisted of 30 wards. To enter the Sabha one had to possess the following qualifications : (i) People between the age group of 35-70 years; (ii) those well-versed in the *mantras* and *brahmanas*; (iii) should not have worked in any committee for the past three years and must be virtuous and have other qualities; (iv) should live in a house built on his own site and; (v) must own more than one quarter of the tax-paying land.

Elections to the *sabha* appear to have been by lot from amongst those who were eligible, though amendments to the working of the *sabha* were made whenever it was thought necessary. Those who served in any committee and did not submit accounts were disqualified from standing elections. Those who committed five sins (i.e., (i) killing a Brahman, (ii) drinking alcohol, (iii) theft, (iv) adultery and, (v) associating

with criminals) those who have relations with outcastes, and those who were not observing social laws, were also disqualified for election.

The *sabha* was vested with proprietary rights over common lands, helped in the reclamation of forest and waste lands, assisted royal officials in estimating the land revenue obligations of the village, collected revenue, and in cases of default was empowered to sell land by auction. The *sabha* also oversaw the maintenance of roads and irrigation works; its decisions were recorded by *madhyasthas*.

Nagaram

The *Nagaram* was an assembly of merchants and was normally found in areas where traders and merchants were dominant. The *Nagaram* played the important role of integrating the local marketing territory. There was *Nagaram* for each *Nadu*. The *Nagaram* not only looked after the commercial interests, but also showed interest in the administration of the local temples. The *Nagaram* looked after the endowments, and provided *nidhi* to the temples for upkeep and maintenance.

Village Committees

The actual work of the village administration was carried on by the various Committees whose members were elected by the Assembly. There was an elaborate code of rules and regulations regarding the qualifications and disqualifications of the members of the committees and the method of election. The villages were divided into a number of wards called the '*Kudumbus*'. The residents of each ward would prepare a list of qualified candidates (voters) for these committees. On the basis of the prescribed qualifications, a list of qualified candidates would be prepared for each ward. One of them would be elected for the ward through lottery system called '*Kuduvolaĩ*'. Finally all the selected candidates would be divided into different committees according to their talent and experience. The Committees were formed to look after the gardens, tanks, charities, temples, justice etc. The judicial committee, called the *nyayattar*, dealt with matters related to law. The number of committees and the strength of each committee differed from village to village. No payment would be made for the members of the committees. The tenure of the members of the village committees was one year. But they could be removed earlier for the misuse of funds and dereliction of duties.

Powers of the Village Assembly

The notable feature of the Chola administration was that the Central Government was mainly concerned with the essential subjects like defence, foreign affairs, law and order. It left the rest to the local units. As such the Village Assembly enjoyed almost sovereign powers within the jurisdiction.

The village assembly was responsible for collecting the assessment for the government (*i.e.* taxes). In many cases it was collected as a joint assessment of the entire village. In addition, the assembly could make a levy for a particular purpose such as the construction of a water tank. These were kept separate from the taxes collected for the state. The activities of the assembly included the keeping of records, particularly those pertaining to charities and taxes and the settling of agrarian disputes such as conflicts over tenures and irrigation rights. It also tried cases and punished the criminals. The large assemblies kept a small staff of paid officers, but most of the work was done on a voluntary basis in the smaller villages.