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Agrarian Society of Thanjavur: Land Ownership, Tenancy and the Life of Peasants under the Cholas

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Abstract

The Chola Empire (9th–13th century CE) represents one of the most prosperous agrarian civilizations in South India, with Thanjavur as its political and cultural heart. This paper explores the agrarian structure of Thanjavur during the Chola period, emphasizing land ownership patterns, tenancy systems, and the socio-economic life of peasants. Using inscriptions, land charters, and literary sources, the study investigates how the Chola administration organized land, water, and labour to sustain agricultural productivity and temple-based economies. The research reveals that Chola rulers institutionalized an efficient revenue and irrigation system, empowering village assemblies (*sabhas* and *ur*) to manage local agrarian affairs. Land ownership was stratified between royal grants, temple holdings, and peasant cultivators, while tenancy and sharecropping were common. Peasants formed the backbone of the Chola economy, yet their status varied across social strata. The study concludes that Thanjavur's agrarian system combined centralized royal authority with decentralized village management, ensuring economic stability and cultural flourishing that defined the classical age of South Indian history.

Keywords: Chola Empire, Agrarian Economy, Land Tenure, Peasants, Thanjavur, Temple Economy.

1. Introduction

The Chola period marks the zenith of South India's agrarian and administrative development. Thanjavur, the imperial capital, symbolized agricultural abundance sustained by the fertile Cauvery delta. The present study investigates the agrarian organization of Thanjavur, focusing on the patterns of land ownership, tenancy, and the life of peasants under the Cholas.

The research problem lies in understanding how agrarian relations structured social hierarchies and supported state power. While previous studies have emphasized Chola architecture and polity, less attention has been given to the lived realities of cultivators and the institutional framework of rural life.

Historians such as K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, Burton Stein, and Noboru Karashima have analyzed inscriptions that illuminate the socio-economic foundations of Chola villages. Building on their insights, this paper re-examines the Thanjavur region as a case study of agrarian governance.

The objective is to reconstruct the agrarian landscape and peasant life of Thanjavur during the Chola period through an integrated study of epigraphy, economic policy, and social structure.

2. Methodology

The study adopts a historical-analytical and descriptive approach grounded in epigraphic, literary, and secondary

sources.

Primary Sources:

- Chola inscriptions from Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, and Gangaikonda Cholapuram, published in *South Indian Inscriptions* (SII) volumes.
- Land donation records (*copper plate charters*) such as the Leiden Grants of Rajaraja I.
- Temple inscriptions detailing land measurement, irrigation taxes, and labour obligations.

Secondary Sources:

- K.A. Nilakanta Sastri's *The Cholas* (1955).
- Burton Stein's *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (1980).
- Noboru Karashima's *South Indian History and Society* (1984).
- Gazetteers and regional histories of Thanjavur district.

The methodology combines epigraphic analysis, economic interpretation, and social history, linking administrative data with cultural context.

3. Discussion/Analysis

- Land Ownership and Distribution:** Chola kings granted lands to temples, Brahmins, and soldiers as tax-free holdings (*devadana*, *brahmadeya*, and

pallichchandam). These grants encouraged agricultural expansion and religious endowments. The state retained ownership of crown lands (*rajabhoga*), while common peasants cultivated wet (*nansei*) and dry (*punsei*) fields under varying obligations.

Temple endowments became major landholders, creating a temple-centered economy that influenced local production and labour distribution.

- b) **Tenancy and Labour Relations:** The majority of cultivators were tenant farmers (*vellalas*) who paid rent in kind or through shared produce. Sharecropping and collective cultivation under village assemblies were common practices. Labourers (*paraiyars*, *pannayalars*) were employed for ploughing and irrigation maintenance. The *ur* (non-Brahmin village council) supervised tenancy disputes and labour distribution, ensuring equitable resource management.
- c) **Village Administration and Revenue:** Local self-governing institutions like the *sabha* (Brahmin assembly) and *ur* (village council) were central to Chola agrarian administration. These bodies maintained records of land surveys, taxation, and water distribution. The *kudimaramath* system ensured community participation in canal and tank maintenance. Taxes such as *kanikadan* (land tax) and *eri vari* (irrigation cess) sustained both local and royal treasuries.
- d) **Life of Peasants:** Peasants formed the economic backbone of Thanjavur society. They lived in joint family units, closely tied to seasonal agricultural cycles and temple festivals. Their status varied from independent cultivators to bonded labourers. Despite social stratification, the agrarian prosperity provided a degree of stability and mobility within village society.

4. Results/Findings

- The Chola agrarian system in Thanjavur was highly organized, integrating royal control with local autonomy.
- Land ownership was diversified among the crown, temples, and peasants, creating a balanced distribution of resources.
- Tenancy arrangements fostered productivity but also reinforced social hierarchies.
- Peasants played a vital role in sustaining temple economies and state revenue.
- The system reflected an early form of decentralized governance that ensured economic resilience and social order.

5. Conclusion

The agrarian society of Thanjavur under the Cholas demonstrates the fusion of political administration, economic management, and social structure. Through an intricate network of land grants, village assemblies, and irrigation control, the Cholas established a sustainable agricultural economy that underpinned their imperial power. Peasants, though socially stratified, were integral participants in this system. The study underscores the Chola model of agrarian governance as one of the most advanced in medieval India, balancing authority with community participation.

Future research could examine gender roles in agrarian labor or comparative studies of Thanjavur's rural systems under later dynasties such as the Nayaks and Marathas.

6. References

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