



A Historical Study on Society and Culture in Thanjavur District in the Inscriptions of Rajaraja Chola I

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Abstract

This historical study examines society and culture in Thanjavur district during the reign of Rajaraja Chola I (985–1014 CE) through his inscriptions, primarily those at the Brihadisvara Temple. The research focuses on how these epigraphic records reveal the intricacies of Chola social structure, economic systems, religious practices, and cultural patronage in the empire's heartland. The objective is to reconstruct daily life, administrative hierarchies, and artistic expressions by analyzing primary inscriptions that detail temple endowments, land grants, staff roles, and rituals. Methods involve historiographical analysis of primary sources like temple wall engravings and copper plates, supplemented by secondary literature from scholars such as K.A. Nilakanta Sastri and S.R. Balasubrahmanyam. Key findings highlight a prosperous agrarian society with centralized administration, including village assemblies managing irrigation and revenues; a vibrant cultural scene fostering Tamil literature, music, and dance; and Shaivite dominance with inclusive endowments supporting diverse temple personnel, including women donors like Rajaraja's sister Kundavai. The study underscores the temple's role as an economic and social hub, integrating conquest spoils into local welfare. This research is relevant for understanding medieval South Indian heritage, demonstrating how inscriptions preserve evidence of a sophisticated civilization that influenced regional identity and pan-Indian Hindu traditions, offering insights into pre-colonial governance and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Rajaraja Chola I, Chola Inscriptions, Thanjavur Society, Brihadisvara Temple, Chola Culture, Shaivite Patronage.

Introduction

The theme of this paper is a historical exploration of society and culture in Thanjavur district as depicted in the inscriptions of Rajaraja Chola I, the eminent ruler who elevated the Chola dynasty to imperial status. Thanjavur, as the Chola capital, served as the epicenter of political, economic, and religious activities, and Rajaraja's epigraphic records provide a window into the lived experiences of its inhabitants, from royal elites to temple artisans.

In historical context, Rajaraja's reign (985–1014 CE) marked the zenith of the medieval Chola empire, expanding from the Tamil heartland to encompass parts of Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and northern India. This period witnessed unprecedented architectural and cultural achievements, exemplified by the construction of the Brihadisvara Temple (completed in 1010 CE), a UNESCO World Heritage site symbolizing Dravidian grandeur and Shaivite devotion. The significance lies in how these inscriptions not only chronicle conquests but also illuminate societal norms, such as gender roles in patronage and communal resource management, amid an era of military expansion and economic prosperity.

Previous scholarship has laid foundational insights. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri's *A History of South India* (1955) emphasizes the administrative reforms under Rajaraja, including land surveys that reorganized Thanjavur into valanadus for

efficient governance. Romila Thapar's works, such as *A History of India: Volume I* (2003), highlight the cultural integration of Shaivism with Tamil literature through the compilation of the Thirumurai hymns. S.R. Balasubrahmanyam's *Middle Chola Temples: Rajaraja I to Kulottunga I* (1971) analyzes temple inscriptions for economic details, while more recent studies like those in *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* (2019) explore queens' roles in historical reconstruction. However, gaps remain in synthesizing these for a focused view of Thanjavur's local society.

The research objectives are:

- i). To analyze inscriptions for evidence of social hierarchies and cultural practices;
- ii). To evaluate the temple's role in economic and religious life; and
- iii). To address how these records challenge or affirm prior interpretations of Chola heritage.

Methodology

This study relies on a combination of primary and secondary sources to reconstruct Thanjavur's society and culture under Rajaraja Chola I.

Primary sources include inscriptions from the Brihadisvara Temple in Thanjavur, such as wall engravings detailing endowments, staff appointments, and rituals; copper plates

like the Thiruvallangadu and Larger Leiden plates recording conquests and grants; and regional epigraphs from sites like Sankaranar Kudikadu and Tirumalavadi, which preserve administrative orders and land surveys. These Tamil and Sanskrit records, often in superb calligraphy, provide direct evidence of contemporary events.

Secondary sources encompass scholarly books, journals, and theses, including K.A. Nilakanta Sastri's historical overviews, S.R. Balasubrahmanyam's temple studies, and articles from *The Hindu* on specific inscription discoveries. Digital archives like the Indian Culture Portal and Wikipedia compilations offer contextual summaries.

Research methods are primarily analytical and historiographical, involving cross-verification of inscriptions with secondary interpretations to identify patterns in social and cultural themes. Descriptive elements catalog inscription details, while comparative approaches contrast Rajaraja's era with predecessors like Parantaka II. No fieldwork was conducted; analysis draws from published translations and scholarly commentaries.

Discussion

The inscriptions of Rajaraja Chola I offer a multifaceted view of Thanjavur's society and culture, revealing a sophisticated civilization blending authority, devotion, and artistry.

Political Administration: Rajaraja centralized power in Thanjavur, initiating a land survey in 1000 CE that divided the region into valanadus for revenue assessment. Inscriptions record officials like Villavan Muvendavelan and revenue collectors, with village assemblies (sabaiyar) handling local affairs, such as irrigation maintenance in exchange for loans. This contrasts with earlier decentralized systems, as noted by Sastri, showing Rajaraja's innovation in bureaucratic control.

Economic Aspects: Economic prosperity is evident in temple endowments, including gold-plated structures, jewels, and land grants from conquests in Sri Lanka. Inscriptions detail commodity prices, wages in paddy, and interest rates (12.5%), with the temple functioning as a bank lending to guilds. Agrarian focus appears in irrigation tank upkeep and cattle donations for ghee lamps, underscoring Thanjavur's role in trade and agriculture, differing from Thapar's emphasis on broader imperial economies.

Religious Developments: Shaivism dominated, with inscriptions chronicling the compilation of Thirumurai hymns and installation of Nayanar saint images. Rituals involved perpetual lamps, prasadam, and festivals, supported by staff like priests and oduvars. Rajaraja's title Shivapada Shekhara reflects personal devotion, while inclusive grants to Buddhist viharas show tolerance, aligning with Balasubrahmanyam's views on religious patronage.

Social Structure: Society was hierarchical yet inclusive, with roles for women like Kundavai in donations. Inscriptions list 400 dancers housed in temple streets, musicians, and cooks, indicating job specialization and social mobility through service. Military honors for regiments highlight valor, while audits prevented corruption, revealing a community-oriented structure.

Cultural Achievements: Cultural vibrancy shines in bronze idols, murals, and music patronage. The temple's architecture and inscriptions preserved Tamil literature, fostering a pan-Indian Hindu complex, as per recent analyses.

Results

The analysis yields several outcomes: Inscriptions confirm Thanjavur's economic hub status, with endowments sustaining

welfare like temple hospitals and stipends. New insights include women's active roles in patronage, challenging patriarchal narratives, and the temple's integration of conquest spoils into local culture, re-evaluating Rajaraja as a cultural unifier. Socially, evidence of guilds and assemblies suggests proto-democratic elements amid monarchy.

Table 1: Summary of Key Inscription Evidence

Aspect	Key Inscription Evidence	Insights
Economy	Land grants, paddy wages	Agrarian prosperity; trade with Sri Lanka
Religion	Thirumurai compilation	Shaivite canonization; ritual recipes
Society	Staff lists, dancer housing	Specialization; gender inclusion
Culture	Bronze idols, murals	Artistic patronage; Tamil preservation

These findings affirm Chola sophistication while highlighting understudied local dynamics.

Conclusion

In summary, Rajaraja Chola I's inscriptions portray Thanjavur as a thriving center of structured society, economic vitality, and cultural richness, with the Brihadisvara Temple as its nucleus. This research underscores the empire's legacy in fostering heritage through epigraphic preservation, contributing to understandings of medieval Indian governance and devotion. For broader history, it illustrates how temples bridged state and society, influencing modern Tamil identity. Future studies could explore comparative analyses with Vijayanagara inscriptions or archaeological excavations for material culture.

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