



THE CHOLAS MARITIME ACTIVITIES

A. Dafny

Ph.D. Research Scholar (History), Reg. No: 21213161092012

Department of History & Research Centre, Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil,
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

Dr. H. Santhosha Kumari

Guide and Supervisor, Assistant Professor,

Department of History & Research Centre, Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil,
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

This article tries to understand the naval expeditions of Cholas in the context of maritime activities. However, the maritime trade and conquests have been a neglected area of study. Maritime trade and cultural exchanges between India and Southeast Asia have comparatively received lesser attention as compared to the studies made on Silk Road. This article focuses primarily on the naval expeditions during the reign of Rajaraja Chola I and Rajendra Chola I in the eleventh century. Chola kings were great patrons of art, commissioned grand temples and were also known for their maritime expeditions and conquests of Southeast Asia. The later part of tenth century and early-eleventh century witnessed many political changes and rise of powerful empires across Asia and Africa. The Fatimids in Egypt, Song dynasty of China, and Cholas in southern India. The prominence of Malabar Coast rose along with ports in Gujarat, as Jewish traders came to trade with present day Kerala and Tamil Nadu. On the other side trade began to gear in the Arabian sea and pacific ocean.

Keywords: Naval power, Merchant Guilds, Maritime activities, overseas conquests, territories and economical interest.

DOI Number: 10.48047/nq.2022.20.19.nq99479

NeuroQuantology 2022;20(19):5152-5154

5152

Introduction

The Chola dynasty was one of the ancient empires of Tamil Nadu, along with the Pandyas and Cheras who ruled Tamil Nadu, along the Kaveri river. The mention of Cholas can be found in texts of the third Sangam, *Mahavamsa* of Sri Lanka, and many other records. They played an important part in shaping the culture, art and traditions of present-day Tamil Nadu. The Cholas conquered Lanka, Serivijaya, Sumatra, Malaya, and many countries in Southeast Asia. The conquests were mainly to gain monopoly on control of trade in the Bay of Bengal and the Pacific Ocean, where extensive trade extended as far as Song China. This not only strengthened their treasuries but also

aided in providing access to Tamil merchant guilds to ports and conduct business in Southeast Asia. The Tamil merchant guilds played a significant role in driving the naval expeditions in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka.

After the conquer of South Indian kingdoms, the cholas importance lies in their rise as a maritime power. They raised a powerful navy and used it to enlarge their territories and further their economic interests.

Historical context

Some Scholars have expressed doubts on the overseas expeditions of the cholas stating that the Thanjavur inscriptions that details Chola expeditions to the south East Asian countries are the mere rhetorics, while



other epistographic records dating from the same periods as the king's rule, and were likely to be more of poetic imaginations.

1. Nilakanta Sastri notes that Chola conquests were motivated by obstacles created by Srivijaya, to extend trade far east to China. Thus, Rajendra Chola's *Digvijaya* could also be motivated to extend his empire to Southeast Asia to both extend the borders of his kingdom and secure trade interests of Tamil merchants. The rise of Rashtrakuta and Angkor in Cambodia in the eight century also marks the beginning of competition to control ports of Malabar in India and ports of Malaya in south east. Another development in the eleventh century was threat from Pagans of coastal Myanmar in Bay of Bengal.
2. RC Mazumdar in this book "Hindu Colonies in the Far East" tells us quite clearly that "the story of this victory is merely an image of the court-poets, but based on facts, is proved, beyond doubt, by the detailed references to the vassal states. It is interesting to note that many of these States are included in the Silendra Empire by the later Chinese authorities".
3. PK Gautam also explains that "There is a lot of weight in the argument that the Cholas undertook maritime expeditions to South East Asia not for short-term plunder motive, but with a long-range view of minimizing the role of Srivijaya as the intermediary between the Cholas and the Sung Dynasty in China. The Cholas continued to be a power to be reckoned with, including in their maritime exploits".
4. Moti Chandra, while expressing doubts on naval battles, holds no doubts about chola conquests in parts of what we now know as South East Asia. He writes, "In the conquests of Rajendra Chola came almost the whole eastern part of Sumatra, and the central and southern parts of the

Malay peninsula. He also occupied the capitals of Srivijaya and Kedah.

Merchant Guilds, Maritime trade and overseas conquests

Merchant guilds played an important role in trade and commerce. As trade expanded in the ninth to fifteenth centuries to overseas markets the guilds became wealthier and powerful. Evidences also suggest these guilds kept their own army, maintained towns with large warehouses to secure and store their goods. Though large inscriptions are available in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and lesser in Kerala and Andhra regions there is very little study devoted to this section. Inscriptions give us information about the goods that were sold by the guilds, they include rice, paddy, oil, sandal, salt, betel leaves, cotton, yarns and threads, iron and many varieties of grains. The list of commodities also give us the insight about the prevalence of industries that produced these goods. Especially textile, oil mills and grains that were traded internationally tell us the development and prominence of these industries. The prominent guilds were *Ainurruvar*, *Anjuvannam*, *Nanadesi*, and *Padinenbhumi*. The first guild included Jewish, Christian and Muslim traders who settled in south India from middle-east regions and latter are groups from the Tamil, Kerala and even Andhra merchants. The power and wealth of these mercantile groups can be known from their donations to local temples and other charitable activities like construction of tanks seeking good profits on their trade. Inscriptions also tell us that these guilds had very good relations with the kings and local chieftains, and also that they enjoyed a certain level of independence.

The Cholas, in the tenth century increased vigilance on *Nagarams*, mercantile towns and in ports mainly to earn more revenue from the flourishing trade, especially international-maritime flows. The increased state control is also evident from the episode where Rajaraja Chola I sends an envoy of 52 members that included state ambassadors and merchants. Also the merchants settling in northern parts of Sri Lanka show the support received from Chola army who conducted

raids on these regions. Though trade with Southeast Asia, China existed for many years it rose to significance from ninth century onwards. Srivijaya controlled important ports of Sunda and Malacca (Indonesia, northern parts). This expansion in markets and the hurdle created by Srivijaya navy to control, restrict Chola and China trade might have led Rajendra to raid Srivijaya twice in 1017 and 1025AD respectively. Certain evidences also note the friendly relations between the two empires, as *Nagapattinam* inscription on Srivijaya emperor ChoodamaniVarma donating gifts, gold to Cholas emperor and donations to construct a Buddhist vihara there. The ports controlled by Cholas became prosperous as they transformed into important centres of trans-shipment international trade. These increased trade should have ensured an inflow of great wealth, revenue to the Cholas treasury. This period of increase commerce in the Pacific between Cholas, Srivijaya and Song (China) highlights the significance of controlling the ports around these regions.

Conclusion

The achievements of Cholas in their maritime conquest is unique in that the Cholas were the first to realize the importance of naval power and they used it effectively to pursue territories and economic interests. The rise of powerful empires and rising trade in the Indian Ocean and Pacific could have motivated Cholas to under naval expeditions to Southeast Asia and conquer Kerala, Kalinga and Palas of Bengal all coastal empires. India has actively conducted trade with overseas empires for centuries, but the period from tenth century onwards with the political developments, emergence of powerful empire- states encouraged Cholas to make overseas expeditions and conquests, that is extended their "*Digvijaya*" (Conquering neighbouring kingdoms in all directions) to Southeast Asia. The wars were motivated by the desire to earn more revenue from the intensifying trade in the Bay of Bengal and Pacific ocean regions. The period also indicates an increased control and cooperation of the state with merchant guilds. The state along with increased supervision

ensured to protect the interests of its merchants. This is evident from the raids conducted on Lanka and Srivijaya respectively. Regrettably not many studies are dedicated to study the economic and cultural dialogues that took place between India and Southeast Asia through its maritime trade over the centuries.

References

1. Kenneth R and Hall (1978). International Trade and Foreign Diplomacy in Early Medieval South India, Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol-1.
2. Karasimha N (1992). Towards a New Formation: South Indian society under Vijayanagar Rule, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
3. Sen T (1995). Maritime Relations between China and Cola Kingdom (850-1279) in "Mariners, Merchants and Oceans: Studies in Maritime History" by KS Mathew, Manohar Publications, New Delhi.