THREE

# South India: The Chola Empire (*900–1200*)

Powerful kingdoms had risen in south India during the sixth and eighth centuries. The most important among them were the Pallavas and the Pandyas who dominated modern Tamil Nadu, the Cheras of modern Kerala, and the Chalukyas who dominated the Maharashtra area or the Deccan. It was the Chalukyan king, Pulakesin II, who had defeated Harsha and not allowed him to expand his kingdom towards the Deccan. Some of these kingdoms, such as the Pallava and Pandya, had strong navies. They also played an important role in strengthening economic, religious and cultural relations with the countries of Southeast Asia, and with China. Their navies enabled them to invade and rule some parts of Sri Lanka for some time.

The Chola empire which arose in the ninth century brought under its control a large part of the peninsula. The Cholas developed a powerful navy which enabled them to conquer Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Its impact was felt even by the countries of Southeast Asia. The Chola empire may be said to mark a climax in south Indian history.

## The Rise of the Chola Empire

The founder of the Chola empire was Vijayalaya, who was at first a feudatory of the Pallavas. He captured Tanjore in AD 850. And by the end of the ninth century, the Cholas had defeated both the Pallavas of Kanchi (Tondaimandalam) and weakened the Pandyas, bringing the southern Tamil country under their control. But the Cholas were hard put to defend their position against the Rashtrakutas. As we have noted in a previous chapter, Krishna III defeated the Chola king, and annexed the northern part of the Chola empire. This was

a serious set-back to the Cholas, but they rapidly recovered, particularly after the death of Krishna III in 965 and the downfall of the Rashtrakuta empire.

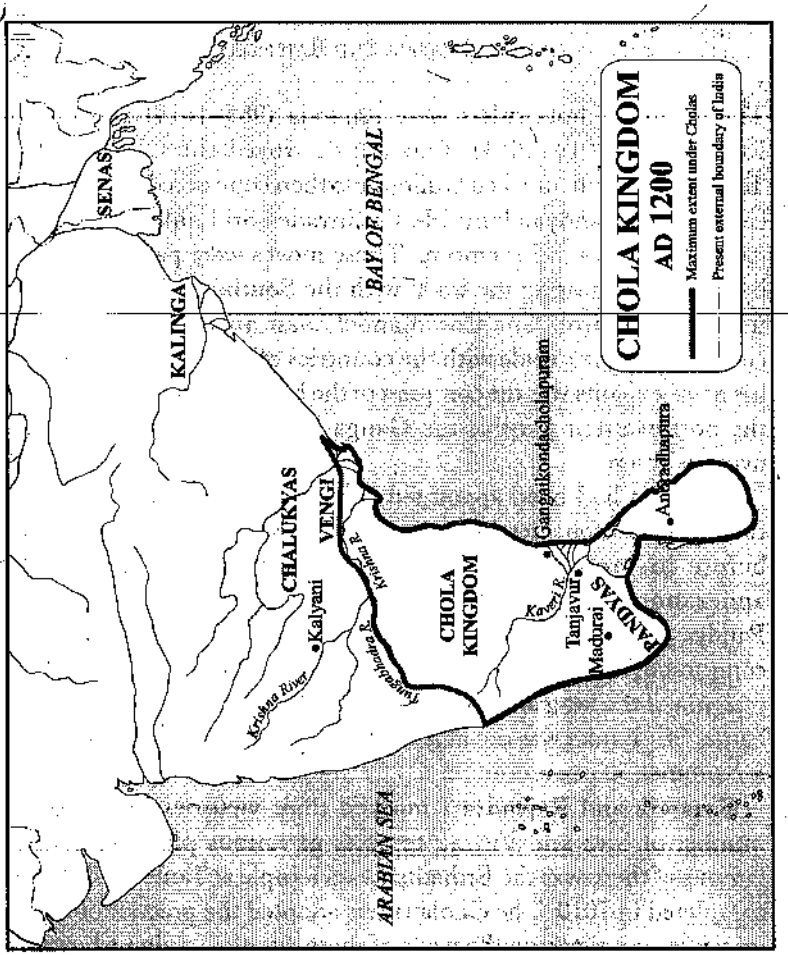
## Age of Rajaraja and Rajendra I

The greatest Chola rulers were Rajaraja (985–1014) and his son Rajendra I (1014–1044). Rajaraja destroyed the Chera navy at Trivandrum, and attacked Quilon. He then conquered Madurai and captured the Pandyan king. He also invaded Sri Lanka and annexed its northern part to his empire. These moves were partly motivated by his desire to bring the trade with the Southeast Asian countries under his control. The Coromandel coast and Malabar were the centres for India's trade with the countries of Southeast Asia. One of his naval exploits was the conquest of the Maldives. Rajaraja, annexed the northwestern parts of the Ganga kingdom in Karnataka, and overran Vengi.

Rajendra had been appointed heir apparent in his father's lifetime, and had considerable experience in administration and warfare before his accession to the throne. He carried forward the annexationist policy of Rajaraja by completely overrunning the Pandya and Chera countries and including them in his empire. The conquest of Sri Lanka was also completed, with the crown and royal insignia of the king and the queen of Sri Lanka being captured in a battle. Sri Lanka was not able to free herself from the Chola control for another 50 years.

Rajaraja and Rajendra I marked their victories by erecting a number of Siva and Vishnu temples at various places. The most famous of these was the Brihadishwara temple at Tanjore which was completed in 1010. The Chola rulers adopted the practice of having inscriptions written on the walls of these temples, giving a historical narrative of their victories. That is why we know a great deal more about the Cholas that their predecessors.

One of the most remarkable exploits in the reign of Rajendra I was the march across Kalinga to Bengal in which the Chola armies crossed the river Ganga, and defeated two local kings. This expedition, which was led by a Chola general, took place in 1022 and followed


CHOLA KINGDOM
AD 1200
Maximum extent under Cholas
Present external boundary of India
SENAS
KALINGA
BAY OF BENGAL
CHALUKYAS
VENGI
Kalyani
Krishna River
Tungabhadra R.
Kaveri R.
CHOLA KINGDOM
Gangaikondacholapuram
Tanjavur
Madurai
PANDYAS
Anradhapura
ARABIAN SEA

in reverse the same route which the great conqueror Samudragupta had followed. To commemorate this occasion, Rajendra I assumed the title of Gangaikondachola ('the Chola who conquered the Ganga'). He built a new capital near the mouth of the Kaveri river and called it Gangaikondacholapuram ('the city of the Chola who conquered the Ganga').

An even more remarkable exploit in the time of Rajendra I were the naval expeditions against the revived Sri Vijaya empire. The Sri Vijaya empire, which had been revived in the 10th century, extended over the Malay peninsula, Sumatra, Java and the neighbouring islands, and controlled the overseas trade route to China. The rulers of the Sailendra dynasty of the Sri Vijaya kingdom were Buddhists and had cordial relations with the Cholas. The Sailendra ruler had built a Buddhist monastery at Nagapatnam and, at his instance, Rajendra I had endowed a village for its upkeep. The cause of the breach between the two apparently was the Chola eagerness to remove obstacles to Indian traders, and to expand trade with China. The expeditions led to the conquest of Kadaram or Kedah and a number of other places in the Malay peninsula and Sumatra. The Chola navy was the strongest in the area, and for some time the Bay of Bengal was converted into a 'Chola lake'.

The Chola rulers also sent a number of embassies to China. These were partly diplomatic and partly commercial. Chola embassies reached China in 1016 and 1033. A Chola embassy of 70 merchants reached China in 1077 and, according to a Chinese account, received '81,800 strings of copper-cash', that is, more than four lakhs of rupees in return for the articles of 'tribute' comprising 'glass-ware, camphor, brocades, rhinoceros horns, ivory, etc.' Tribute was the word used by the Chinese for all articles brought for trade.

The Chola rulers fought constantly with the Chalukyas who had succeeded the Rashtrakutas. These are called the later Chalukyas and their capital was at Kalyani. The Cholas and the later Chalukyas clashed for the overlordship of Vengi (Rayalaseema), the Tungabhadra doab, and the Ganga ruled country in northwest Karnataka. Neither side was able to gain a decisive victory in this contest and ultimately it exhausted both the kingdoms. It also appears that the wars were becoming harsher during this time. The Chola rulers sacked and

plundered Chalukyan cities including Kalyani, and massacred the people, including Brahmans and children. They adopted a similar policy in the Pandya country, settling military colonies to overawe the population. They destroyed Anuradhapura, the ancient capital of the rulers of Sri Lanka, and treated their king and queen harshly. These are blots in the history of the Chola empire. However, once they had conquered a country, the Cholas tried to set up a sound system of administration in it. One of the remarkable features of the Chola administration was their encouragement to local self-government in the villages all over their empire.

The Chola empire continued to flourish during the twelfth century, but it declined during the early part of the thirteenth century. The later Chalukyan empire in the Maharashtra area had also come to an end during the twelfth century. The place of the Cholas was taken by the Pandyas and the Hoysalas in the south, and the later Chalukyas were replaced by the Yadavas and the Kakatiyas. All these states extended patronage to arts and architecture. Unfortunately, they weakened themselves by continually fighting against each other, sacking the towns and not even sparing the temples. Ultimately, they were destroyed by the sultans of Delhi at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

## Chola Government—Local Self Government

The king was the most important person in the Chola administration. All authority rested in his hands, but he had a council of ministers to advise him. The kings often went on tours in order to oversee the administration. The Cholas maintained a large army consisting of elephants, cavalry and infantry which were called the three limbs of the army. The infantry was generally armed with spears. Most of the kings had bodyguards who were sworn to defend the kings even at the cost of their lives. The Venetian traveller, Marco Polo, who visited Kerala in the thirteenth century, says that all the soldiers who were bodyguards burnt themselves in the funeral pyre of the monarch when he died—a statement which may well be an exaggeration. The Cholas also had a strong navy, as we have seen, which dominated the Malabar and Coromandel coast and, for some time, the entire Bay of Bengal.

The Chola state included area of central control, and loosely administered areas under different types of local control. The state was interpersed with hill people and tribals. The basic unit of administration was the *nadu* which consisted of a number of villages having close kinship ties and other close associations. The number of *nadus* increased as fresh lands were brought under cultivation by means of irrigation works such as ponds, wells, etc., and by converting hill or tribal people into agriculturists. Grants to Brahmans and temples increased, both of which helped in expanding cultivation.

In the Chola kingdom, *nadus* were grouped into *valanadus*. The Chola state was divided into four *mandalams* or provinces. Sometimes, princes of the royal family were appointed governors of provinces. Officials were generally paid by giving them assignments of revenue-bearing lands.

The Chola rulers built a network of royal roads which were useful for trade as well as for the movement of the army. Trade and commerce flourished in the Chola empire, and there were some gigantic trade guilds which traded with Java and Sumatra.

The Cholas also paid attention to irrigation. The river Kaveri and other rivers were used for the purpose. Many tanks for irrigation were built. Some of the Chola rulers carried out an elaborate survey of land in order to fix the government's share of the land revenue. We do not know what precisely the government's share was.

In addition to land tax, the Chola rulers drew their income from tolls on trade, taxes on professions, and also from the plunder of the neighbouring territories. The Chola rulers were wealthy, and could afford to build a number of towns and magnificent monuments, including temples.

We have already referred to local self-government in the villages in some areas in the Rashtrakuta empire. We know more about village government in the Chola empire from a number of inscriptions. We hear of two assemblies, called the *ur*, and the *sabha* or *mahasabha*. The *ur* was a general assembly of the village. However, we know more about the working of the *mahasabha*. This was a gathering of the adult men in the Brahman villages which were called *agraharams*. These were villages with Brahman settlements in which most of the land was rent-free. These villages enjoyed a large measure of

autonomy. The affairs of the village were managed by an executive committee to which educated persons owning property were elected either by drawing lots or by rotation. These members had to retire every three years. There were other committees for helping in the assessment and collection of land revenue, for maintenance of law and order, justice, etc. One of the important committees was the tank committee which looked after the distribution of water to the fields. The *mahasabha* could distribute new lands, and exercise ownership rights over them. It could also raise loans for the village and levy taxes.

The self-government enjoyed by these Chola villages was a very fine system. To some extent this system worked in the other villages as well. However, the growth of feudalism which is discussed in an earlier chapter, restricted their autonomy.

## Cultural Life

The Chola rule saw the further growth and climax of the bhakti movement which we have discussed separately. The movement was closely linked to temples. The extent and resources of the Chola empire enabled the rulers to build great capitals, such as Tanjore, Gangaikondacholapuram, Kanchi, etc. The rulers maintained large households and large palaces with banquet halls, spacious gardens and terraces. Thus, we learn of seven or five-storeyed houses for their chiefs. Unfortunately, none of the palaces of the period have survived. The Chola capital, Gangaikondacholapuram, is now just a small village near Tanjore. However, descriptions of the magnificent palaces of the rulers and their ministers, and of equally magnificent houses in which the wealthy merchants lived, are to be found in the literature of the period.

Temple architecture in the south attained its climax under the Cholas. The style of architecture which came into vogue during this period is called Dravida, because it was confined largely to south India. The main feature of this style was the building of many storeys above the *garbhagriha* (the innermost chamber where the chief deity resides). The number of storeys varied from five to seven, and they had a typical style which came to be called the *vimana*. A pillared

hall called *mandap*, with elaborately carved pillars and a flat roof, was generally placed in front of the sanctum. It acted as an audience hall and was a place for various other activities such as ceremonial dances which were performed by the *devadasis*—the women dedicated to the service of the gods. Sometimes, a passage ran around the sanctum so that the devotees could go round it. Images of many other gods could be put in this passage. This entire structure was enclosed in a courtyard surrounded by high walls, which were pierced by lofty gates called *gopurams*. In course of time, the *vimanas* rose higher and higher, the number of courtyards were increased to two or three, and the *gopurams* also became more and more elaborate. Thus the temple became a miniature city or a palace, with living-rooms for priests and many others being provided in it. The temples generally enjoyed revenue-free grants of lands for their expenses. They also received grants and rich donations from the wealthy merchants. Some of the temples became so rich that they entered business, lent money, and took part in business enterprises. They also spent money on improving cultivation, digging tanks, wells, etc., and providing irrigation channels.

An early example of the Dravida style of temple architecture is the eighth century temple of Kailasanath at Kanchipuram. One of the finest and most elaborate examples of the style is, however, provided by the Brihadiswara temple at Tanjore built by Rajaraja I. This is also called the Rajaraja temple because the Cholas were in the habit of installing images of kings and queens in the courtyards of the temples. The temple at Gangaikondacholapuram, though in a dilapidated condition, is another fine example of temple architecture under the Cholas. A large number of temples were also built at other places in south India. However, it may be well to remember that the proceeds for some of these activities were obtained from the plunder of the population of the neighbouring areas by the Chola rulers.

After the fall of the Cholas, temple building activity continued under the Chalukyas of Kalyani and the Hoysalas. The district of Dharwar and the Hoysala capital, Halebid, had a large number of temples. The most magnificent of these is the Hoysalesvara temple. It is the best example of what is called the Chalukyan style. Apart from the images of gods and their attendants, both men and women

(*yaksha* and *yakshini*), the temples contain finely sculptured panels which show a busy panorama of life, including dance, music and scenes of war and love. Thus, life was closely integrated with religion. For the common man, the temples were not merely a place for worship but the hub of social and cultural life as well.

The art of sculpture attained a high standard in south India during this period. One example of this was the giant statue of Gomateswara at Sravana Belgola. Another aspect was image-making which reached its zenith in the dancing figure of the Siva, called Nataraja. The Nataraja figures of this period, particularly those in bronze, are considered masterpieces. Many fine examples of this are to be found in museums in India and abroad.

The rulers of the various dynasties also patronized arts and letters during this period. While Sanskrit was regarded as the language of high culture and a number of kings as well as scholars and court poets wrote in it, a remarkable feature of the period was the growth of literature in the local languages of India. A number of popular saints called *Nayanmars* and *Alvars* who were devotees of Siva and Vishnu respectively, flourished in the Tamil kingdoms between the sixth and the ninth centuries. They composed their works in Tamil. The writings of the Saivite saints, which were collected into eleven volumes under the name *Tirumurai* in the early part of the twelfth century, are considered sacred and are looked upon as the fifth Veda. The age of Kamban who is placed in the second half of the eleventh and the early part of the twelfth century is regarded as a golden age in Tamil literature. Kamban's *Ramayana* is considered a classic in Tamil literature. Kamban is believed to have lived at the court of a Chola king. Many others too took their themes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, thus bringing these classics nearer to the people.

Though younger than Tamil, Kannada also became a literary language during this period. The Rashtrakuta, the Chalukya and the Hoysala rulers patronized Kannada as well as Telugu. The Rashtrakuta king, Amoghavarsha, wrote a book on poetics in Kannada. Many Jain scholars also contributed to the growth of Kannada. Pampa, Ponna and Ranna are regarded as the three gems of Kannada poetry. Although they were under the influence of

Jainism, they also wrote on themes taken from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Nanniah, who lived at the court of a Chalukyan king began the Telugu version of the *Mahabharata*. The work begun by him was completed in the thirteenth century by Tikkanna. Like the Tamil *Ramayana*, the Telugu *Mahabharata* is a classic which inspired many subsequent writers. Many folk or popular themes are also to be found in these literatures. Popular themes which were not derived from Sanskrit and which reflect popular sentiments and emotions are called *desi* or rural in Telugu.

We can, thus, see that the period from the eighth to the twelfth century was not only remarkable for the growth of regional kingdoms and regional integration, but was also a period of cultural growth, and the development of trade and commerce and agriculture in south India. Merchants and artisans increased their strength with the development of foreign trade under the Cholas.