

The Chola Empire's Craftsmen And Their Crafts

***Dr. Sunita Meena**

ABSTRACT

The goal of this research paper is to look at a few Chola Empire-related topics of crafts and craftspeople (ninth to thirteenth centuries A.D). In the history of the imperial Cholas, this subject has not received much attention. The most significant figure in the Chola government. It was entirely in his hands. He often travelled to be in contact with the government. A council of ministers that served at the king's pleasure assisted and advised him. To monitor how the Central government ran, there was a fully functional secretariat.

Keywords: Urbanization, Chola Empire, Sculptors, Chariots.

INTRODUCTION

Relatively speaking, the sub-discipline of craft history is relatively young in the field of academic institutions' historical study. Traditional research has a tendency to just briefly mention craftspeople. Researchers have now begun to seriously study the craft industry's goods and manufacturers. Some eminent academics, both within and outside of India, are doing this while taking into account theories from the Marxist, Subaltern, and Annals schools. They include prominent craft and art historians such as Jan Brouwer, S. Settar, Raju Kalidos, Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta, R.N. Misra, Thomas E. Levy, and Carla Sinopoli. These writers wrote selectively on the artisan products in various parts of the Indian subcontinent. The economics and cultural ethos of the society in which artisans lived will be shown via study into a variety of craftsmen's features.

THE CHOLA EMPIRE

As shown by the local, regional, and searade/markets, artisanal activity had a significant economic impact. At its height, the Chola Empire also include the entirety of modern-day South India (apart from northern Kerala and northern Karnataka), Sri Lanka, and some South-East Asian littoral states or kingdoms. Raja Raja Chola I (reigned A.D. 985–1012) and Rajendra Chola I (reigned A.D. 1012–1044) were the two most famous Chola monarchs. Moreover, the Chola Empire's location between the rich Gulf of Aden and the South China sea trade routes made it easier for them to conduct marine commerce and explorations. The studies of historians like George W. Spencer, Kenneth R. Hall, and Vasudha Narayanan on the effects of Chola activities along these important trade routes on the economy, politics, and culture are particularly pertinent here.

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RESEARCH GOALS AND HYPOTHESIS

The following four goals guide this study:

1. To look at the many types of handicrafts and how they were produced throughout the urbanisation process in the Chola Empire (ninth to twelfth century A.D.).
2. To comprehend the socioeconomic condition and religious obligations of the artisans and craftspeople in Chola culture.
3. To investigate these artisans' socioeconomic mobility.
4. Attempt to integrate the history of the craftspeople into the subaltern historiography.

HISTORICAL SOURCES

This essay was written using a variety of original sources. The famed Chola bronzes, paintings, coins, sculptures, copper plate records, works of literature, architectural manuals, and folklore are among them. Along with these types of primary source material, this article also makes use of pertinent secondary works in the form of books, journal articles, and essays. During the data gathering phase, fieldwork is done at museums, a few temples, and artisan studios.

RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

The research technique used in this study included a thorough examination and synthesis of the aforementioned primary historical materials, which were then organised into two main frameworks: "Crafts and Craftsmen" on the one hand and "the perspective from below" (subaltern approach) on the other. The information is gathered and verified in order to categorise it and utilise it trustworthily in line with the defined goals. To offer a historical account of the subject under discussion, the components of chronology and theme(s) are both linked.

THE SITE OF THE CHOLA CRAFTSMEN

The Chola Empire had a wide variety of social groupings residing there. One such group that participated in creative cultural endeavours to support the imperial Chola rulers' growing geographical authority was the craftsmen and artisans. In other words, they essentially functioned as non-agrarian production units that catered to the requirements of both urban and rural areas. Craftsmen were subject to state taxes and cesses, and the proceeds were placed in the treasury (Karuvulam). According to the inscriptional records, a group of five artisans known as the Kammalar—goldsmiths (tattan), brass smiths (kannan), blacksmiths (Karuman/Kolan), carpenters (tachchan), and sculptors—once existed (silpis). As they revered Him and claimed to be descended from Lord Vishwakarma, the celestial builder of the Gods and Goddesses listed in Hindu mythology and the Puranas, they were also known as the Vishwakarma artisans. Additionally, these artisans were given the names "Viswakarma Kula" and "Viswakarma Kulaja," which denote their caste, a significant social institution in India. Weavers, potters, oil pressers, architects, watercraft practitioners, and other craftspeople are on the opposite end of the spectrum.

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WEAVERS AND TEXTILES

In addition to food and shelter, clothing is one of the three basic necessities of all living things. As a result, the textile industry evolved throughout time. Loom or hand weaving has been identified. Inscriptions and literary manuscripts from the Chola dynasty made extensive mention of textiles and weavers. The Kanchipuram area has long been renowned as being a premier centre for cotton and silk weaving. The second significant centre of textile manufacture in the Chola Empire was Tribhuvanam, Arni, Tirupparkadal, Virinchipuram, Woraiyur, Tirupati, Kalahasti, Gugai, Madurai, Salem, Sular, Venkatagiri, Dharmavaram, Kumbakonam, Thanjavur, and Vridhachalam. Cotton could be found nearby, but raw silk had to be imported, sometimes from other countries!

The weavers payed particular taxes to the Chola Government authorities in Kanchipuram and its surrounding area. One such instance was the loom tax (tari arai). The reign of the Chola king Vijayakantagopala at the Tirupputkuli hamlet serves as proof of this. Each spinner is required to provide one sari from each loom, known as the tari pudavai, as part of the state's obligation to the temple as part of the arrangement of "antarayam" or intermediate local cess. Additionally, per kadamai was levied in addition to these taxes.

In addition to other previous researchers, R. Tirumalai, an epigraphist-historian, has stated that the Madras Museum Copper Plates of Uttama Chola (tenth Century) characterise the significance of traders and weavers (saliyar) in the early mediaeval economy of Kanchipuram as well as in the taxation structure mediated by the nagaram or market centre during the late tenth century A.D. Strangely, one stone inscription enables us to examine the taxation structure in Kanchi Managar's merchant district more attentively (city). This Chola royal edict gave Katamai, or land charges, to the temple as well as cesses on weaving looms known as the saliyar vari, thanks to an agreement by all merchants, weavers, traders, and other residents. These allusions to merchants and weavers are highly important since Kanchipuram has a long history of being associated with clothing. The majority of the textile customers were Cholas.

Because bleached fabric produces odour, weaving groups have historically resided outside of villages. Weavers were attracted to go to the slowly developing Temple Towns by the urban space established during the Pallava and Chola dynasties. The saliyar pattu and Devanga pattu, named after the weaving villages included in this section, were the names given to the finely woven silk sarees.

GOLDSMITHS AND JEWELLERY

People in the Chola Age thought wearing jewellery was lucky. The perumtattan (literally, "great goldsmith") and his crew produced intricate gold work. According to epigraphic evidence, the Chola kings and their family members, as well as nobles, officials, and wealthy merchants, spent a lot of money on the creation of gold, diamond, and pearl decorations. They were intended for both private usage as well as giving to the temple deities. One example is the Brahadisvara that Raja Raja Chola I erected in Thanjavur. A classification of goldsmithy existed. The small-time tattan, who provided services to a market established by customers and lived on a piece-wage, was at the lowest rung. The other was the wealthy perumtattan who enjoyed the jewelry's royal commission and resided in prestigious metropolitan areas like Thanjavur, Kanchipuram, and Chidambaram. Crowns (makutas), ear lopes (makarakundalas), necklaces

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(kantabharana), girdles, finger rings, anklets, and other types of gems are among the creations.

CHOLA BRONZES FOR DIVINE VISION

What is the purpose of Chola bronze? Under the supervision of the Chola kings and queens, bronze statues of Hindu gods and goddesses were created by metalworkers and coppersmiths for temple devotion. Art historians refer to these pictures as "Chola bronzes." Additionally, skilled artisans at Swamimalai, Tiruvengadu, Kilur, and Kanchipuram created the bronze statues of the royal sovereign and his family, the 63 Shaivite hymnodists (Nayanmars), and the 12 Vaishnava hymnodists (Alvars). A excellent example is the bronze statue of Queen Sembian Mahadevi. Each Chola bronze is a one-of-a-kind handcrafted item that cannot be duplicated. They are made using the lost-wax method. The fact that these statues are employed as the processional deities during temple festivities is their noteworthy value. The Nataraja emblem has always been a creative inspiration.

THE ART OF THE SCULPTOR

Temple construction erupted under the Chola rulers, along with their queens, nobles, and military leaders.

The stone carvers (Silpis) created exquisite representations of the gods, kings, queens, and a large number of other figures. Three temples stand out among the hundreds that were constructed across the vast Chola Empire, including the Brahadisvara at Thanjavur (built by Raja Raja Chola I), the Brahadisvara at Gangaikondacholapuram (built by Rajendra I), and the Airavatisvara at Darasuram (Rajaraja II). The Darasuram temple in Kumbakonam has an excellent panel around the main shrine depicting the trying scenes of Siva with the Nayanmars in tune with Sekkilars Periyapuranam. It was created in the style of a chariot pulled by prancing horses. The temple construction projects were overseen by the head architect (Sthapati) or the Silpacharya, who undoubtedly engaged a sizable number of craftsmen for the sculpting work. The royal sponsors gave the sculptors residential lots, land, grain, and even gifts of cash as payment. The architects adhered to the architectural texts like the Pratima Lakshana, the Vastusashtras, and the Narada Silpasastra. In the Tamil nation and abroad, the traditions of sculpture are still present today.

THE MAKERS OF CHARIOTS

Two different kinds of chariots were produced by the artists and craftspeople. One was used by the monarch throughout the conflict, while the other was the temple chariot that worshippers pulled during the yearly festivals of well-known deities including Siva, Vishnu, Kamakshi Amman, Ganapati, and Lord Murugan. The superb monograph about Tamil nation's temple-chariot customs and works was given by art historian Raju Kalidos. The procession of the Chola Kings came after the ula (procession) of the Gods. The craftsmen known as rathakarars utilised high-quality wood to build the chariot. Nearly all god statues had exquisite carvings that were painstakingly detailed. The four cardinal avenues around the temple were used to transport the bronze statues, which were adorned with lavish gems. The Tiruvarur ter is a well-known illustration.

THE ART OF PAINTING

Even though it is in lesser quantities, the Chola-era paintings that have survived show the artists' creativity.

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The famous Rajarajesvaram (the Brahadisvara temple), built by Rajaraja I about the year 1010, is known for its circumambulatory corridor (tiruchitramblam), in which Chola painters portrayed both human and divine images. These beautiful paintings on the passage's interior walls contain metaphors that are encoded. For instance, the historian R. Champakalakshmi examined a fascinating panel depicting Lord Siva in the form of an elderly man whisking a palm leaf in front of a crowd of subservient individuals. The power or documents in Chola governance and society are shown in this artwork in an illuminating manner. The landowners (kaniyalar), especially the Brahmanas, felt some kind of pressure to get royal charters providing them superior rights over the fertile land in the Thanjavur Kaveri deltaic area of lush, green rice fields, coconut groves, and banana plantations. Rajaraja I, the emperor, had a special affection for the Tripurantaka Chola image, which represents Lord Siva as the destruction of the three cities or forts. There is an iconographic section. The name Tanjai Alagar, which Tripurantaka is also known as in Tamil epigraphs, gives it a particularly stunning and formidable appearance. In the Sivan temples that praised him as the Tripurantaka, one of the great breakthroughs of the Chola era was the fusion of architectural style with iconographic motifs in an artistically beautiful manner. The painted figure is so brilliant, vibrant, and imposing. the depiction of Nataraja, the cosmic dancer (also known as Atavallan or Atalarasar in Chola temple inscriptions). While working on a painting at the enormous Sri Varadaraja Perumal temple in Kanchipuram, a crew hired by the Archaeological Survey of India recently unearthed old Chola frescoes.

Status of the Craftsmen

The various types of craftspeople were socially differentiated. For instance, in the social order, weavers were positioned above craftspeople. Comparatively speaking, the rural craftspeople were less fortunate than their urban colleagues. The income and assets varied according to economic level. Ritually, the scale also changed. While some weaving villages gave the temple offerings, others had to continue to exist. As a result, the temple honours were given in accordance with contributions made and social standing. Particularly the Master-Craftsmen held high esteem in Chola society and had a number of privileges. What is veneration of Vishwakarma? The face-color hypothesis is applicable in this situation. According to the Tamil literature Vishwakarma Puranam, Lord Vishwakarma had five faces, each of which stood for one of the two non-smiths and the three smiths. In actuality, the book claims that each person's face colour represented their trade: a gold face for a goldsmith, a copper or brass face for a coppersmith, a black face for a blacksmith, a stone face for a mason, and a wooden face for a carpenter. This genesis story is a myth.

URBANIZATION AND CRAFT ACTIVITY

When analysing the quasi-rural nature of cities in the Chola realm, the topic of urbanisation will be addressed in all of its many facets. Here, temple-towns are what we're interested in (tirumadaivilagam). In this historical setting, several strong commercial guilds worked alongside artisans, kaikkola weavers, and kammalar to a significant extent. The weavers resided in the temple towns, and other craftspeople did the same in the designated streets, tending to the temple's ceremonial requirements. Significantly, these artisans were hired by both the temple and the Hindu holy monastery (matha). The market / centre known as Nagaram, which is located close to or on the outskirts of the major temple towns like as Chidambaram, Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, Kanchipuram, Tirupati, Kalahasti, and Perunagar, also sells a range of handcrafted goods. the distinctiveness of Perunagar, Kalahasti, Kanchipuram, and Tirupati. Kanchipuram is

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known for being a multi-temple centre. As a result, the artisans were crucial to the growth of the temple towns.

CONCLUSION

We may make some general inferences based on the examination of the Chola-period craftspeople that has been done so far. The development of temples at Kanchipuram, Uttaramerur, Perunagar, Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, Chidambaram, Madurai, Tiruvannamalai, and other locations was greatly aided by the artisans. Evidently, the manufacturing of crafts raised Kanchipuram's economic standing under Chola hegemony in the Tondaimandalam area. The standing of the artisans and craftsmen then varied from one group to the next in terms of social, economic, and ceremonial factors. For instance, weavers were positioned above craftspeople. The fact that social mobility was limited to certain rural craftsmen (such as potters, blacksmiths, and carpenters) and encouraged other artisans—such as goldsmiths, oil pressers, weavers, and others—to live in temple cities is also crucial to consider. As a result, depending on the craft industry and demand, social mobility and migration became simpler. Both then and still, Lord Viswakarma is revered widely among Chola craftsmen. In reality, the Chola Empire created a favourable environment for creative inventiveness and unique style in the field of temple arts and the related crafts. One such is the Chola bronzes. Overall, the artisans played a crucial role in the construction of the Chola Empire, and the current research adds to our understanding of Tamil Nadu's and South India's subaltern history.

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