

THE EPIGRAPHICAL HERITAGE OF CHOLA TEMPLES AND ITS INSIGHTS INTO TAMIL CULTURE AND GOVERNANCE

¹*G.Rajadurai, ²Dr.K.Krishnamoorthy

¹Research Scholar, Department of History, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, India.

²Associate Professor & Head, Department of History, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, India.

*Corresponding Author: historyrajadurai@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Chola temples of South India, renowned for their architectural splendor, stand as monumental repositories of Tamil culture, history, and governance. The rich corpus of epigraphical records engraved on temple walls, pillars, and inscriptions offers unparalleled insights into the socio-political, economic, and religious dimensions of the Chola era. This study delves into the epigraphical heritage of prominent Chola temples, analyzing inscriptions to unveil critical aspects of Tamil culture, such as language, art, societal norms, and governance mechanisms. The research highlights how temples functioned not merely as religious centers but also as administrative hubs, reflecting a sophisticated system of resource management, land allocation, and judicial practices. By decoding these inscriptions, this paper underscores the Chola dynasty's contributions to Tamil cultural identity and governance, illustrating how their legacy continues to influence modern Tamil Nadu.

KEYWORDS: *Chola Temples, Tamil Epigraphy, Cultural Heritage, Governance.*

INTRODUCTION

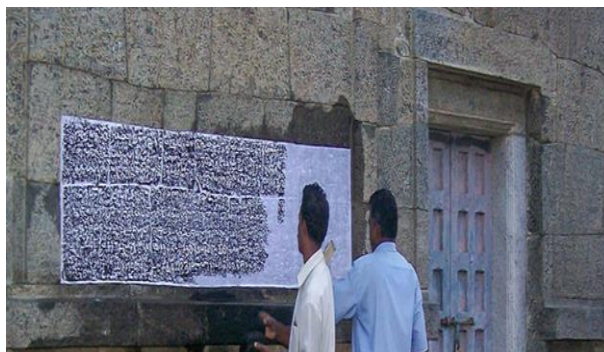
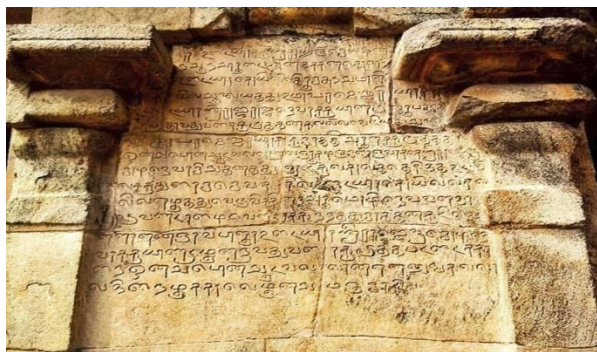
The Chola dynasty, reigning over southern India from the 9th to 13th centuries CE, is renowned for its remarkable contributions to art, architecture, and administration. Central to understanding this illustrious period are the inscriptions found in Chola temples, which offer invaluable insights into Tamil culture and governance.

These epigraphical records, meticulously etched on temple walls, pillars, and copper plates, serve as enduring testaments to the socio-political and cultural dynamics of the era. They encompass a wide array of subjects, including administrative machinery, economic transactions, land surveys, irrigation systems, taxation, accounting, military organization, rituals, music, dance, and the rulers' patronage of Tamil and Sanskrit literature.

Temples during the Chola period were not merely places of worship but also pivotal centers of economic and administrative activities. The inscriptions reveal a sophisticated administrative system, documenting land grants, tax regulations, and resource allocations for temple maintenance and rituals. For instance, the Brihadeesvara Temple at Thanjavur contains inscriptions detailing the kingdom's administrative machinery, economic transactions, and organization of a vast army, reflecting the central role temples played in governance and community life.

Figure-1: Inscriptions on the Walls of the Brihadeeswarar Temple





Sources: Government of Tamil Nadu, Department of Archaeology

Moreover, these inscriptions shed light on the Cholas' commitment to promoting Tamil culture and religious practices. The Vaikunda Perumal Temple in Uthiramerur is renowned for inscriptions that detail the democratic practices of electing representatives for village assemblies, highlighting the emphasis on local governance and community participation.

The Chola inscriptions also reveal a hybrid model of kingship that blended Aryan and Tamil influences, shaping the dynasty's administrative, religious, and ideological structures. This synthesis allowed the Cholas to maintain a stable rule and expand their influence across South Asia, reflecting a unique approach to governance that integrated diverse cultural streams.

In essence, the epigraphical heritage of Chola temples serves as a vital resource for understanding the intricate tapestry of Tamil culture and the administrative acumen of the Chola dynasty. These inscriptions not only chronicle the historical events of the time but also provide a window into the daily lives, beliefs, and values of the people, offering a comprehensive understanding of a civilization that has significantly shaped the cultural landscape of southern India.

OBJECTIVES

- To analyse the epigraphical inscriptions of Chola temples to uncover insights into Tamil culture and governance.
- To examine the role of temples as administrative and resource management hubs during the Chola period.
- To explore the socio-cultural, economic, and religious significance of temple inscriptions.
- To highlight the contributions of Chola temples to Tamil cultural identity and statecraft.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The epigraphical records of Chola temples remain a crucial yet underexplored aspect of Tamil cultural and administrative history. Despite significant research on temple art, architecture, and inscriptions, gaps persist in comprehensively understanding their roles in governance, resource management, and socio-cultural dynamics (Ali, 2007; Branfoot, 2013). Many studies highlight individual facets of Chola heritage, such as temple renovations (Branfoot, 2015) or ritual economy (Heitzman, 1991), but a holistic analysis of the inscriptions as tools of governance and cultural continuity is lacking. Furthermore, the interconnectedness between temples as sacred, administrative, and cultural hubs has not been fully addressed, particularly regarding their influence on Tamil identity and statecraft (Cane, 2019; Nguyen, 2024). This research addresses these gaps by focusing on the epigraphical heritage of Chola temples, aiming to provide a detailed understanding of their contributions to Tamil culture and governance, building upon the insights of previous scholarship.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The epigraphical heritage of Chola temples has garnered extensive scholarly attention for its contributions to understanding Tamil culture and governance. Agoramoorthy and Ravichandran (2023) underscore the historical significance of temple art and architecture, emphasizing their roles as cultural repositories. Similarly, Alamelu (2019) highlights Tamil Nadu's archaeological sites, emphasizing temples as centers of cultural and political life. These studies collectively reveal the intricate relationship between temples and societal structures.

Ali's (2007) analysis of Chola court retinues through the term *velam* in Tamil inscriptions provides valuable insights into the administrative framework of the Chola dynasty. **Branfoot (2013, 2015)** explores the evolution of Tamil temple landscapes, with a focus on renovations and the transformation of gopurams (temple gateways) as symbols of regional identity. Complementing these findings, **Cane (2019)** discusses the role of inscriptions in reconstructing historical narratives, shedding light on the socio-political milieu of medieval Tamil Nadu.

Dehejia (2023) and Srinivasan (2023) delve into the material and artistic heritage of Chola temples, particularly sacred bronzes and sculptures, emphasizing their spiritual and cultural significance. **Gupta (2025)** explores the interconnectedness of intangible and tangible heritage, with specific reference to Kumbakonam's pilgrimage town, illustrating how Chola temples served as nodes of cultural and spiritual exchange.

Heitzman (1991) and Nguyen (2024) provide in-depth analyses of Chola polity and administration, highlighting the role of temples in economic transactions and governance. **Vanaja and Raju (2023) and Prasad et al. (2023)** reveal the multifaceted heritage of Tamil temples, including their contributions to medical practices and community welfare.

This body of literature establishes the Chola temples as integral to Tamil cultural identity, governance, and heritage. The present study builds upon these insights, focusing on the epigraphical evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Chola legacy.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study on the epigraphical heritage of Chola temples holds significant academic and cultural value. It provides a deeper understanding of how inscriptions serve as vital historical sources, shedding light on the socio-political and economic systems of the Chola era. By analyzing these inscriptions, the research illuminates the role of temples as multifunctional institutions, encompassing governance, resource management, and cultural preservation. The study also contributes to the discourse on Tamil cultural identity, emphasizing how the Chola dynasty's administrative practices and religious traditions continue to influence modern Tamil Nadu. Moreover, it enhances heritage management efforts by fostering appreciation for the historical and cultural richness of temple inscriptions. By bridging gaps in existing scholarship, this research offers valuable insights for historians, archaeologists, and policymakers, ensuring the preservation and recognition of Tamil Nadu's epigraphical and cultural heritage for future generations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to analyze the epigraphical heritage of Chola temples and its insights into Tamil culture and governance. The research relies primarily on historical and epigraphical sources, focusing on inscriptions engraved on temple walls, pillars, and other architectural elements. A descriptive-analytical approach is adopted to interpret the content, language, and historical context of these inscriptions. The primary data is gathered from inscriptions documented in epigraphical surveys conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and other scholarly archives. Secondary data includes academic articles, books, and journals that provide insights into the cultural, political, and economic aspects of the Chola period. Comparative analysis is applied to correlate findings from different temples, highlighting similarities and regional variations in governance and cultural practices. Field visits to prominent Chola temples, such as Brihadeeswarar Temple and Gangaikonda Cholapuram, are planned to closely examine the inscriptions and architectural details. Expert consultations with historians and epigraphists further ensure the accuracy and depth of analysis. This methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of the role of temple inscriptions in reflecting the Chola dynasty's governance, cultural ethos, and contributions to Tamil heritage, bridging gaps in existing literature and providing fresh perspectives.

ANALYSIS

The epigraphical inscriptions of Chola temples provide a unique lens to analyze the multifaceted aspects of Tamil culture and governance during the Chola dynasty. These inscriptions serve as historical records, chronicling not only religious practices but also socio-political, economic, and administrative dimensions. By examining these inscriptions, key insights into the Chola administration emerge, including their advanced resource management systems, land distribution policies, and judicial mechanisms. Temples, as reflected in the inscriptions, functioned as administrative hubs where land grants, tax records, and royal decrees were formalized.

The inscriptions also highlight the cultural ethos of the Chola period, showcasing the richness of Tamil language, literature, and artistic traditions. Many inscriptions document donations made by rulers, merchants, and common

citizens, revealing a society deeply rooted in religious devotion and communal harmony. The Chola rulers' emphasis on temple construction and maintenance reflects their use of temples as instruments of statecraft, legitimizing their authority through divine association.

A comparative analysis of inscriptions from various temples, such as Brihadeeswarar Temple and Gangaikonda Cholapuram, reveals regional variations in governance while maintaining a unified cultural identity. The inscriptions also document the integration of local customs into administrative practices, reflecting a dynamic and inclusive governance model.

Moreover, the research identifies the dual role of temples as both spiritual centers and economic entities. The temples' role in fostering trade and supporting artisans and craftsmen underscores their economic significance. The analysis also reveals the Chola dynasty's efforts to preserve Tamil culture, language, and traditions through temple inscriptions, ensuring their transmission across generations.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of these inscriptions as vital historical resources, illustrating how the Chola dynasty's governance and cultural practices continue to influence modern Tamil Nadu's identity and heritage.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research findings underscore the Chola temples' epigraphical inscriptions as invaluable sources for understanding the socio-political, economic, and cultural landscape of the Chola dynasty. The results reveal that these inscriptions served not merely as religious texts but as comprehensive records of governance and societal practices.

Results

- **Governance and Administration:** Inscriptions indicate a well-structured administrative system under the Cholas, with temples functioning as local hubs of governance. Land grants, tax records, and decrees were meticulously documented, reflecting a highly organized system of resource management and taxation. Terms like *velam* highlight the administrative retinues and their roles in maintaining governance (Ali, 2007).
- **Economic Role:** The inscriptions reveal the temples' central role in regional economies. Donations of gold, land, livestock, and agricultural produce supported temple operations, while artisans and craftsmen found patronage under temple authorities. Trade guilds and merchant associations were also linked to temple activities, indicating their influence on the broader economic framework.
- **Cultural and Religious Identity:** The inscriptions emphasize Tamil as the dominant language, showcasing the Chola rulers' efforts to preserve and promote Tamil culture. Many records detail rituals, festivals, and contributions to temple art and architecture, reflecting the Cholas' commitment to their religious and cultural identity.
- **Social Harmony and Inclusivity:** The inscriptions illustrate a society marked by collaboration among rulers, merchants, and common citizens. Donations and participation in temple activities by diverse social groups underscore a shared cultural and religious ethos.

Discussion

The findings align with existing scholarship that position Chola temples as centers of cultural preservation and governance (Branfoot, 2013; Cane, 2019). By serving as repositories of administrative and economic records, the temples bridged the spiritual and material aspects of society. The study highlights the duality of temples as both religious sanctuaries and pragmatic institutions of power and economy. Additionally, the inscriptions provide insights into the Chola rulers' political strategies, where temple-building and patronage were employed to legitimize their authority and foster loyalty. The use of Tamil in inscriptions also demonstrates a deliberate effort to unify the diverse population under a common cultural identity. This research emphasizes the enduring legacy of Chola temples, illustrating their contributions to Tamil Nadu's socio-cultural fabric and their relevance in understanding historical governance models. The study calls for greater preservation efforts to safeguard these invaluable historical records.

RECOMMENDATION OF THE FUTURE STUDY

Future research on the epigraphical heritage of Chola temples can explore broader comparative analyses between Chola inscriptions and those from contemporary South Indian dynasties, such as the Pallavas and Pandyas. This could provide a deeper understanding of regional variations in governance, culture, and temple administration. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies incorporating digital tools like 3D modeling, epigraphic digitization, and AI-

based text analysis can help preserve and analyze inscriptions with greater precision. These technologies can uncover hidden patterns in language usage, artistic styles, and administrative practices. Further research can also focus on the impact of Chola temple inscriptions on the development of modern Tamil Nadu's cultural and political identity. Exploring the role of these inscriptions in shaping contemporary governance models and community engagement would offer valuable insights. Lastly, field studies involving underexplored or less-documented temples could enrich the existing corpus and ensure the preservation of overlooked aspects of Chola heritage.

CONCLUSION

The epigraphical heritage of Chola temples offers profound insights into the cultural, administrative, and societal framework of the Chola dynasty. These inscriptions, etched on temple walls and pillars, transcend mere records of devotion, serving as vital historical sources that reveal the sophistication of Chola governance, resource management, and social structures. Temples were not just religious edifices but multifunctional institutions, playing pivotal roles in land distribution, judicial administration, and economic transactions. This study highlights how the inscriptions reflect the Chola dynasty's deep commitment to Tamil culture and governance, underscoring their enduring legacy. They serve as a testament to the integration of art, architecture, and administration, providing a model of cultural sustainability that continues to inspire modern Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, the research contributes to a broader understanding of the interconnectedness between tangible and intangible heritage, demonstrating how epigraphical records preserve the ethos and values of a bygone era. By filling gaps in existing literature and fostering appreciation for Tamil Nadu's historical and cultural richness, this study emphasizes the importance of preserving these inscriptions for future generations. The findings underscore the invaluable role of Chola temples in shaping Tamil identity and affirm their relevance in understanding South India's historical and cultural evolution.

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