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CHOLAS ADMINISTRATIVE SIGNIFICANCE IN COIMBATORE REGION

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ABSTRACT

The political and administrative history of the Kongu country (modern-day Coimbatore, Erode, Salem, and surrounding regions) occupies a unique position in Tamil history due to its geographical location between the Chera, Chola, and Pandya kingdoms. This article examines the administrative significance of the Kongu Cholas from the 10th to the 13th centuries A.D., specifically focusing on the period between Vira Chola I and Vikrama Chola III.

Drawing evidence from temple inscriptions and copper plates, the study details a hierarchical governance structure consisting of central, nadu (micro-region), and local divisions. While the monarchy was hereditary and exercised significant authority over land revenue and judicial matters, the administration was heavily decentralized. Vital roles were played by village assemblies (Sabhas and Urs), which functioned as "little republics" managing local justice, irrigation, and taxation. Furthermore, the article explores the specialized military organization of the region, characterized by distinct senior and junior divisions (Mutha and Ilaya samarkkattu) and the recruitment of diverse forces like the Malayalapai. Ultimately, the Kongu Chola government is presented as an efficient monarchy tempered by democratic local institutions that reflected the customary practices of the era.

KEYWORDS: Kongu Chola, Coimbatore Region, Administrative Significance, Kongu Mandalam, Vira Cholamandalam, Central Government, Village Administration, Sabha, Chaturvedimangalam, Nadu, Village Assembly, Army Administration, Samarkkattu, Judicial Administration, Inscriptional Evidence..



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INTRODUCTION

Kongu country is a part of Tamil Nadu and the kings who ruled over it during various periods were also of the three ancient Tamil dynasties, her separate history has some unique features. The reason for this is that the Kongu country lies between the three ancient divisions of the Tamil country viz., the Chera, Chola and the Pandya countries respectively. It was through the Kongu country that the early migrants from north- western parts of the Indian sub- continent entered the eastern and southern parts of the Tamil country and established their kingdom.

The beginning of the political history of Kongu is generally and rightly traced to the sangam times. The Sangam literary sources delineate Kongu as a separate country occupied by various societies and their chiefs such as *Pegan*, *Pittan*, *Kadiya Neduvettuvan*, *Kumanan* and so on. Sangam classics depict these chiefs as mere war-lords or cattle lifters. During the Sangam times Kongu meant 'exclusively a country'. It did not imply any *kula* or race or king, till the 8th century A.D. According to this concept, a person who lived in Kongu became a *Kongar* by his geographical belonging. Kongar had clashes with the Pandyas and the *Podhiyil* chief, *Aay* a chieftain in the far South, is described in Sangam odes.

This paper traces the administrative significance of Kongu Cholas which gleaned from inscriptions.

KONGU CHOLA ADMINISTRATION

Administration can be defined as caring for and looking after people; it is to manage affairs and the organisation and direction of human and material resources to achieve desired ends. Administration is the capacity of co-ordinating many and often conflicting social energies in a single organism, so that they shall operate as a unity.

In ancient India big empires were divided into provinces and districts for the sake of administrative convenience. Small kingdoms like Pallavas, Vakatakas, Gahadwalas are only types of district division known by different names like Vishaya or Rashttras. South Indian administration in ancient and medieval times followed certain cardinal principles that were common to each of the dynasties, the Chola, Hoysala and Pandyas. In spite of the frequent dynastic changes there were no drastic administrative changes in the general, constitutional condition of these countries. Neither the chieftains nor the Rattas, Gangas, Cheras who set up their independence in due course, introduced any novel element to the customary type of administration.

During the medieval period, South India was divided into fifteen mandalams (macro regions)ⁱ. Half of these (nine) were under the direct control of the Imperial Cholasⁱⁱ. The administrative system of the Imperial Cholas became very efficient and praiseworthy. This system of the Imperial Cholas was introduced in the Kongu country from the time of Vira Chola I which is dealt fewer than three different categories namely, the Central, the Nadus and the local.

In the peripheral areas, macro regions were under some kind of semi-autonomous rule. Since the empire was too vast to control, the Imperial Cholas appointed trusted chieftains like Irukkuvels, Banas, Vaidumbas and Adigamans in the peripheral areas. The chieftains exercised autonomous authority over their areas. Kongu, Gangavadi and Kolar regions in their own right were semi-autonomous regionsⁱⁱⁱ. In the beginning imperial Cholas directly controlled the northern part of Kongu, which was strategically an important area. It was then vested with the Ko-Nadu rulers, with a vassal status under Parantaka I.

An attempt is made in this chapter to describe the state of Government in the Kongu country from the accession of Vira Chola I (942-980 A.D.) to the end of Vikrama Chola III (1274- 1304 A.D.).

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS

The Imperial Chola kingdom at the helm of its powers consisted of nine mandalams. Each one of the mandalam was divided into sub-macro regions called Valanadu and Kottam . Each region was again divided into micro regions called Nadu. It was in this classification that Kongu Nadu became a macro region of Chola administrative system, which was styled as Kongumandalam^{iv}. The Kongu region was divided into three divisions namely Kongu alias, Vira Cholamandalam (ancient Mala Kongu), Vada Kongu or North Kongu and the Ten Kongu^v or South Kongu. The first division comprised of Salem (excluding Attur Taluk), Kulithalai and Karuvur Taluk of Trichirappali district. The second one included Erode district and northern parts of Coimbatore district (Avinashi, Mettupalayam and North Coimbatore district). The rest of Coimbatore district and Palani region were included in Ten or the South Kongu. Among these divisions Viracholamandalam was under the direct control of Imperial Cholas^{vi}. In Viracholamandalam Chola administrative system prevailed whereas Vada Kongu was an autonomous division of Kongu Cholas and Ten Kongu was under the vira Kerala chieftains upto 12th century A.D. and had little impact on Kongu Nadu. An inscription from Pirur mentions, the name Vira Keralam^{vii}.

It is also known that Coimbatore itself was called "Virakerala - Nallur" and this part was ruled by chieftains. These chieftains were in cordial relations with the Imperial Chola. The number and the name of mandalams differed from era to era and from king to king and Kongu itself was called by various names, like 'Adirajarajamandalam' or 'Vira cholamandalam'^{viii} and Chola Keramandalam during the reigns of Rajendra, Vira Rajendra and Kulotunga III and Vikrama Chola respectively^{ix}.

Vira Cholamandalam which was under the direct control of the Imperial Cholas had a meticulous administrative system. Land revenue, local administration, Nadu assembly system and official system were imposed on these parts of Kongu. But the administration in the Vada and the Ten Kongu was different from that of Vira Cholamandalam.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

The details from the inscriptions show that the Kongu Chola monarchy was a hereditary one - primogeniture- with the tradition of the eldest son succeeding the father. Sometimes this rule was slightly modified by the ruling king's choice falling upon his brothers as heir-apparent. The heir-apparent was called the Yuvaraja and he was given proper training both in heading the administration and in leading the army. On the occasion of the coronation, the monarchs assumed the prefixes of *Tribhuvana Chakravarti*^x, *Konerinmai Kondan*^{xi}, *Parakesari*^{xii} and *Rajakesari*^{xiii}. Rajakesari panmarana Tirubhuvana Chakravarti monarchs were regarded as the representatives of God on earth.

The Kongu Chola enjoyed and exercised unlimited powers in the public administration. The orders, inscribed on the temple walls and copper plates, speak about their unlimited powers. The king was the sole authority in issuing orders and conferring titles like *Manradi*^{xiv}, *Kaniyatchi*^{xv} (the hereditary rights to own lands) and *Uranmai rights*^{xvi}. Social rights like canopy were given after collecting money from a particular group. He was the authority of land revenue, irrigation and land donations. It was the right of the king to order for the creation of new settlements and new villages.

The king was more a warrior than a civil administrator. Laws and law-making were particularly unknown in those days when custom and practice were the ruling factors. The king's own orders were always issued orally and were known as *Thiruvaimozhi*. They were committed to write the orders on the palm leaf and then assumed the name *Tirumantira olai*. The entire corpus of administrative work fell on the officers and nobles who enjoyed the titles and honours like the well-known *Marayam* and *Perundanam*. All officers were generally known as *Adigaris*. Many of these terms were still in current use in Tamil country, particularly the term *Perundanam*. There was a definite council of ministers or other officials regularly connected with the central government.

The monarchs used to tour the various parts of their country followed by the important officers. Such royal tours had brought personal contact between the king and the people and the people had the opportunity of representing their grievances to the monarch^{xvii}. King was the fountain-head of justice and did a lot for the welfare of the state. He was always tolerant towards his subjects and stood as a defender and protector of the different faiths that prevailed in the kingdom^{xviii}. An inscription of *Kalimurkka Vikrama Chola* speaks of his personal care for his subjects^{xix}. The central government was interested in providing external defense, maintaining peace and order in the country and increasing the general prosperity of the people. All the details of administration were practically left in the hands of local bodies.

VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION

The Kongu inscriptions give the vital details about the sabha. Sabha was the village assembly instituted for the Brahmins which was otherwise known as Chaturvedimangalam. The Kongu Chola inscriptions make mention of a few chaturvedimangalams and also of their sabhas such as Vira Sangata Chadurvedimangalam^{xx}, Uttama Chola Chaturvedimangalam^{xxi}, Kumarangabhima Chaturvetimangalam^{xxii}. These were named after the imperial and the Kongu Cholas.

Though there is no references to the infrastructure of brahmadeya sabha in Kongu, some inscriptions from Vijayamangalam and Kunnatur refer to the simple nature of brahmadeya sabha administration. These chaturvedimangalams were exclusively Brahmin settlements. They had their own sabhas. They met once in a while and decided religious matters. The inscriptions found in Adiyur, Kadathur, Komaralingam, Piramiyam and Rudrapalayam mentions a few agraharas and brahmadeyas^{xxiii}. Due to two main reasons the number of chaturvedimangalam was less in number in Kongu in the Imperial Chola empire. The kongu region was comparatively less fertile than the Imperial Chola kingdom and Jainism was more predominant in Kongu than the Hindu religion.

VILLAGE ASSEMBLY

The Kongu Chola Inscriptions throw sufficient light on urali^{xxiv} (the chief of the UR). The administration of the village was regulated by the village assembly. It was subjected to general supervision by royal officers, particularly to periodical audit of accounts when important business was transacted by the assembly. Matters pertaining to the change of land rights affecting the Government were discussed by one or more officers of the king who represented the royal rights.

The village assembly made rules for regulating their own constitution. Administration of justice was primarily in the hands of village assemblies. They regulated irrigational rights, maintained tanks, gardens and managed the temple affairs, administered charitable endowments and collected taxes and paid them to the king. All these functions were done either directly or by employing servants^{xxv}. The village assemblies were also vested with some judicial powers. They maintained a record about tax collection which was open to inspection of the officers of the king. The organisation of these little republics, the tiny states at the grass root level, encouraged the communal life of the people and developed a strong sense of civic duties, fostered a love of manly liberty and guaranteed a high standard of administrative efficiency.

ARMY ADMINISTRATION

During the Kongu Chola period the army was strengthened mainly because the Kongu was a veritable battle-ground for the fighting dynasties which had an eye on the Kongu region. Inscriptions mentioning temple donations refer to the numerous military officers and generals who were employed in the army of the Kongu Cholas at the Vala Nadu and nadu levels. The inscriptions found in places like Tirumuruganpundi, Avinashi, Sevur, Perur, Annur, Vellalur, Kadathur and Kolumum had various army divisions, such as mutha samarkkattu, Ilaiya samarkkattu and Kaikola army. Each division had its commander-in-chief or senapathi or nayagam. The post of senapathi was reserved for the members of the

royal families , or for the dominant social groups in society such as Vellala community^{xxvi}. Perumal senapathi was important among the senapathis as evident from the inscriptions^{xxvii}. It is understood from the inscriptions that Perumal mudali served as commander-in-chief under Virarajendra^{xxviii}. The inscriptions of Kulottunga and Virarajendra refer to a Vellala who served as a commander-in-chief of the army for muthasamarkattu^{xxix} division. Ilaya samarkattu and Virasamarkattu were the special divisions of the Kongu Chola army^{xxx}. Mutha means senior in medieval Tamil^{xxxi}. Samarkattu means army division (samar-war, Kattu-division). From the inscriptions it is not possible to understand the actual functions of these divisions. Muthasamarkattar senior division must be a full-fledged army division. This was stationed at Vellalur, Tirumuruganpundi Avinashi, Annur, Perur, Polachi, Ponnivadi, Sevur and Kadathur^{xxxii} Ilayasamarkattu or junior division was either a junior army division or an army division consisting of recruits. This division was mentioned in Tirumuruganpundi, Annur, Perur and Vellalur inscriptions . virasamarkattu of Kadathur inscription was probably a special army under Virarajendra's control.

The Kadathur inscriptions make reference to other divisions 130 in the army such as padai, nilaipadai (standing army), malayalapadai (kerala army) and velaikarapadai . Inscriptions from Perur, Annur, Tirumuruganpundi, Avinashi, Sevur, Kadathur and Kolumum make references to these armies.

Kadathur inscription informs us that a malayalapadai was recruited from Palakkattucheri and Madevicheri in Kerala and deployed at Kadathur.

JUDICIAL ADMINISTRATION

No record refers to the method of dispensation of justice and the settlement of cases. It is to be understood that only rare cases went to the king for his decisions. The local assembly whether it was the assembly or the sabha, was the immediate court of justice. Witnessess was examined and in certain difficult cases even trial by ordeal was followed.

An inscription from Kadathur refers to a theft of cash and jewels in the temples over which there was a trial. Temple poojaris (priests) and other employees were involved and they were questioned by a sabha. Some of them admitted their guilt, while others denied it. The lying poojaris lands were confiscated^{xxxiii}.

Kulottunga's inscription of his 7th regnal year found at Rudrapalayam states that the idankai group had a sabha which dealt with the crimes of the village. The sabha punished the guilty and beating was the usual punishment. This idankai sabha had the jurisdiction over all the 99 idankai castes^{xxxiv}.

There was yet another reference to Siva brahmin, who failed to perform his duty of daily poojas in the temple sincerely. For this, the temple authorities confiscated his lands given to him for his religious services as service tenure. To revive his religious services, he had to remit a certain amount of money in the treasury and get olai (written permission) from the king for the recovery of the service tenure of land^{xxxv}.

As per the Solamadevi inscription, Kadavarayan alias — Udaiyadityadevan was in charge of the tax collection in South Kongu. Failing to remit the collected tax amount to the king, he fled to the North Kongu. As a punishment the king confiscated his lands and gifted them to the temple servants for meeting the expenses of the Tirupatigam Paduvour* (singers of irupatigam)^{xxxvi}.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing accounts provide ample evidences to support the conclusion that the kongu chola government was a monarchy regulated and controlled by democratic institutions voicing the free will of the people.

Considering the various aspects of the administrative system, the Kongu Chola administration can be deemed efficient and well- suited the times.

ⁱ Y. Subbarayalu, Political Gography of the Chola country, Madras, 1973,pp.31-32

ⁱⁱ E.I., Vol. XXX,P.101.

ⁱⁱⁱ K.V. Subramaniya Aiyer, Historical Sketches of Ancient Dekhan, Vol.II,Coimbatore,1967, P.67

^{iv} S.I.T.I., Vol. P.245

^v K. S. Vaidhyanathan, The Ancient Geography of the Kongu Country, Coimbatore,1983,P.16

^{vi} E.I., Vol.XXX, P.99

^{vii} A.R.E., 251, 1961-62

^{viii} C.M. Ramachandran Chettiar, *Kongunattu Varalaru*, Perur, 1972,P.164

^{ix} *Ibid.*,P. 165

^x In. from Coimbatore-4 (UP) copied : T.S.D.A.C.

^{xi} In. from Kadathur-29 (UP) copied: T.S.D.A.C

^{xii} In. from Solamadevi 21(UP) Copied: T.S. D. A. C

^{xiii} In. from Kadathur 17 (UP) copied : T.S.D.A.C

^{xiv} A.R.E., 147 of 1905 and 417 of 1958-59.

^{xv} In. from Piramiyam-4 (UP) Copied : T.S. D.A.C

^{xvi} In. from Kadathur-39 (UP) Copied : T.S. D.A.C

^{xvii} In. from Peur-48 (UP) Copied : T.S.D.A.C

^{xviii} A.R.E., 145 of 1905

^{xix} In. from Piramiyam – 6 (UP) Copied : T.S.D.A.C

^{xx} A.R.E., 154 of 1915

^{xxi} A.R.E., 556 of1908

^{xxii} S.I.I., Vol.XXVI, No.124

^{xxiii} In. from these places, Copied T>S.D.A.C

^{xxiv} A.R.E., 645 of 1922

^{xxv} In from vijayamangalam, (UP) Copied : M.S.D.A

^{xxvi} S.I.I., Vol. XXVI, No. 239

^{xxvii} A.R>E. 247 of 961-62 and In. from Naduvacheri, (UP) Copied: T.S.D.A.C

^{xxviii} A.R.E., 28 of 1923.

^{xxix} A.R.E., 87 of 1915

^{xxx} A.R.E., 247 of 1961-62

^{xxxi} Tamil Lexicon, Vol.VI, P.3220.

^{xxxii} Ins. From these places, Copied: T.S.D.A.C

^{xxxiii} In. from Kadathur-30, (UP) Copied: T.S.D.A.C

^{xxxiv} A.R.E., 546 of 1905, 9UP) Copied: T.S.D.A.C

^{xxxv} In. from Kunnathur-30, (UP) Copied: T.S.D.A.C

^{xxxvi} S.I.I., Vol. XXVI, No.244