



Empires at Sea and Strife at Home: The Dual Legacy of Rajaraja I and Rajendra I

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ABSTRACT

The study critically explores the Chola Empire during the reigns of Rajaraja I and Rajendra I, focusing on the strategic motivations behind their military and economic expansions and the internal structural complexities that ultimately constrained their imperial legacy. Often celebrated for their naval prowess, architectural achievements, and cultural patronage, the Cholas built a formidable empire by securing vital trade routes and fostering maritime dominance across the Indian Ocean. Their military campaigns, particularly against Sri Lanka and the Srivijaya Empire, were not merely conquests but carefully calculated moves to protect economic interests and assert regional supremacy. However, the empire's growing dependence on continuous expansion led to administrative overreach, resource strain, and eventual vulnerability. Internally, while the Cholas promoted trade, agriculture, and temple-based economies, these benefits were inequitably distributed across a rigidly hierarchical society. Marginalised groups—such as women, lower castes, and enslaved persons—remained excluded from the empire's prosperity, highlighting the contradictions between grandeur and inequality. Religious patronage, especially toward Saivism, served political ends more than spiritual inclusivity.





INTRODUCTION

The Chola Empire, especially under the rule of Rajaraja I and Rajendra I, represents one of the most compelling episodes in the annals of medieval South Indian history. Often eulogized for their grand military conquests, flourishing trade networks, artistic achievements, and religious patronage, the Cholas crafted an imperial vision that extended beyond the shores of the Indian subcontinent. Their reigns ushered in a period of maritime dominance and administrative sophistication that remains influential in the historiography of early medieval South Asia. However, beneath this dazzling exterior of empire lay complex socio-political undercurrents that ultimately shaped both the brilliance and the brittleness of the Chola legacy. The expansionist ambition that propelled the Cholas into historical grandeur simultaneously overextended their administrative and military resources, creating fissures that would later manifest in the gradual disintegration of their empire.

Rajaraja I laid the foundation of Chola grandeur through strategic military campaigns that were as much about power projection as they were about economic imperatives. His decisive victories over the Pandyas, Cheras, and Gangas were instrumental in consolidating power within the southern peninsula. Yet these campaigns were not mere acts of conquest; they were deliberate moves to secure maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean, especially those leading to Southeast Asia. The Cholas recognized the critical importance of controlling the commercial arteries that connected the Bay of Bengal with the wider Asian economy. Rajaraja's campaigns to Sri Lanka and the Maldives were part of this broader geopolitical strategy, intended to place the Chola navy in a dominant position over key maritime chokepoints. His diplomatic alliance with the Eastern Chalukyas through marriage alliances further reflects a nuanced strategy aimed at ensuring peace along the Deccan frontiers, enabling the Cholas to divert resources toward naval expansion.

Equally significant was Rajaraja's investment in monumental architecture, especially in temple-building, which served a dual purpose. Architecturally magnificent temples such as the Brihadeeswarar Temple at Thanjavur were religious centers, administrative hubs, and symbols of centralized authority. These structures articulated the imperial ideology of the Cholas and projected a form of sacred kingship closely associated with Saivism. The temple economy, supported by land

grants and endowments, became a conduit for redistributing wealth, but also served to legitimize state power by embedding it within the religious and social fabric of Tamil society. This confluence of spiritual and political authority was a hallmark of Chola statecraft, binding the monarchy to divine sanction while reinforcing the socio-religious hierarchy.

Rajendra I inherited and expanded upon this strategic blueprint with equal vigor. His famed expedition to the Ganges was more than a symbolic assertion of imperial grandeur—it was a demonstration of the Cholas' capacity to extend their influence into northern India, a region traditionally beyond their direct control. The Ganges campaign, culminating in the symbolic transportation of sacred water to Gangaikondacholapuram, underscored the Cholas' aspiration to transcend regional dominance and position themselves as an all-India power. This was further exemplified by his naval expeditions into Southeast Asia, particularly against the Srivijaya Empire. These missions were not impulsive military forays; they were carefully calibrated assaults designed to disrupt rival trading networks and ensure Tamil merchants' supremacy in transoceanic commerce. Rajendra's campaigns reflected an understanding of economic diplomacy and power politics that was remarkably sophisticated for its time.

Yet the seeds of decline were sown amidst this golden age of imperial expansion. The territorial aggrandizement that fueled the Chola economy also stretched the administrative capacities of the state to its limits. By the time of Rajadhiraja I and Rajendra II, the empire was engaged in constant warfare on multiple fronts—against the Western Chalukyas, Sinhalese rebels in Sri Lanka, and regional insurgents within the Tamil heartland. These conflicts depleted the treasury, overburdened the military, and diverted attention from internal governance. While the Cholas are often credited with pioneering local self-governance through village assemblies and temple administrations, these institutions began to weaken under the pressure of militarized centralization. The demands of maintaining a vast empire increasingly required direct control over fiscal and human resources, thereby eroding the decentralized mechanisms that had once been a source of administrative resilience.



Socially, the Chola period was marked by a paradoxical blend of advancement and rigidity. The empire oversaw considerable economic growth and infrastructural development, including the expansion of irrigation systems, promotion of artisan guilds, and integration of temple-based economies. However, this prosperity was not equitably distributed. The hierarchical social order remained largely intact, with privileges concentrated among Brahmins, landlords, and temple authorities. While elite women had access to property rights and religious roles, the broader female population continued to be confined by patriarchal norms. The Devadasi system, though central to temple rituals and cultural life, institutionalized the subordination of women under the guise of religious service. Similarly, the lower castes and enslaved populations contributed labor to the empire's agrarian and temple economies but remained excluded from the fruits of prosperity.

Religiously, the Chola state practiced a form of pluralism that was politically expedient rather than genuinely inclusive. The kings were ardent Saivites and lavished patronage on Saivite temples and monasteries, reinforcing the centrality of Saivism in court culture and state ideology. Although Buddhist and Jain institutions received sporadic support, this tolerance was often tactical, aimed at securing loyalty from specific regional or mercantile groups. Temples served not only as places of worship but also as economic institutions, receiving land grants, managing granaries, employing artisans, and organizing local festivals that stimulated trade and social cohesion. These religious centers thus became instruments of both spiritual authority and state control.

This complex interplay between strategic brilliance and structural strains is the key to understanding the Chola experience. The empire's leaders exhibited exceptional vision in navigating the geopolitical currents of their time, leveraging trade, diplomacy, and military power to construct a formidable state apparatus. However, their relentless pursuit of expansion, coupled with the socio-economic imbalances embedded in their administrative and religious institutions, rendered the empire vulnerable to internal and external shocks. The Cholas were not merely conquerors; they were institution-builders, cultural patrons, and economic strategists. Yet their legacy is marked as much by their achievements as by the systemic contradictions that ultimately undermined their cohesion.

A study of the Chola Empire, therefore, must go beyond the conventional celebratory narrative and critically engage with its internal dynamics. The grandeur of temple architecture, the triumphs of naval expeditions, and the proliferation of Tamil culture across seas are all testament to Chola ingenuity. But so too are the tensions between centralization and local autonomy, between religious orthodoxy and pluralism, and between economic prosperity and social exclusion. These tensions did not merely coexist with Chola greatness—they were intrinsic to it. The same structures that enabled the Cholas to ascend to imperial prominence also contained the conditions for their eventual decline.

Often praised for its military victories, economic growth, and cultural achievements is the Chola Empire under Rajaraja I and Rajendra I. On closer inspection, however, one finds that geopolitical needs, economic demands, and regional power rivalry impacted their expansionist agendas in addition to their ambition for territory acquisition. Rather than just warlords trying to gain supremacy, the Chola kings' military operations were deliberate actions meant to safeguard trade routes, dominate important areas, and keep South and Southeast Asia in balance of power.¹

Along with his naval operations to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, Rajaraja I's victories over the Pandyas, Cheras, and Gangas were not just acts of aggression but also calculated moves to control the Indian Ocean commerce network. Ensuring continuous commerce with Southeast Asia, especially with the Srivijaya Empire, which held important ports along the Strait of Malacca, the Cholas aimed to become the main marine power. Rajaraja guaranteed a consistent flow of riches into his kingdom by protecting these trade routes, which in turn supported local self-government organisations and helped to finance the building of grand temples as the Brihadeeswarar Temple at Thanjavur. Another deliberate diplomatic tactic aimed at avoiding strife within the Deccan while concentrating on marine development was his relationship with the Eastern Chalukyas, reinforced by the marriage of his daughter to Vimaladitya.²

Campaigns of Rajendra I highlight the larger strategic perspective of the Cholas. Not just a symbolic deed of imperial grandeur, his well-known voyage to the Ganges—where he vanquished the Pala king Mahipala and delivered Ganges water to Gangaikondacholapuram—showcased the Cholas'



capacity to extend influence beyond the customary southern strongholds. Though often presented as a display of power, his naval invasion on Srivijaya was a deliberate effort to undermine a rival trade empire endangering Chola business interests. Asserting naval authority in the Bay of Bengal, Rajendra I guaranteed the safety of Tamil traders who were vital part of the commercial life of the area.

The Cholas' aggressive expansionist strategies had long-term effects notwithstanding their strategic achievements.³ Under Rajaraja I and Rajendra I, the kingdom prospered; yet, the subsequent Chola leaders, especially Rajadhiraja I and Rajendra II, battled to maintain authority over their large domains. Originally seeming as a victory, the acquisition of Sri Lanka became a protracted battle resulting from ongoing Sinhalese upheavals. Likewise, the effort to rule the Western Chalukyas resulted in a lengthy war draining Chola military and financial resources. The Cholas were diminishing their administrative hold on the central areas of the empire by the time of Rajadhiraja I as they were involved in unrelenting wars on many fronts.⁴

Theoretical Framework

This study on the Chola Empire's strategic brilliance and structural strains is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from political realism, structural functionalism, and subaltern historiography. These approaches collectively help illuminate the duality of the Chola era—its geopolitical success and its entrenched social hierarchies—by integrating macro-historical events with sociocultural dynamics.

Political realism, traditionally used to understand the motivations of state actors in international relations, is crucial for interpreting the Chola Empire's foreign policy and expansionist campaigns. Under the reigns of Rajaraja I and Rajendra I, the Chola state is best understood as a rational actor seeking to maximize its influence and security through calculated military and economic strategies. The invasions of Sri Lanka and the Srivijaya Empire, and the strategic matrimonial alliances with the Eastern Chalukyas, align with the realist assumption that states pursue power to preserve autonomy and economic interest. These moves were not impulsive wars of conquest but were rather intended to secure trade routes, project naval supremacy, and maintain regional hegemony. Thus, realism enables a reading of Chola

imperialism not as mere military aggression, but as a tactical and economically motivated expression of statecraft.

However, political realism alone cannot explain the internal vulnerabilities that accompanied Chola expansion. To analyze the internal structure of Chola society—its caste hierarchy, administrative overreach, and gender dynamics—structural functionalism offers a suitable lens. This sociological theory posits that societies are complex systems whose parts function together to promote solidarity and stability. The Chola administrative apparatus, the temple economy, and the caste-based division of labor were all interdependent institutions that contributed to the overall functioning of the empire. For instance, the temples served religious, economic, and educational functions while reinforcing the legitimacy of state authority. Nevertheless, as the theory also acknowledges, dysfunctions can occur when institutions fail to adapt. This is evident in the Chola Empire's eventual overextension—where the militarization of state resources and concentration of wealth in elite temples and merchant guilds led to systemic strain, thereby weakening the very structures that had underpinned its earlier success.

The theoretical limitations of both realism and functionalism are mitigated by incorporating insights from subaltern historiography, particularly inspired by the Subaltern Studies Collective. This perspective focuses on voices historically marginalized in dominant narratives—such as women, lower castes, and enslaved persons. While the Chola period is often celebrated for its grandeur, subaltern theory exposes the systemic exclusion that undergirded this prosperity. Women's relative agency in property and ritual life, for example, is complicated by the exploitative Devadasi system. Similarly, lower castes and slaves remained excluded from economic and religious benefits, despite the image of a thriving and pious society. Subaltern theory demands a critical reading of sources that recognizes the asymmetries in power, privilege, and access to resources, thereby offering a more holistic and inclusive understanding of the empire.

Review of Literature

The Chola Empire, a significant power in medieval South Indian history, has long attracted scholarly attention due to its rich contributions to politics, economy, culture, and religion. The historical grandeur of the Cholas, particularly under



the reigns of Rajaraja I and Rajendra I, has been explored from a variety of academic perspectives. The reviewed literature offers insights into the empire's administrative innovations, military strategy, religious patronage, social structure, and maritime influence, while also critically assessing the systemic inequalities and eventual strains that led to its decline. This review synthesizes existing scholarship while positioning the present study within this historiographical context.

The foundational scholarship on the Cholas by K.A. Nilakanta Sastri remains central to any historical inquiry into the dynasty. His magnum opus, *The Cholas* (1955), systematically traces the political and administrative evolution of the empire, highlighting Rajaraja I and Rajendra I's strategic acumen in consolidating and expanding their realm. Sastri's narrative is imbued with admiration for the Chola rulers, portraying them as enlightened monarchs who laid the groundwork for a unified South Indian polity. However, while thorough in political and institutional analysis, Sastri's work largely embraces a celebratory tone and does not substantially critique the empire's social contradictions or the impact of expansionism on internal stability.

More critical perspectives emerge in the works of scholars like Kesavan Veluthat, whose *Early Medieval South India* (2009) contextualizes the Cholas within the broader transformations of South Indian society from the 8th to 13th centuries. Veluthat emphasizes the role of state formation, temple economies, and Brahmanical dominance in shaping the Chola polity. He challenges the overly centralized image of Chola administration, arguing instead for a complex negotiation of power between kings, local elites, and temple institutions. This theoretical orientation marks a shift from dynastic to structural analysis, focusing on how ideological apparatuses like Saivism and caste hierarchy underpinned Chola legitimacy and governance.

The strategic dimensions of Chola imperialism are further elaborated in works such as George W. Spencer's *The Chola Conquest of Sri Lanka and Sri Vijaya* (1983), which provides a detailed study of the Chola naval campaigns and their implications for maritime trade in the Indian Ocean. Spencer highlights how Rajaraja I and Rajendra I used their military prowess to protect Tamil merchant guilds, control crucial sea lanes, and challenge rival powers like the Srivijaya Empire. These campaigns, he argues, were not

merely militaristic but economically and diplomatically motivated, reflecting an early form of state-sponsored mercantile expansion. However, he also notes that such aggressive strategies placed long-term strains on the empire's military and fiscal capacities, foreshadowing the overreach that would later challenge the cohesion of Chola rule.

The economic foundations of Chola power are explored in B.K. Pandeya's *Economy under the Cholas* (1984), which investigates the interconnections between agriculture, trade, temple patronage, and taxation. Pandeya shows how irrigation projects and land grants contributed to agrarian surplus, which in turn sustained both the royal treasury and the temple complexes that acted as socio-economic hubs. Nevertheless, the study also highlights the uneven distribution of this prosperity, as much of the wealth remained concentrated among Brahmins, landlords, and temple administrators. This observation aligns with the arguments made by later scholars who critique the empire's socio-economic inclusivity.

Temple-building has been an area of sustained academic focus, given its religious, political, and architectural significance in Chola society. S.R. Balasubramaniam's *Thanjavur A.D. 600–1850* (1994) provides a detailed architectural and epigraphic study of major temples like the Brihadeeswarar Temple and their role as instruments of royal ideology. These temples not only symbolized divine kingship but also functioned as sites of labor, landholding, education, and ritual practice. This dual role underscores the fusion of political power and religious authority, which was central to Chola statecraft. The temple, as scholars like R. Champakalakshmi have argued elsewhere, served as the "economic heart" of local communities, but also perpetuated caste hierarchies and gender roles that reinforced structural inequality.

Gender dynamics in Chola society have received increasing attention in recent scholarship, particularly in relation to the Devadasi system. Scholars such as Leslie Orr have argued that while elite women enjoyed certain rights, such as property ownership and temple endowments, ordinary women remained confined to household labor or ritual service. The Devadasis, though custodians of music and dance traditions, were socially marginalized and subjected to institutional control. The persistence of patriarchal norms, despite superficial legal and religious concessions to



women, complicates the narrative of Chola society as progressive or egalitarian.

Slavery and caste-based exclusion are themes explored in T.V. Sadhasiva Pandaraththar's *History of the Later Cholas* (1974), which discusses how temple economies were sustained by forced or hereditary labor. Slaves and lower castes contributed immensely to agriculture and temple maintenance, but were denied access to upward mobility. Such evidence problematizes the image of a harmonious and integrated Chola society. Instead, it suggests that the empire's wealth was predicated upon systemic exploitation, a theme echoed in modern postcolonial critiques of early Indian empires.

The maritime aspects of Chola expansion have been further examined by K.V. Hariharan in *The Chola Maritime Activities in the Early Period* (1972), which presents a compelling argument for viewing the Cholas as early architects of Indian Ocean diplomacy. Hariharan outlines the logistics of Chola naval campaigns and the empire's engagement with distant commercial hubs in Southeast Asia. These insights are supported by archaeological finds and inscriptions that confirm the presence of Tamil merchant guilds in places like Sumatra, Cambodia, and the Malay Peninsula. Nevertheless, Hariharan also acknowledges that maritime campaigns, while prestigious, placed considerable logistical demands on the Chola administration and necessitated a reallocation of domestic resources toward military ends.

Studies by M. Rajendran on copper plate inscriptions provide crucial primary source evidence for Chola land grants, tax regimes, and village administration. These records reveal a tension between central directives and local autonomy, suggesting that the much-vaunted Chola bureaucracy was not monolithic but negotiated through multiple levels of authority. This aligns with more recent interdisciplinary approaches that treat empires as networks of relationships rather than rigid hierarchies.

FINDINGS

The Cholas' internal collapse resulted from their administrative overreach as much as from outside challenges from the Hoysalas, Pandyas, and Kakatiyas. Although the Cholas are recognised with a competent local self-government system, over time the administrative framework was undermined by the centralising of military and financial

resources supporting conquests. Rather than concentrating on improving internal government, the subsequent leaders kept expanding activities without properly stabilising already won territory. This left the empire susceptible to internal strife and outside attack, which resulted in slow down of the empire.⁵

Therefore, even if the military operations of the Chola Empire earned them great glory, their dependence on ongoing expansion as a tool to maintain power proved to be unsustainable over time. The Cholas were smart leaders negotiating a convoluted political and financial terrain, not just forceful conquerors. But finally, their aggressive growth turned into a two-edged blade, guaranteeing momentary supremacy but finally causing administrative burden and military tiredness. Therefore, the Chola legacy should be seen as a complex history of determined ambition, economic strategy, and the unavoidable consequences of overextension rather than just as a tale of unquestioningly imperial supremacy.⁶

Often distinguished by improvements in social structures, economic systems, and religious practices, the Chola period is been defined as one of amazing expansion and wealth. On closer inspection, however, one finds that this wealth was not shared equally across many spheres of life. The socioeconomic structure remained hierarchical, with certain advantages confined among particular classes, even while the Chola Empire gave stability and security, therefore encouraging commerce, agriculture, and religious patronage. Though their external appearance suggested social inclusiveness, women, inferior castes, and enslaved people suffered structural restrictions. While encouraging religious plurality, the Chola state mostly supported Saivism and used temple-building as both a political and spiritual instrument.⁷ Therefore, even if the Cholas have made notable social and economic gains, they must be seen in light of current disparities and strategic governmental control. Presumably based on Varnaashramdharma, which arranged society into many castes, the Chola period's social system was Although records show that various groups cohabit peacefully, this harmony was more predicated on an established social order than on actual equality. The Chola state guaranteed that every group stayed in its assigned duty, therefore preserving social stability even if it did not openly question caste divides. Though inter-caste marriages were allowed and resulted in sub-castes,



this did not translate into a collapse of the hierarchical caste system.⁸

In Chola civilisation, women's roles seem to be more advanced compared to later stages of Indian history. Women were free to own and inherit property, engage in religious activities, and reject the purdah system—which gained more popularity in subsequent years. Still, society expectations defined their positions even with these liberties. Although privileged women could have had more liberty, ordinary women were usually limited by home and financial obligations. Women committed to temple service under the Devadasi system were an institutionalised form of female subordination as well as a religious ritual. Though Devadasis was important for temple ceremonies and the preservation of arts, their social position remained dubious and many were open targets for abuse. Furthermore, while Sati was not a common practice, its presence implies that certain patriarchal rules were firmly ingrained in Chola civilisation.⁹

Another important component of the social structure, slavery reflected social inequality as well as economic reliance. Agricultural labour, temple duties, and housework were among the uses for enslaved people. Although some were given specific privileges, they remained at the lowest rung of the social scale. The prevalence of prostitutes in metropolitan areas suggests even more the existence of an economic underclass, which did not participate equitably in the advantages of the empire despite its general wealth.¹⁰

Agricultural development, commerce, and industrial output taken together helped the Chola economy to grow. The state instituted efficient irrigation systems and reclaimed large areas of wasteland for use. This agricultural excess benefited commoners as much as kings as it set the stage for economic growth. This wealth was not shared equally, however; land ownership remained in the hands of elites, notably Brahmins and temple buildings, who oversaw huge estates with great income producing power.¹¹

In the Chola economy, trade—internal as well as external—was very vital. Strategic position of the empire along marine trade routes enabled fast trade with China, Malaya, Western Gulf, and Southeast Asia. Protected by the Chola fleet, Tamil traders oversaw important commercial stations to guarantee the continuous flow of cash into the kingdom. For every segment of society, nevertheless, this commercial success did not

always translate into financial freedom. Influential merchant groups generally dominated the guild system, which controlled sectors like textiles, metallurgy, and temple building, hence strengthening economic stratification. The state aggressively sponsored sectors such as fabric manufacture, jewellery design, metallurgy, and temple building, but much of the riches produced remained concentrated among the merchant classes and governing elite.¹²

One of the most powerful marine armies of its day, the Chola navy served both military conquest and commercial protection. Not only were military operations to Southeast Asia and the invasion of Sri Lanka and the Maldives fuelled by economic considerations, but also by show of force. Seeking to guarantee their merchants' economic superiority, the Chola kings aimed to control their domination over trade routes in the Indian Ocean. Although this helped the Chola economy overall, it also raises issues regarding the long-term viability of such a strategy as it implies that military aggressiveness was frequently connected with economic development.¹³

Strong Saivites, the Chola leaders aggressively encouraged the devotion to Lord Shiva. The enormous temples they built—including Rajaraja I's Brihadeeswarar Temple at Thanjavur and Rajendra I's Gangaikondacholapuram Temple—showcase this clearly. These temples housed priests, artists, academics, and workers, therefore serving as hubs of social and economic life in addition to places of prayer. Receiving extravagant gifts of land, wealth, and jewellery, they were strong financial institutions bolstering the central power of the Chola empire.¹⁴

The Chola kings maintained a policy of religious tolerance even in this state-sponsored Saivism. There was a lot of Vishnu devotion; the Chola monarchs also supported Buddhist temples and Jain colleges. But the degree of governmental sponsorship provided to non-Saivite traditions was far lower, indicating that religious pluralism functioned essentially as a political tactic rather than as an ideology of genuine inclusiveness. Reinforcing both religious commitment and social cohesiveness was much aided by religious celebrations such as Masimaham, Mahamaham, Karthigai, Thaipusam, Sivarathri, and Chithirai Vizha. Rising as prominent pilgrimage sites, the temple towns of Tanjore, Kumbakonam, Kanchipuram, and Tirukadaiyur drew pilgrims from



all across the empire. These religious celebrations also had financial purposes as temple celebrations stimulated local markets, more commerce, and employment for workers and artists.¹⁵

Although the Chola period is rightly praised for its developments in commerce, temple construction, government, and agriculture, its socioeconomic structure remained somewhat hierarchical. Though riches remained concentrated among landowners, trade guilds, and temple organisations, the economy prospered. Though they were still limited by society conventions, lower castes, slaves, and underprivileged groups, women delighted in some privileges. Although there was religious plurality, the Chola state's support was mostly towards Saivism, hence strengthening the political authority of temple institutions. The Chola age therefore marks a paradox: a time of indisputable wealth but one in which social mobility was constrained.¹⁶ The prosperity of the empire rested on a disciplined but inflexible system in which religion and economic policies served more as tools of imperial authority than tools of equality. This analytical viewpoint questions the conventional story of Chola greatness by offering a more complex picture of a kingdom that, while developed, was nevertheless very stratified.

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CONCLUSION

Strategically spreading its military and economic power throughout the Indian Ocean, the Chola Empire under Rajaraja I and Rajendra I was an amazing force in South Asian history. But this achievement was based on an unsustainable paradigm of ongoing development, which finally taxed the military and administrative capacity of the empire. Although their influence over trade routes and temple-building projects enhanced the monarchy, these advantages were not equally shared, therefore supporting the current social inequalities. Notwithstanding some progress, women, lower castes, and enslaved groups remained structurally deprived. Moreover, while diversified, the religious patronage of the Chola state mostly served political ones. Military tiredness, administrative excess, and rising regional powers undermined Chola rule over time. Therefore, even if the Cholas were brilliant strategists, the fall of their kingdom emphasises the limitations of expansionism without internal cohesion. Their legacy is best seen as a paradox: a time of immense success but one characterised by ingrained inequality and finally overreach.