Gangaikondacholapuram as the after Chola’s capital – An Inscriptional Study

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Abstract

For a period of four hundred years, from the ninth to thirteenth centuries, the Cholas were the dominant cultural, artistic, religious and political force in South India and beyond. Chola power extended directly into Sri Lanka and Maldives Islands while their indirect influence and temporary hegemony was exerted over the kingdom of Sailendra in Java. During the four centuries of Chola rule the arts of Music and dance of Poetry and Drama, of stone sculpture, bronze-casting, painting and architecture reached new heights. It was a period of unparalleled creativity in the history of Indian Art. The Chola monarchs were devoted to the worship of Shiva and they erected a good number of Shiva temples with a view to earn religious merit. Rajaraja Shivapada Shekhara being the greatest monarch of the Chola dynasty erected a grand temple of Shiva at Tanjore round about 1000 A.D. Rajaraja’s son and successor, Rajendra I the mightiest emperor in the history of South India, changed his capital from Thanjavur to Gangaikondacholapuram. The city was founded by the eminent Chola emperor probably to commemorate his victorious march to the Ganges and reflected his personality throughout the days of its eminence and continues to do so because of its great temple, though its role as a capital of the south has been forgotten by its inhabitants. It occupies an important place in the history of India. As the capital of the Cholas from about 1025 A.D. for about 250 years, the city controlled the affairs of entire South India, from the Tungabhadra in the north to Ceylon in the south. In this paper an attempt is made to study the influence of Later Cholas on their capital Gangaikondacholapuram through the temple inscriptions.

Gangaikondacholapuram, now in the Udayarpalayam taluk of Ariyalur district, in Tamilnadu, was erected as the capital of the Cholas by Rajendra I, the son and successor of Rajaraja I, the great Chola who conquered a large area in South India at the beginning of the 11th century A.D. It occupies an important place in the history of India. As the capital of the Cholas from about 1025 A.D. for about 250 years, the city controlled the affairs of entire South India, from the Tungabhadra in the north to Ceylon in the south. The great temple of Siva at this place is next only to the great temple of Tanjore in its monumental nature and surpasses it in sculptural quality. The city was founded by the eminent Chola emperor probably to commemorate his victorious march to the Ganges and reflected his personality throughout the days of its eminence and continues to do so because of its great temple, though its role as a capital of the south has been forgotten by its inhabitants.

The name Gangaikondacholapuram came into existence from the period of Rajendra I. In 1014 A.D Rajaraja died and his son Rajendra I, till then Yuvaraja and co-ruler, succeeded him. He established Gangaikondacholapuram city after his victorious march to river Ganges on North India. Earliest references to the Ganga expedition of Rajendra-I is found in a record of his 11th regnal year. The city and the palace there must have come to exist between A.D 1023 and A.D 1029. How much earlier it was designed and built is a matter of conjecture. He might have conceived the scheme of a new capital even during the last years of his father. Rajendra I was the son of Rajaraja I through his queen Tribhuvanamadevi, evidently a Chera princess. Rajendra was a young boy when Rajaraja ascended the throne in 985 A.D. Under the guidance and care of his father, he grew up as the most powerful General in the Tamil History. When he was 20 years old, he himself led a Chola army into the heart of the Western Chalukya Kingdom. In the campaign, Rajendra is said to have advanced as far as north Bijapur District with an army of 9,00,000 men, and as a result, territories upto Rettapadi were annexed to the Chola Empire. He is also identified with Pancavan Maraya, who served as the Mahadandanayaka of the Vengi and Ganga countries.
After his consolidation of the empire inherited from his father, he conducted so many expeditions to expand his empire. Among them the expeditions against the Ganges was a famous one. His Thiruvalangadu copper plates states that "the light of the solar race (Rajendra), mocking Bhagiratha who by the force of his austerities caused the descent of the Ganga, set out to sanctify his own land with the waters of that stream brought by the strength of his arm".9

On the way to Ganges he conquered so many territories like Sakkarakottam,10 Maduramandalam,11 Panchapalli,12 Kosalainadu,13 Dandabutti14 and Vangala Desa.15 As a result of Rajendra's expedition all the countries north of Vengi, which included Kalinga, Odda, Southern Kosala, the lower and upper Lada, and finally the Vangaladesa (Bengal) were made to bow before the might of this Chola Emperor. Rajendra himself went up to the banks of the Godavari,16 where he awaited the return of his triumphant army, which brought Ganges water in golden vessels, carried on the heads of the vanquished rulers.17 The invasion of the great southern conqueror, Rajendra Chola I, seems to have left a permanent mark in Bengal.18 For every victory he gained, he assumed a title commemorating his success.19 He also conferred titles on his victorious generals. The conquest of the overseas island and the Malay Peninsula form the most important event in the life of Rajendra. This triumphant naval expedition was directed against the ruler of Srivijaya, who also held sway over Kadaram to commemorate his success against the eastern Archipelacco islands.20 Rajendra assumed the title of Kadaram Konda Chola.21 Rajendra completed a brilliant "Digvijayam", conquest of quarters, which made him a Chakkaravarthi, an Emperor.22

Though he got several victories, his victories of Ganges and Kadaram are specially mentioned by the poets of that period. In Kalingathuparani,22 Vikramancholanula,23 and Kulottungacholanula,24 references are found about his victories.

To commemorate his expedition against the Ganges, Rajendra assumed the title of Gangaikondachola, a name given not only to his new capital (Gangaikondacholapuram) but also to his temple.25 Gangaikondacholapuram was unheard of even as a village when Rajendra I ascended the Chola throne. Thanjavur continued to be the Chola capital ever since it had been captured from the Mutharaya Chieftains by Vijayalaya who founded the Imperial line of the Chola in the middle of 9th century A.D. Thanjavur served the interests of the Cholas well. It was well fortified and adorned with palaces, mansions, and the famous Brahadiswara temple. Yet within a few years of the erection of the great temple (Brahadiswara) and death of his father, his son Rajendra-I shifted his capital to Gangaikondacholapuram.26

No answer is possible, except for a suggestion that, it was probably from Gangaikondacholapuram that Rajendra I resolved to dispatch a military expedition to the Ganganic plain. It indicates that a place which inspired a ruler to attain phenomenal success was honored by being made capital of the ruler to cherish sentimental attachment to it.27 The site was chosen because it was here that Rajendra could easily resist the expeditions often undertaken by the Chalukyas of Badami and Aihole. There is another view that the Chola could not easily cross the Kaveri and to Kolidam during winter season whenever an attack came from the northern direction. Some historians assert that Rajendra determined to construct a royal temple of his own, not in the shadow of his father’s but on a virgin and somewhat desolate site. He, thus, abandoned Thanjavur and rich paddy fields of the Kaveri delta to found a new capital just sixty kilometers to the north west of Thanjavur.28

Another reason for changing the capital from Thanjavur to Gangaikondacholapuram may be as follows: A political and religious capital is not a military outpost. Rajendra wanted to protect the delta of Thanjavur area from his unending rivalries with the Chalukyas and Pallavas in his northern flank. It is more probable to view it as the apprehension of a Pandya attack from the south and his concern to shield the capital from behind the Kolidam. Chidambaram, the religious capital of the Cholas, with the main deity, God Nataraja, was held intimately by the royal members of the Chola dynasty. The ladies of the haram wanted to visit Chidambaram very often. Hence it may be concluded that the change took place for the above reasons. Although Gangaikondacholapuram remained an official Chola capital until the decline of the dynasty in the 13th century, it is evident that the majority of the kings preferred to establish temporary capitals in the active towns of the delta, where they constructed their royal temples (Darasuram, Palayarai, Thirubhuvanam).29
The epigraphical evidences of the Brahadiswara temple at Gangaikondacholapuram belonging to the period of the later Cholas and other rulers of the region are very useful for the construction of the history of the temple. The earliest inscription belongs to ViraRajendra. They were issued in his fifth regnal year, and were found on the northern wall of the central shrine of Brahadiswara temple. It is the earliest and lengthiest inscription running to about 216 lines. It relates to gifts of lands in a number of villages in the Chola Empire. The proceeds from them were to be utilized for worship and maintenance of the temple. It gives the details of the boundaries and measurements of lands recorded, the taxes from which the lands were exempted, the crops that were raised in the lands, and the total quantity of grains to be measured out the temple by each village, the names of the officers who drafted the endowment, the name of those who compared the drafting, the names of those who entered them in Registers etc. The epigraph shows the recording efficiency and thoroughness of the Chola administration.

The inscription reveals the gifts ordered by Vira Rajendra in his palace at Kanchipuram. Though it is a single record, it relates to more than six orders of the king. It records that the order would take effect from the regnal years of Rajendra I and Rajadhiraja I. The earliest regnal year of Rajendra I from which an order was to take effect is mentioned as the 23rd regnal year. Evidently the temple was completed and consecrated before 1035 A.D. It is likely that Rajendra, the builder of the temple himself, offered the gifts. Probably, they had not been recorded. Hence, Virarajendra ordered them to be entered in the proper registers. There are two orders that took effect from the 26th and 30th year respectively of Rajadhiraja I the son and successor of Rajendra. Evidently, some gifts were made in the reign of Rajadhiraja as well. From the records it is seen that more than one hundred and ten thousand bags of paddy were to be measured out to the temple every year by the villagers mentioned in the epigraphs.

A careful scrutiny of the inscriptions reveal that most of the lands and the proceeds recorded in this inscriptions are also recorded in the Thanjavur inscriptions of Rajaraja I as gifts to the great temple of Thanjavur. It is strange that most of the lands gifted to Thanjavur temple by Rajaraja should have been transferred to the temple of Gangaikondacholapuram by his son within 25 years of the original gift.

The inscription is of great value. It gives the names of the various divisions and sub divisions of the Chola empire. It also gives a long list of officers who were in-charge of the administration in the reign of Virarajendra. One Palavarayan received orders verbally from the king and drafted them. The orders were scrutinized and approved by three senior secretaries.

This epigraph is of great interest from another angle. In listing the villages gifted, it gives the names of various temples, tanks, colonies, irrigation channels, cremation grounds etc., in each village. It furnishes details for a study of the contemporary history of these villages. The inscription also details the victories gained by Virarajendra. It incidentally enables one to fix the date of the temple from the days of Rajendra I.

There is another inscription of Adhirajendra found on the tiers of the platform abutting the central shrine at the entrance which records some provision made for a perpetual lamp probably by one Marudan.

The next king represented in the inscriptions is Kulottunga I. The accession of Kulothunga I heralded the Chalukya Chola dynasty. His reign lasted from A.D.1070 upto A.D.1122. From Kalingathuparani, a heroic poem, composed on him by Jayamkondar, it is learned that Kulottunga was born and brought up in Gangaikondacholapuram. He had his education, military, and other training and was crowned Yuvaraja by ViraRajendra at Gangaikondacholapuram. At the time of the uprising at Gangaikondacholapuram, Kulottunga was waging a war in the north. He at once rushed to Gangaikondacholapuram. The Chola Generals found in him a capable ruler and crowned him the Chola Emperor in the name of Kulotunga. He immediately restored peace in the Kingdom. A fragmentary inscription mentioning his mother Ammangadevi is preserved in the Gangaikondacholapuram temple. A record of his, dated in 49th regnal year, does not pertain to the temple, but to the temple of Rajendracholisvara in Pottalimada, about a village Sungamthavirtha Cholanallur, as a Devadana gift, for provisions, etc. Probably the temple was built in the reign of...
Rajendra I and was named after him. The inscription state that worship in the temple was stopped as sufficient provisions were not available. Kulottunga I made the gift tax-free and arranged for regular worship. The epigraph also records that the order of the king was issued when he was seated on a throne at the eastern court in the ground floor of Gangaikondachola Maligai in Gangaikondacholapuram.45

There is another inscription46 of the ruler found in the fragments built into the side wall of the entrance of the gopura of the same temple. It records that Palagai Padai, probably, for Kutthanda Devar was raised by Sembikula Manikatta, an Anukiyar (a close female attendant), of the king. There is another, undated inscription47 of this ruler found on a stone fixed into the wall of the platform at the entrance to the main shrine. It is interesting as it contains parts of two Sanskrit verses in Granta characters describing the exploits of Kulottunga Chola I. After mentioning his victory over the Pandyas and the setting up of the Vijaya Sthamba, the record seems to refer to the Parasikas, in the context of singing the praise of the monarch.

Another inscription48 of interest found on the west wall of the central shrine, was issued by Kulottunga I, in his 41st regnal year. It is a copy of a portion of the copper plates of Govindhachandra Kannuj. The latest known date of the Govindhachandra is A.D.1114. There is, however, no doubt that some sort of relationship existed between the Chola king Kulottunga I and the Gahadavalas or his son Govindhachandra as some other member of their family who went to the Chola capital Gangaikondacholapuram on a friendly visit after a request made by the Chola King Kulottunga I and wished to make a grant to the temple.49 For some reason the grant was either not made or was not engraved.

Next to Kulottunga I, his son Vikramachola ascended the throne on 29th June A.D.1118.50 Three inscriptions of Vikramachola are found on the loose stone pieces of this temple. They were inscribed in his 3rd, 6th and 9th regnal years of Vikramachola. They mention about the sluice of the lake in Gangaikondacholapuram51, a gift of money by a lady Tirabhuvanamudaiyal for a perpetual lamp52 and mentions puppudai of Gangaikondacholapuram of Kidarankonda Chola Valanadu.53 When Viramachola was in power Gangaikondacholapuram, the head quarters of the Cholas came under the revenue division of Kidarankonda Chola Valanadu. Rajaraja II crowned himself as a king in Gangaikondacholapuram after Kulotunga II.54 Even though he crowned as a monarch at Gangaikondacholapuram, he established a second capital at Darasuram. He also built a temple of Rajarajeswaram there itself.55 It indicates that Gangaikondacholapuram slightly lost its political activities during the time of Rajaraja II. After Rajaraja II, Rajathiraja came to power.

The last Chola king mentioned in the inscriptions found in this temple is Kulotunga III. His inscriptions are in fragments and found by the side of the steps to the eastern entrance to the great mandapa. They record the victories gained by Kulottunga and the erection of a victory pillar.56 The fragmentary nature of the inscriptions may lead to the surmise that a number of other Chola inscriptions of the temple have been lost. He won several victories against Ceylon, Madurai and Karuvur and carried the title of Conqueror of Madurai (Maduraikonda). Karuvur and Elam.57 However, towards the close of his reign, the dynamic Maravarman Sundarapandya humiliated him. He invaded the Chola country and razed Thanjavur and Urundai to the ground and performed the Virabhiseka at Ayirathalli and reached as far as Chidambaram.58 It is not known whether Sundarpandya captured Gangaikondacholapuram. At any rate it is not mentioned in his inscriptions. The humiliation marked the beginning of the decline and fall of the Chola empire and with it of the Chola capital.

Kulottunga III did not live long after the defeat and was succeeded by an inefficient son Rajaraja III.59 The latter was driven out of his capital by the Pandya and he tried to escape to the north to join the Kuntalas (the Hoysalas) but was intercepted by the Pallava chieftain Kopperunchinga probably at Sendamangalam where Rajaraja was made a captive. Hoysala Narasimha intervened and defeated the Pandyas of south. Subsequently, Hoysala Generals captured Kopperuncinga territories and release the Chola ruler.60 Rajaraja III was re-crowned at Gangaikondacholapuram as the Chola capital. Probably Rajaraja III had a preference for the place though Gangaikondacholapuram continued to be of importance. After him Rajendra III came to power. Maravarman Kulasekara, another capable Pandya ruler defeated and probably slaughtered the last Chola ruler Rajendra III in 1279 A.D.
Gangaikondacholapuram was included in his dominion and two inscriptions\(^6\) of him are found in the temple. After the death of Rajendra III, Chola mandalam was merged with the Pandya empire.\(^6\) Along with this merger, the royal patronage of this temple was also undertaken by the later Pandyas. Thus the inscriptions of this temple are shedding welcoming light on the historicity of this temple as well as on the contemporary political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of the life of the people. The contribution of the later Cholas to the temple is considerably immense when compared with the kings of other dynasties. Thus, the temple has a history of nearly a millennium that is, from the reign of Rajendra I to the present day.

**END NOTES:**

2. A.R.E., 61 of 1914.
17. *Ibid*.
19. A.R.E., 271 of 1927 and
30. A.R.E., 82 of 1892.


44. A.R.E., 80 of 1892.


61. A.R.E., 75 and 78 of 1892.