

Cholas in all their complexity

A sober analysis of a complex agrarian system under the Cholas

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After K.A. Nilakanta Sastri's pioneering work on the Cholas, *South India under the Cholas* has claimed the major attention of scholars and researchers, as the Chola period is of crucial importance in the study of the south Indian state and society and its implications for the medieval state in India. Among the most important of these studies, is that of Y. Subbarayalu, whose research on the political geography of the Chola country made significant interpretations of the Chola agrarian organisation with the *nadu* as the basic peasant region, which determined the nature of the Chola agrarian system and the state. His work influenced subsequent research on the nature of the Chola state carried out by American, Japanese and Indian scholars.

The Segmentary state or Peasant state and society theory of the American school based on African models and the Japanese emphasis on the need for micro-level studies using computerised data have led to continuous and inter-

esting debates which focused on the characterisation of the Chola state, either as centralised or segmentary or even in some ways feudal.

Epigraphic sources

Subbarayalu's present work is a collection of his essays on several aspects of the Chola state, society and economy based on his meticulous, thorough and unbiased studies using the rich epigraphic sources of the period (9th to 13th centuries AD). His empirically sound essays have left no single term of political, social and economic importance out of his close scrutiny in terms of the spatial and temporal spread. Hence his careful periodisation of Chola history into three major phases, the first being the early formative stage, the second the middle imperial stage and the third being one of disintegration and decline. He recognises the formative period as crucial for the building up of the imperial state under the celebrated Rajaraja I and Rajendra I till the reign of Kulothunga I (985- 1118), followed by the last phase which was one of probable feudal-

isation and agrarian crisis leading to decline.

Not being carried away by ideological and speculative theoretical considerations, Subbarayalu's work is a sound and sober analysis of a very highly complex agrarian sys-

tem and its development under the Cholas with gradual urbanisation, emergence of trading centres, trading organisations, regional and inter-regional trade guilds, supra-local organisations and their relations with the Chola

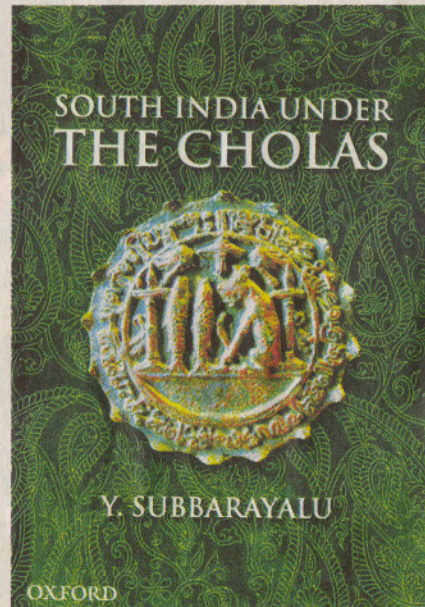
state. These are discussed in separate essays on all institutional structures, village bodies of the *Brahmadeya* and *Ur*, market centres like the *Nagaram*, protected merchant centres like the *Erivirappatana*, trading guilds like the *Ainnuuruvar*, *Manigramam* and *Anjuvannam*, identifying them as supra regional, regional and west Asian trading organisations respectively. Above all the revenue units like the *Nadu* and *Valanadu* and the larger *Periya nadu*, the Chola officialdom, land revenue organisation, land ownership and the taxation system are the major issues, which have been placed in proper perspectives in his discussion of the Chola state structure and its character.

Left hand, Right hand

Sociological aspects of the names, designations and titles, apart from the Left hand Right hand caste organisations, peculiar to the Tamil and Karnataka regions are discussed on the basis of the inscriptional evidence with greater clarity than hitherto attempted, especially the Right and Left hand caste or-

ganisation as potential groupings in the context of a changing agrarian order and craft production and trading economy. These are backed up by carefully prepared maps, charts and tables. Summing up the results of his work on the Chola state and characterising the Chola state in the final chapters, Subbarayalu shows that the 400 years of Chola rule represented the development of a regional state, which cannot be characterised by any single typological approach, although it did mark the most centralised and well consolidated state under a powerful monarchy in its imperial stage.

Subbarayalu's work will be of lasting value to both teachers and students, especially researchers, as to how to use epigraphical sources and why not to make hasty generalisations or conclusions, particularly in the light of the highly complex nature of the sources. In the historiography of South India, Subbarayalu's work marks an important advance and will prove to be an inspiration for further fruitful research on South India.



SOUTH INDIA UNDER THE CHOLAS: Y. Subbarayalu; Oxford University Press, YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi-110001. Rs. 675.