UNIT 12 · SOUTH INDIA

Structure

12.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you should be able to:

- determine the parameters of South India in terms of regional polity,

- sketch the broad spectrum of political powers,

- identify important ways of studying polity of the concerned region,

- delineate major foci of polity and their socio-economic bases,

- know about major components of the political structure such as taxation, bureaucracy and military control, and

- outline the ideological bases of South Indian polity between the eighth-thirteenth centuries.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the last Unit concerning regional variations of early medieval polity. It deals with South India, which broadly covers the portion of the peninsula lying south of 13⁰ Northern Latitude. It begins with the emergence of the Pallavas in the sixth century of the Christian era and ends with the establishment of the Tamil macro-region as a regional state with distinctive politico-cultural features under the Cholas (ninth-thirteenth centuries). After analysing the major lines of enquiry the Unit seeks to demarcate various tiers of administration. These tiers have been identified with a distinct focus on their social and economic bases. The nature of resource mobilisation and apparatus to regulate it have also been sketched. Finally, the ideological support of the South Indian polity has been suggested.

12.2   THE REGION

Here South India refers to the region called Tamil Nadu, not in its present form as a
linguistic state, but as a macro-region, which evolved from the seventh to the
thirteenth centuries and at times extended into parts of South Karnataka, southern
Andhra and South Kerala. This region may be divided into various zones, which had
a long historical evolution, **viz.**, the core and subsidiary zones in the plains, on the
basis of its river systems and a secondary zone located in its north-western parts
marked by the upthrusting eastern ghats and the edges of the plateau leading to
Karnataka and Kerala. These zones represented different politico-cultural regions,
which were known as **mandalams** from the Chola period onwards. The geography of
the whole region determined to a large extent the nuclei of the regional polities
which emerged during the centuries under discussion.

12.3   EMERGENCE OF POLITICAL POWERS

The post-Gupta history of India is dominated by the evolution of a number of
regional polities. Some of them emerged as regional states (Orissa and Tamil Nadu)
coinciding with regional cultures. Others were smaller polities located as buffers
between larger ones. This is well illustrated by the larger polities of South India such
as those of the Pallavas of Kanchipuram and the Pandyas of Madurai in Tamil
Nadu (sixth to ninth centuries A.D.). Dispersed between these larger ones were
several smaller powers such as the Western Gangas, Kadambas, Banas and a host of
others, owing allegiance alternatively to the larger lineages of the Deccan (See also
Unit 11.4) and Tamil plains or occasionally establishing their independence. The
most powerful of these regional polities was, however, that of the Cholas (ninth to
thirteenth centuries),who with the Kaveri Valley as the nucleus of their power,
succeeded in establishing their territorial sovereignty covering the whole of the Tamil
macro-region. The Cholas were able to establish a regional state with its distinctive
politico-cultural features.

12.4   PERSPECTIVES ON THE SOUTH INDIAN POLITY

There are three different perspectives on the Tamil regional polity. The pioneering
works on South Indian polity in general and Tamil polity in particular showed a
direct concern with administrative institutions and their history and were devoted to
the study of institutions like kingship, **brahmadeya** with its **sabha** and the temple,
their organisation and functions. They neither adopted a viable framework of
analysis nor an integrated approach to study the political processes and their
linkages with the socio-economic organisation. In short, they treated polity in
isolation from society and economy. They were also influenced by imperialistic
notions of the state and empire, centralised monarchies and powerful bureaucracies.
Their assumptions were that all the known features of a modern state were prevalent
in the earlier periods.

New perspectives on polity have been provided by more recent works, which
emphasise the need for understanding the inter-connections between social
formation, economic organisation and political structures. They focus on the
processes of evolution and change, leading to the emergence of regional polities and
the role of institutions such as the **brahmadeya** and the temple in the formation of
political structure. As a result, the theory of the centralised state followed by the
conventional studies has been seriously questioned. As an alternative, the concept of
the segmentary state has been used to characterise the medieval South Indian state.
The main difference between these two perspectives is based on the nature of local
organisations, the degree of their autonomy and the extent of central control or
direct political control exercised by the ruling dynasties over the different zones of
the Tamil region. The first view assigns greater and more effective control to the
central authority over all regions, despite the existence of local initiative and
autonomy (what they called "local self government") while the second view rejects it
as contradictory and assigns a high degree of autonomy to the local organisations
and a mere ritual sovereignty to the ruling dynasty except in the core area

As against both these extreme views, the studies of the Chola state, based on a careful statistical analyses of the rich inscriptional data, provide a third perspective suggesting the need for modifications of both the above views. They show the development of a centralised polity from an earlier stage of independent peasant regions controlled by peasant assemblies. These peasant regions were integrated through various institutions and through the introduction of innovative administrative measures by a political authority. The zenith of the Chola power was reached in the eleventh century, which also marked the crystallization of a centralised polity.

12.5 SUB-REGIONAL POLITIES

Under the Pallavas of Kanchipuram and the Pandyas of Madurai (sixth to ninth centuries), two sub-regions of the larger Tamil region became the territorial bases of two monarchies, in the Palar-Cheyyar Valley and the Vaigai-Tamraparni Valley respectively. The Pallavas were influenced by the political climate of the Deccan and Andhra regions, where they originated as the subordinates of the Satavahanas (See also Unit 11.3). The Pallavas later emerged to power in the post-Satavahana period, which was marked by a transition to the brahmanical socio-political order and a land grant economy. Hence, the Pallava polity introduced into the northern part of the Tamil country the sanskritic elements of the Gupta and post-Gupta periods as they developed in the Deccan and Andhra regions. However, this polity of northern Tamil Nadu (known as **Tondai nadu**) was slightly different from the North Indian brahmanical variety due to the specific agrarian context. The nature of agrarian society in the region was dominated by peasant organisations, which had evolved from the early historic period, popularly known as the "Sangam" age (first to the third centuries). Though Pallava statecraft was inspired by the **Dharmashastra** model, the northern regal forms were adapted to suit the Tamil regional context and the Pallavas succeeded in establishing a brahmanical monarchy, a territorial base around Kanchipuram and new forms of integration through the **brahmadeya** and the temple. This is illustrated in their copperplate records, which are bilingual (Sanskrit and Tamil) and in the Puranic religion and temples which they sponsored. The Pallavas acquired legitimation through impressive genealogical claims of descent from Vishnu and epic heroes, their basic ideology being derived from Puranic cosmological world view. The Pandyas of Madurai also established a monarchical state of the same type, although they claimed descent from Shiva and Chandravamsa (lunar lineage), with the sage Agastya as their preceptor.

The Pallava and Pandya dynasties aspired for control over the Kaveri Valley, the most fertile and well irrigated agricultural core of the Tamil region. They also set in motion a process of agrarian expansion and integration through the **brahmadeya** and the temple, which helped to integrate the agrarian or peasant units called the **nadus** (also **kurrams**) (see also Units 1.2.2 and 1.3).

Check Your Progress 1
1) What are the three main perspectives of studying South Indian polity?

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2) What are the specific features of agrarian society of northern Tamil Nadu?

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12.6   THE AGRARIAN ORDER AND POLITY

For a proper understanding of the agrarian order and polity we will study a number of aspects. Let us start with the **nadu**.

12.6.1   The Nadu

It dates from pre-Pallava times and is marked by common agrarian features and a kinship based social organisation. The production processes in the **nadu** were controlled by the **natter** assembly (the Nadu) composed of the heads of peasant families of **velalas** (agriculturists). The **nadu** consisted of subsistence level settlements coming together for common economic and social activities. The integration of the **nadus** into a larger and systematic agrarian organisation through land grants to **brahmanas (brahmadeya)** and the temple by the ruling families (Pallavas, Pandyas and Chola) let to the emergence of the first regional Tamil polities. Special emphasis was laid on the construction of irrigation works, advanced irrigation technology and their management through the **brahmana** assembly called the **Sabha**. Thus, the earlier subsistence level production of the **nadu** was transformed into a surplus oriented one which resulted in a restructuring of the economy (see also Unit 2.4.2). The **brahmadeya** and temple not only helped in agrarian integration but also played political roles by acting as instruments of mobilisation and redistribution of resources.

With its expansion and integration through the **brahmadeya** and the temple, and due to new irrigation works, the internal structure of the **nadu** also changed. Land rights and tenures became more complex, land relations became stratified, and the composition of the **netter** also underwent changes. The kinship basis of social organisation was eroded and gave place to a brahmanical caste and ritual ranking, i.e. caste hierarchy.

The **nadu**, although it evolved as a kinship based agrarian unit, shows the prevalence of a variety of collective controls over production. This is seen in the **kahi** rights or hereditary rights in land which were transferable by sale or donation. Various categories of rights in land existed and were determined and enjoyed within the norms accepted by the contemporary organisations of the **brahmadeya**, non-**brahmadeya(ur)** settlements and the family.

In the earlier conventional approach, the **nadu** received only marginal attention and its significance was lost in such studies. In view of the segmentary state, a high degree of autonomy is assigned to the **nadu** as a segment and hence the medieval South Indian state is characterised as a segmentary and peasant state. However, the **nadu** cannot be studied independently of the other institutions. In reality, the **nadu** brahmadeya and the temple together mark the phased opening of the Tamil plains. With the recognition of the **nadu** as the basic unit of agrarian organisation, the older

theory of the unchanging village communities has lost its validity. The debate now centres on the degree of **nadu** autonomy and the stability of the **natter** organisation and hence also on the validity of the segmentary state concept.

12.6.2 The Brahmadeya

Land grants to **brahmanas** are known from early historic times. However, it is only by the end of the sixth century that it assumed an institutional character in the Tamil region. **Brahmadeyas** were invariably created by ruling families in hitherto uncultivated land or among existing settlements (within a **nadu** or **kottam**) by clubbing together two or more settlements. They introduced advance farming methods—irrigation, management of means of production and resources. The Pallava and Pandya reservoir systems were managed by the **brahmana** assembly viz. the **Sabha**. The **brahmadeyas** were separated from the jurisdiction of the **nadu**. The major **brahmadeyas** also became independent units **(tan-kuru)** from the tenth century especially under the Cholas, adding to their economic and administrative/political significances. They are often regarded as pace makers of royal authority, enlarging the sphere of political action.

The **Sabha** or the assembly of the **brahmana** landowners grew into a more prominent institution vis-a-vis the **Ur**, the assembly of a non-**brahmadeya** settlement. The growing maturity of the **Sabha** is illustrated by the famous Uttaramerur (Chingleput district), a major **brahmadeya** and **tan-kuru** of the eighth to thirteenth centuries as well as by Manur (Tirunelveli district), an important **brahmadeya** of the eighth and ninth centuries. The **tan-kuru** had a central function also and often had under its purview several other centres of agricultural and craft production. The brahmanical temple, which was invariably the nucleus of many of these settlements, was also under the supervision or direct control of the **Sabha**, which functioned through various committees called **variyams**.

12.6.3 Valanadu

Revenue surveys and assessment of land revenue were systematically undertaken under the Cholas in the eleventh century. In the process, new and larger revenue units were formed by grouping some **nadus** together and even by partitioning some under different **valanadu-s**. This was determined by their irrigational needs and hence **valanadu-s** had consciously chosen boundaries such as water courses. The **valanadu** was an artificial unit and a politico-economic division created by the will of a political authority. The **valanadu-s** were named after the kings who created them. Their organisation was also linked with the establishment of a hierarchy of officers and a department of revenue collection, which kept detailed records of revenues. This department (the **puravu-vari-tinaikkalam**) was the most impressive of the administrative machinery evolved by the Cholas for mobilisation of resources.

12.6.4 The Temple

The temple was looked upon and functioned as a "superordinate" instrument of the political apparatus from the ninth century. Under the Cholas its role progressively increased and diversified, thereby forging institutional links for territorial sovereignty. This is well illustrated by the imperial temples such as those at Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram. Its economic outreach became phenomenal with a widening orbit through huge temple endowments land and money grants, gold deposits, merchant interaction through gifts and the luxury trade of larger merchant corporations. Its social function was the integration of various ethnic and professional groups through ritual ranking within the **brahmana varna** order. Temple administration was in the hands of the **Sabha, ur** and the **Nagaram**. In the redistribution of resources the temple assumed a more direct role than even the **brahmadeya**. It is through the temple that the Cholas achieved a greater degree of centralisation in the eleventh century, for it broke local ties by virtue of its economy and management of resources across **nadu** limits. It provided a foothold for the King to intervene in local affairs through royal officers "auditing" or enquiring into temple endowments, scale of expenses and making reallocations. The temple was, in short, the symbol of royal authority.

12.6.5 Nagaram: The Market Centre

Nagaram was another major tier of administration. It emerged by the ninth century

as a market centre with a merchant body (**nagarattar**) administering it. With the growing needs of an expanding agrarian society, such market centres came up in most **nadus,** to serve their exchange requirements as well as those of the **brahmadeya** and other settlements. The **nadu** and **nagaram** were mutually supportive. The **nagaram** members were themselves agriculturists who could channelise their surplus produce into trade. They became a full fledged trading community called the **nagarattar.** At the same time the **nagaram,** like the **brahmadeya** enjoyed a special status, with considerable autonomy vis-a-vis the **nadu.** The **nagaram,** often created or sponsored by the ruling family, had direct revenue arrangements with the King's government and participated in temple administration. The **brahmadeya** and **nagaram** brought the **nadus** together in a system of unified political organisation and economic exchange, thereby assisting in the process of a state synthesis.

A network of **nagarams** emerged between the ninth and twelfth centuries. The royal and political centres as well as larger commercial centres such as Kanchipuram and Thanjavur were designated as **managarams** or great **nagarams.** This network was further brought into a wider inter-regional exchange due to the revival of South Asian trade by the tenth century involving South India, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and China. The Cholas promoted this trade by undertaking maritime expeditions to Sri Lanka and Sri Vijaya (Sumatra) and sending trade missions to China. They extended their patronage to their merchant organisations by issuing royal charters for establishing mercantile towns protected by mercenaries. Warehouses and distribution centres known as **erivirappattana** interacted with the **nagaram** as well as other smaller localised merchant organisations like the **manigramam** and foreign merchant organisations like the **Anjuvannam.** They traded in luxury goods, exotic items from other countries and in South Indian textiles. They also obtained in exchange agricultural products from the **Chittirameli Periyanadu.** The **Chittirameli** was an organisation of agriculturists belonging to all the "four castes" **(caturvarnya).** It originated in the Tamil region and extended their activities into South Karnataka and southern Andhra regions in the twelfth century.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Why and how the internal structure of the **Nadu** changed?

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2) How **brahmadeya** became more important?

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3) How the temple came to occupy significance in polity?

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4) How **nagrams** came into prominence?

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12.7 TAXATION

The existence of a regular taxation system, which the segmentary state concept denies, is indicated by a statistical analysis of tax terms in Chola inscriptions. The major land tax called **kadammai** was uniform as also many other smaller ones related to land. There was a system of storage and transfer of revenue from the locality to the government at the **valanadu, nadu** and **ur** levels. Taxes, both central and local, have been identified. Increase in non-agricultural taxes over time has also been recognised. Local official involvement in tax collection also increased. Local forms of collection and re-investment in regional economy avoided problems of central collection and redistribution. The state's active interest in trade and commercial ventures provided a second resource base. Royal ports were consciously developed and tolls were levied by royal agents. Exemption from tolls also formed part of the policy of encouragement of trade ventures.

12.8 BUREAUCRACY

The Chola, state was viewed as a highly bureaucratised one by the pioneering scholars. This is denied by the followers of the segmentary state theory. Statistical data from inscriptions, however, have been used to show the existence of officers at

both central and local levels. The term **adhikari** prefixed to names of important
personages with the **Muvenda velan** title indicates the presence of a bureaucracy
especially in the hierarchically structured revenue department. Ranking among
officers is also shown by the terms **perundaram** (higher grade) and **sirutaram** (lower
grade), both in the 'civil' and 'military' establishments. Officers at the royal court
(**udan kuttam**) and officers touring the country (**vidaiyil adhikari**) are also known.
The King's government was present in the localities through a hierarchy of
officers — the **mandalamudali, nadu vagai** and **madhyastha** acting as important links
between the King and the locality.

12.9   MILITARY ORGANISATION

There is no conclusive evidence in Chola records of the existence of a regular army,
recruited by clearly defined criteria. Hence there are alternative interpretations of the
meagre evidence. According to the conventional view, there was a royal military
force. But this is denied by the proponents of the segmentary state concept, who
look at the military forces as an assemblage of "segments", peasant militia and/or
caste and guild armies. However, there are references in inscriptions to grants for
army chiefs and to army camps at strategic points indicating the existence of a royal
force. The higher and lower grades were also prevalent among the Right Hand units
of the army corps known as the **Velaikkarar**. There was also a Left Hand unit
mentioned in royal records. Armies of local chiefs supplemented royal military
expeditions.

12.10   STRUCTURES OF CONTROL

Given the nature of politico-cultural zones which evolved from the early historic
period, the Cholas evolved different structures of control by adopting the concept of
the **mandalam** to designate such zones. Each **mandalam** was named after the King. It
was one of the innovations of Rajaraja-1 (985-1014 A.D.), who also initiated revenue
surveys and the **valanadu** system. For example, earlier structures such as the **Kottam**
(a pastoral-cum-agricultural region) were left undisturbed in the **Tondaimandalam**
(also called **Jayankondacholamandalam**), but the **tan-kuru** was introduced. The
valanadu replaced earlier chieftaincies in the **Cholamandalam** and the adjoining
Naduvil **nadu** or **mandalam** in the north. Similarly, army units came to be stationed
at strategic points in transit zones and routes of trade leading to the adjoining
Karnataka region to establish lines of communication. Chola princes and **mandala
mudalis** were appointed to rule over such sub-regions.

Lesser chieftains, described as feudatories, represent another distinct level of
intermediate strata in the Chola polity. Arrangements were made by the King with
the powerful chiefs, under different terms, either by conceding a certain amount of
local autonomy in return for military support or in return for trading interests in
zones of transit. Some chieftaincies were conquered but re-instated and others were
newly created lineages supporting the king in return for local control. They were also
ranked at different levels as chiefs or even as Chola officials with 'civil' and 'military'
service tenures and policing rights.

12.11   IDEOLOGICAL BASES OF SOUTH INDIAN
POLITY

In the Pallava and Pandya polities genealogies claiming descent from divinities, epic
heroes, and lunar lineage formed an important ideological force. **Kshatriya** status
and the gift (**dana**) provided additional concepts in support of sovereignty. Puranic
religions and world view were other important aspects of the ideological base.

The Chola genealogies are more complex in their ideological claims. Apart from the
solar lineage, the Cholas directly linked themselves with the "Sangam" Cholas, the
Kaveri region and the temple building activities of their ancestors for legitimating

their claims to sovereignty. Above all, they adopted and promoted in a significant way the **bhakti** ideology of the Tamil Vaishnava and Saiva saints by popularising it through temple building, temple rituals and iconography. The symbolism of the temple, equated with territory/cosmos considerably enhanced royal power. The ritual and political domains coincided which shows further limitations of the idea of segmentary state (for a critical evaluation of this idea, see also Unit 8.3).

Check Your Progress 3

1) Was there a bureaucracy in Chola state? Give names of some officers.

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What was the Chola system of administrative control?

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.12 LET US SUM UP

This Unit was concerned with the :

- region of South India comprising modern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and southern portions of the states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh,

- the nature of political structure in the aforesaid region between the eighth and thirteenth century.

- relative viability of hypotheses concerning so called centralisation and segmentation in the political order,

- expansion of agriculture and trade network and their impact on the evolution of centres of administrative and fiscal powers,

- nature of resource mobilisation and mechanism to regulate it, and

- role of prominent socio-economic and religious forces in providing ideological support to the newly emerging polity.

12.13   KEY WORDS

Bhakti	: Devotional cult
Chittirameli	: Organisation of agriculturists belonging to all the "four castes"
Erivirapattana	: Warehouses and distribution centres
Kadamai	: A major land tax
Kottam	: Pastoral-cum-agricultural region
Madhyastha	: Local officer—impartially supervising royal orders relating to land and other grants
Mandala mudali	: Chief of a **mandalam**
Mandalam	: Term used for a politico-cultural region
Nadu	: Peasant assembly or organisation
Nadu vaqai	: Officer organising the **nadus**
Perundaram	: Higher grade amongst officials
Puravu-vari-tinaikkalam	: Department of revenue records
Right Hand and Left Hand	: A vertical division of the army into Right and Left Hand groups
Sabha	: **Brahmana assembly**
Sirutaram	: Lower grade amongst officials
Tan-kuru	: Independent unit
Ur	: Non-**brahmadeya** settlement and assembly
Valanadu	: Artificial revenue unit created by the Cholas
Variyams	: Committee through which the **Sabha** functioned
Vidayil adhikari	: Officials touring the country

12.14   ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1) The South Indian polity was first studied through the organisation and functions of institutions. The recent works emphasise the need for understanding the inter-connections between social formation, economic organisation and political structure. The third view points out the development of a centralised polity from an earlier stage of independent peasant regions controlled by peasant assemblies. See Sec. 12.4.

2) The peasant organisations and their influence were the main features of agrarian society. Also See Sec. 12.5.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Through integration and expansion of **brahmadeya** and temple the **Nadu** underwent a change. New irrigation works also contributed. Land right and tenures became complex. Land relations also became stratified. Also see Sub-sec. 12.6.1.

2) After **brahmadeyas** became independent units they gained economic and administrative significance. See Sub-sec. 12.6.2.

3) Through large donations and grants temples became important. With the help of the temples Cholas could intervene in local affairs and temples became the symbol of royal authority. See Sub-sec. 12.6.4.

4) **Nagrama** came into existence to fulfil the exchange requirements as market centres. In due course through inter-regional and South Asian trade they became very important. See Sub-sec. 12.6.5.

Check Your Progress 3

1) There was a hierarchical bureaucracy under the Cholas both at central and state levels. See Sec. 12.8.

2) The Cholas evolved the administrative zones (**mandalam**). These were generally placed under princes. Chieftains were also governed through well established norms. See Sec. 12.10.

SOME USEFUL BOOKS FOR THIS BLOCK

Burton Stein	:	**Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India,** Delhi, 1980.
C. Minakshi	:	**Administration and Social Life under the Pallavas,** Madras, 1977 (Rev.Ed.)
D.N Jha(ed)	:	**Feudal Social Formation in Early India,** Delhi, 1987.
K.A. Nilakanta Sastri	:	**The Cholas,** Madras, 1975.
	:	**History of South India,** Delhi, 1984.
N. Karashima	:	**South Indian History and Society,** Delhi, 1984.
R.S. Sharma ·	:	**Indian Feudalism,** New Delhi, 1981.
Romila Thapar	:	**History of India,** Vol. 1, New Delhi, 1983.
T.V. Mahalingam	:	**South Indian Polity,** Madras, 1955.
Y. Subharayalu	:	**Political Geography of the Chola Country,** Madras, 1973.