



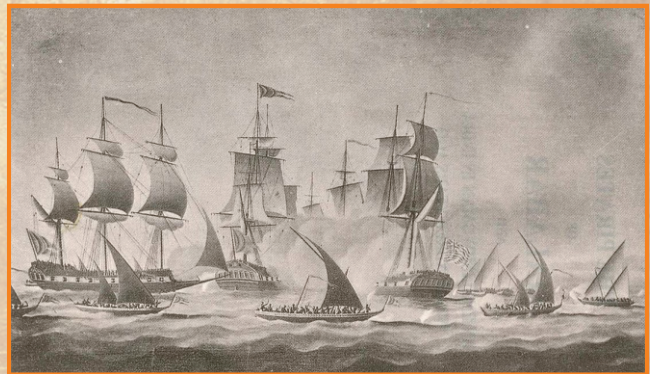
A PEEK INTO INDIA'S MARITIME HISTORY UNDER THE CHOLA RULERS

The Indian maritime sector is huge and it is not surprising considering the huge chunk of trade that the country does via the sea route. The current focus of the incumbent government is to look for ways that can enhance the working of this sector by developing and modernizing its existing ports while scouting new areas to build ports and maritime facilities. A close look at this sector brings forth evidence at how the economic condition of various Indian states had flourished during the ancient times due to their knowledge of shipbuilding and persistent naval activities.

Be it the folklore that forms an integral part of our country's history or the Silpa Sastras preserved in India's libraries or historical texts authored by eminent historians then and now, what remains noticeable is the use of ships and boats to transport men and cargo, thus, indicating the ubiquity of Indian maritime enterprise.

Boost to Maritime Affairs Under the Cholas

A detailed reference to the maritime activity under the Chola rule highlights how navigation on the sea triggered commercial activities. Established by the third century BCE, the Chola rulers used ships and boats for improved logistics and naval warfare. Though not much is known about the origins of the Chola dynasty, the rulers after gaining prominence took a greater interest in maritime affairs, thus, resulting in increased trade, banking and commerce. The motive to propel the maritime industry was purely economic than expansionist, thus, explaining the use of large-capacity ships to transport cargo from one port to the other.



MAHARATTAGRABS AND GALLIVATS ATTACKING AN ENGLISH SHIP
(From a picture in the possession of Sir Ernest Robinson)

The Cholas pursued an aggressive military policy and had a very strong Navy, which reached far away shores to conquer them. The conquest of distant lands was to promote mercantile interests. The expansion afforded greater opportunities to their merchants to penetrate overseas markets. During the reign of the Cholas, the mercantile fleet was also well developed. The state spent money on infrastructure to develop Ports, Lighthouses and roads. Mamallapuram (now Mahaballipuram) was the main port of the period. Archaeological pieces of evidence point out to Kaveripattinam, located at the point where the river Cauvery meets the Bay of Bengal, as another important port of the Cholas. Later the Cholas also developed Nagapattinam, Kancheepuram, Kulachal, Thootukodi, amongst others, to promote trade.

Invasion of South East Asia

During the Chola period, King Rajendra I invaded the Sailendra Empire and occupied the Malay peninsula, Java and Sumatra and by bringing this region under his control, he thwarted Chinese attempts to bring a stop to the flourishing Chola trade with that region.

Knowledge of Ship Building and Sailing

Kappal Sattiram is a treatise on shipbuilding. Proof of extensive knowledge of ship building, ship-technology, shipping and navigation has been gleaned by historians through literary writings and numismatic evidence of the Chola period including those found on the East Coast of China and South East Asia and are indicative of the vast and flourishing trade that existed during that period. Shipping technology was, therefore, at its zenith during this period and an increasing number of ships were used to undertake international trade, import and export of goods and movement of people-groups with religious beliefs. Though references to sea battles exist, greater stress is laid on trade through the sea route.

Chola's “Look East Policy”

Surprising as it may sound, the Government's “Act East Policy” is similar to the Chola rulers' “Look East Policy” during their times as there was substantial economic activity from trade with China and South-East Asia. The surplus earnings from sea trade laid the groundwork for urbanization in the South. Impetus was given to improving trade infrastructure, thus, explaining the high quality of living of the people during that period. Cultural exchange followed, thus, explaining the stark contrast of people living in the South with those living in Northern India.

