

## Unearthing Her Green Thumb: The Integral Role Of Women In Agriculture During The Chola Period

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### Abstract

Chola period is enriched with intensified agriculture. The role of women in agriculture during this period is presented in this article. Women were involved in all stages of crop cultivation starting from seed selection, seed treatment, sowing, intercultural operations, harvesting and post harvest activities. Research sources reveal the involvement of women in management of the farm and allied enterprises of agriculture namely livestock production, goat rearing and poultry. Women were entitled to maintain the farming enterprises along with their routine household activities. Women were highly capable of this dual role and thus exerting an impact in their social – economic status in the society. Traditional methodology was adopted in farming enterprises which facilitated sustainable agriculture in this period.

### Introduction

The era of the Imperial Cholas holds immense significance in the history of South India, particularly Tamil Nadu. During the late 9th century A.D., the Cholas reasserted their power, establishing a formidable empire that exerted dominance over a significant portion of the peninsula until the early 13th century. Notably, women during the Imperial Chola period occupied a distinct position compared to the earlier Sangam age. Women's contributions during the Chola period were enduring and diverse. From royal women to those belonging to the lower social strata, they played pivotal roles in shaping the socio-economic, political, and cultural aspects of the country. Their impact was felt across

various spheres, signifying their active involvement and influence in the Chola society. Agriculture served as the backbone of the Chola economy, and women's participation in this domain was of great significance. Women participation in agricultural practices, ranging from planting and harvesting to managing farms and overseeing agricultural production were analyzed. Additionally, the social and economic implications of women's active roles in agriculture were evaluated shedding light on their contributions to food security and economic prosperity in the Chola civilization. By examining historical records, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how women's participation in agriculture shaped the Chola society and economy during this pivotal period in South Indian history

### **Expansion of Agrarian Land**

The agricultural landscape of South India underwent significant transformations during the Chola period, ushering in key changes that shaped the region's agrarian condition. One of the most noteworthy developments was the conversion of forest and wasteland into cultivable agricultural land. This expansion of arable land was facilitated by the patronage of the Chola royalty, a crucial factor that contributed to the growth of agriculture in the region.

The expansion of settlements during this time further attests to the spread of agriculture and other commercial activities. The Chola rulers' support extended to the construction of tanks and irrigation systems, which played a vital role in the agrarian expansion. These improvements in irrigation and water management significantly increased agricultural production, paving the way for an expanding economy. As agriculture flourished, trade and commerce experienced a parallel growth, fueling economic development. The emergence of guild organizations was a consequence of this economic prosperity. These guilds played a pivotal role in organizing economic activities, both within the merchant community and in coordination with the state. The amalgamation of agrarian changes, increased agricultural production, and the flourishing trade and commerce collectively contributed to the overall growth and prosperity of South India during the Chola period. The support and patronage of the Chola rulers were instrumental in fostering these developments and establishing a thriving economic landscape that endured beyond their era.

### **Land Tenure and Agrarian Relations in the Chola Period**

The Chola period witnessed diverse land tenures: individual ownership (ekabhogam) and collective ownership (ghanabhogam) were common. Waste, forest, and pasture lands were held communally (ur-podu). Individual ownership (kani right) allowed inheritance and land transfer. Scholars noted the emergence of powerful landlords, evident from titles like Udaiyan, Kilavan, Alvan, and Ariyan. These agrarian relations shaped Chola society. Titles of women related to the agrarian society were not common during the Chola period. Due to the patriarchal nature of the society, their contributions may not have been explicitly mentioned, but they undoubtedly played a significant role in agriculture.

### **Evolution of Land Holdings in Chola Period Agrarian Society**

The Chola period's agrarian society was based on villages, referred to as vellanvagai, with communal possession of land owned by the community called 'urar.' Each individual in the community received a share of the land by rotation and was considered a possessor of the entire village. This un-stratified system changed with the formation of brahmadeya villages, introducing private ownership by Brahmins. The Vellala families possessed these lands, leading to the evolution of landlords and cultivators as distinct strata. Devadana villages further complicated agricultural operations, with all land vested under temple custody. The temple leased the land to wealthy individuals who organized agriculture through cultivators. This multi-tier agrarian setup resulted in a feudal system, with landlords, possessors or tenants, and cultivators in the Chola agrarian society.

### **Agriculture during Chola period**

Agriculture in the early and medieval Chola period witnessed significant expansion as areas under cultivation increased through the reclamation of forest and wastelands. The establishment of brahmadeya and devadana lands also contributed to this expansion. Notably, the growth of wet crop cultivation played a pivotal role in transforming the landscape of early medieval Tamil country. The rise in population was a primary driver behind the search for new settlements and the need for more agricultural land. Moreover, the production pattern relied on expanding the cultivated area to boost overall output. This focus on increasing the cultivation area was crucial for enhancing agricultural productivity during the Chola period.

### **Cropping pattern**

During the Chola period, the geographical conditions determined the agricultural techniques, crops, and cropping patterns. The Kaveri region with red and alluvial soil was suitable for wet crop cultivation, particularly paddy. Other soils in the Chola region were more suitable for dry-crop cultivation. The Chola inscriptions describe different crops grown near the Kaveri river, including areca-palms, coconut trees, mango trees, and Palmyra palms. Dry crops like varagu, ragi, millet, and pulses were also cultivated. Paddy cultivation varied according to the season, with references to kar and pasanam cultivation types. Coconuts were an essential agricultural product, primarily cultivated in brahmadeya and devadana villages. Toddy collection from coconut and palm trees was a popular local practice. Cotton cultivation was widespread due to the importance of weaving in village industries, especially in Kanchipuram and Coimbatore. Other crops included medicinal plants, oil-seeds, and betel nut-producing areca palms. The cultivation of medicinal plants and cotton threads was subject to taxation during the Chola rule.

#### Method of Cultivation

1. **Owner-Cultivated:** Owners worked the land with their family's help, often seen with small landholders belonging to the cultivating class.
2. **Owner with Labourers:** Landlords managed large estates with hired day labourers and farm servants.
3. **Tenant-Leased:** Owners who belonged to non-agricultural classes or institutions leased land to tenant cultivators, commonly found with Brahmins and temple lands.

The cultivated land was categorized into wet, dry, and garden lands based on water availability. Wet lands were irrigated from river channels or tanks, producing crops like paddy with two harvests, kar and pasanam. Dry lands relied on local rainfall and grew crops like punpayir. Cattle played a significant role in agricultural tasks, from ploughing to transport. Female labor dominated when no cattle were used, but male laborers took over with draught animals. Rituals and offerings were made to God Ganapathi before sowing seeds, and a broken coconut on the ploughshare foretold the harvest's nature.

#### Conclusion:

The study of women's participation during the Chola period reveals their significant involvement in various aspects of agriculture. They actively assisted men in cultivation, engaging in activities such as sowing seeds, transplanting, weeding, and harvesting crops. Moreover, they played a crucial role in irrigation management, skillfully working in tanks and canals. Women

possessed valuable traditional knowledge and expertise in seed preservation, contributing to the continuity of diverse crop varieties. Although many literary sources have overlooked their contributions, overall studies strongly indicate that women indeed played a vital role in the development of agriculture during the Chola period.

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