

# Nagapattinam Port: The Catalyst of Cultural and Diplomatic Exchange Between Indian Sub-Continent and Indonesian Archipelago

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## Abstract:

This paper explores the dynamic interactions between the Shailendra dynasty of Southeast Asia and the Chola dynasty of South India from the 8th to 11th centuries CE. The Shailendras, who were known for deep ties with cholas. The Cholas, expanded their influence across South India and beyond, maintained a significant relationship leading to cultural, economic, and religious exchanges. The paper highlights Nagapattinam's pivotal role as vibrant trade hub that facilitated these exchanges. Through the exchange of gifts and the construction of Buddhist institutions, like those which were funded by the Srivijayan rulers. The study demonstrates how these reciprocations fostered a shared cultural heritage and strengthened maritime trade networks. This trade-off underscores the role of economic and cultural hubs in bridging regions leading to enhancing diplomatic relations.

**Keywords:** Shailendra Dynasty, Chola Dynasty, Southeast Asia, South India, Nagapattinam port, Nagapattinam Monasteries, Cultural Exchange and diplomacy, Indian ocean, Maritime Trade, Buddhism, Hinduism.

## Methodology

The research method employed appears to be historical research, specifically documentary analysis or archival research. The study utilized historical records and inscriptions, such as the Chaiya inscription and the Small Leiden Charter, which provide information about the Shailendra and Chola dynasties. Secondly, a comparative historical analysis would have been conducted, focusing on the political and cultural developments of the Chola and Shailendra dynasties, particularly their interactions and mutual influences. Additionally, the research included an analysis of diplomatic and cultural exchanges, examining the exchange of gifts, religious influences, and diplomatic relations between the two regions—common aspects of historical research. Finally, the study focused on specific events and contributions, such as the construction of a Buddhist vihara funded by the Srivijayan king, to support the study of cultural exchange and diplomacy.

## Introduction

The Shailendra dynasty, a prominent ruling family in Southeast Asia, known for their influential reign from the 8th to 11th century CE. The first mention of the dynasty appears in the 'Chaiya inscription' (also

known as the Ligor Stele) from 775 CE.<sup>1</sup> They were famous for their patronage of Buddhism, construction of the famous Borobudur Temple in Central Java, Indonesia. The dynasty's command also extended over Java, Sumatra, and the Malay Peninsula. The last known reference to the Shailendra dynasty is found in the Small Leiden Charter, dated 1089–1090 CE, issued by the Chola king Kulottunga.<sup>2</sup> They happened to be contemporaries of the Cholas.

The Imperial Cholas were one of the dominant South Indian dynasty that flourished between the 9th and 13th centuries CE. They served as tributary princes under the Pallavas and reasserted their independence when Pallava's power declined due to the constant confrontation with the mighty Rashtrakutas.<sup>3</sup> They again rose to prominence under leadership of kings like Aditya Chola,<sup>4</sup> who was considered real founder of Chola dynasty. The Chola Empire reached its peak under the reign of Rajaraja Chola I (985–1014 CE) and his son Rajendra Chola I (1014–1044 CE),<sup>5</sup> who expanded the empire's influence across South India, Sri Lanka, and the Indian Ocean during this time, Nagapattinam emerged as a significant port city.

Nagapattinam is a modern-day port city in the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The definite reference of Nagapattinam as prosperous port city highly doubtful until end of 6<sup>th</sup> century, the earliest definitive references to Nagapattinam, as described in the thirty-one devotional couplets of Saint Thirunavukkarasar (Appar) which provided an overview of the city in 7<sup>th</sup> century, the city was vibrant, fortified with walls and a port with significant traffic.<sup>6</sup> This port during the Chola Dynasty, was vital in facilitating cultural and diplomatic exchanges between India and Southeast Asia. Its strategic location and prosperous economy made it a crucial trade hub and attracted merchants, scholars, and diplomats from across the region.

## Discussions

Nagapattinam gained increased significance because of trade and cultural activities because as the original overland Silk Route, which stretched from the Mediterranean through the Middle East to China, became less reliable due to occasional conflicts in the Middle East. Further boosting Nagapattinam's role in international trade as it served as an alternative sea route, which circled the Indian Ocean and traversed Southeast Asian waters to reach China, was found to be both more convenient and economical.<sup>7</sup>

The concentration of Buddhism and their cultural activities in Nagapattinam may have been influenced by historical upheavals, including the attack of white Huns,<sup>8</sup> the revival of Hinduism,<sup>9</sup> and the later Islamic invasions, which dealt a final blow to Buddhism in northern India.<sup>10</sup> These events plunged Northern India

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<sup>1</sup> Zakharov Anton O., Shailendra reconsidered, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Aug. 2012, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibdi*, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Kulke, H. Kulke; Rothermund D., A history of India, Routledge 11 New Fetter Lane, London, 1998 p.114.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, kulke, p.114.

<sup>5</sup> Kulke Hermann; Kesavapany K.; Sakhuja Vijay, Nagapattinam to Swarnadwipa a reflection on the chola naval expeditions to southeast Asia, institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009, p.230

<sup>6</sup> *Ibdi* 2009, p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibdi*, 2009, p. 174.

<sup>8</sup> Heirman Ann and Bumbacher Stephan P., The Spread of Buddhism, Brill, 2007, p. 61-62

<sup>9</sup> Dutt Sukumar, Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India Their History & Contribution to Indian Culture, London George Allen Unwin LTD, 1962, p.322.

<sup>10</sup> Elverskog Johan, Buddhist and Muslim Interactions in Asian History, Published online: 30 September 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.418>

into a state of continuous chaos. However, more research is needed to establish a definitive connection between these phenomena.

Amid these turbulent circumstances, the Chola and Srivijayan rulers found a suitable opportunity to engage and cooperate across various fields.<sup>11</sup> These rulers were particularly notable for their extensive cultural reciprocations across the Bay of Bengal. The Cholas and the Shailendras of the Srivijayan Empire maintained cordial relations, characterized by the exchange of gifts, architectural techniques, and religious knowledge. As Shaivites, the Cholas not only facilitated the spread of Hinduism but also supported Buddhism, as evident by the construction of monumental temples and the patronage of Buddhist viharas, such as the ones at Nagapattinam. This cultural diplomacy not only strengthened maritime trade networks but also reinforced the Chola's influence in the Indian Ocean, with Nagapattinam serving as a crucial connecting point between the two regions.

A key aspect of Nagapattinam's prominence was its role in the spread of Indian culture in southeast Asia this is also by trade and commerce related to textiles in the regions. Because, The Chola traders were not as trade means, but were carriers of culture.<sup>12</sup> They were the key pillars forming harmonious relation between Sumatran Island and Tamil region. <sup>13</sup> Driven by the interest of the Shailendra Dynasty, the Srivijayan rulers, who were closely aligned and interested in Buddhism which proved to be a positive point with the Shailendras, actively supporting Buddhist institutions within the Chola kingdom at that time In 1005 CE, the Srivijayan king Chudamanivarman funded the construction of a Buddhist vihara in Nagapattinam, incrementing the port's religious significance. Nearly a decade later, a representative of the Srivijayan king presented precious stones to an idol in the temple in Nagapattinam,<sup>14</sup> and subsequently, a Srivijayan trader donated lamps. By 1018 CE., a Srivijayan ruler, known as "the king of Kadram," gifted valuable offerings, including "Chinese gold" (cinakkanakam), to a local temple.<sup>15</sup>

Numerous scholars have noted that these generous contributions were not mere acts of religious devotion but strategic efforts to cultivate commercial and diplomatic ties with the powerful Chola kingdom. The exchange of gifts symbolized a deep and cordial relationship, that reflected a shared interest in maintaining peace and mutual prosperity. Even though cholas sacked capital city of srivijya. Later the relationship become harmonious. another Kadaram king (name unknown) had sent a mission to the Chola court in 1090 CE. and requested Kulottunga I, the then Chola king, to confirm the grant of villages which were previously made to the Buddhist temple that constructed in Nagapattinam by Chulamanivarman, this is recorded in the Smaller Leiden plates.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, as trade flourished, so did the movement of ideas, art, and religion. Trade also caused expedition of cholas on Srivijaya empire, either to secure trade route or take leverage in Chinese trade or secure suppliants in Kadaram.<sup>17</sup>

Buddhist monks and scholars frequently travelled between India and Southeast Asia, promoting Buddhism and facilitating cross-cultural exchanges. Nagapattinam must have attracted cultural and religious tourist similarly Sanchi or Bodhgaya do today. The Buddhist temple of Borobudur is living legacy of that cultural

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<sup>11</sup> Kulke, Nagapattinam to Swarnadwipa , 2009, p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> Ibd, 185

<sup>13</sup> Ibd, 171

<sup>14</sup> Ibd, 67

<sup>15</sup> Hall Kenneth R. International Trade and Foreign Diplomacy in Early Medieval South India, Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Jan., 1978), pp. 87-88

<sup>16</sup> K.V. Aiyar Subrahmanya, "The Large Leiden Plates"

<sup>17</sup> Kulke, Nagapattinam to Swarnadwipa, 2009, p. 176

exchange. A lasting impact can be seen between two regions, Indian cultural elements, including architecture and political ideologies must have significantly influenced Southeast Asian societies.

Nagapattinam's economic vitality, therefore, played a crucial role in its development as a center of cultural and diplomatic exchange, bridging the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia. Karl Marx identified economy as the primary factor driving cultural and societal change<sup>18</sup>. It is also apparent in the case of the two regions under our study. This legacy of interconnectedness highlights the importance of economic hubs in fostering cultural and diplomatic ties between regions, emphasizing Nagapattinam's historical significance as a gateway of interaction and influence. This was reconfirmed when colonial power involves in merchantalism<sup>19</sup> and identify the economic potential of Nagapattinam.

### Final Argument:

The Shailendra and Chola dynasties exemplify the profound interconnectedness between Southeast Asia and South India through their diplomatic and cultural exchanges. Their collaboration, characterized by mutual influence in religion, architecture, and trade, fostered a shared legacy that significantly shaped the region's history. Nagapattinam, in particular, played a crucial role as a hub for these exchanges, serving as a focal point where numerous reciprocations took place. The enduring monuments and cultural ties from this era illustrate how these interactions enriched both civilizations, leaving a lasting impact that transcended borders. Although to fully explore Nagapattinam legacy, more scholarly work is needed.

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