# The Chola chronicles

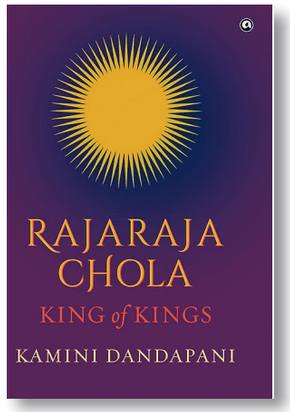
A comprehensive overview of the Chola dynasty written in a colourful and easy style. BY **KAMALA GANESH**

IS history to be written only by the trained—those who have studied history—or the professional—those who research and teach history in academic institutions? And is it only for historians? The subject of the past has universal appeal. The history of one's own country and region has a deep connect with one's psychic and cultural identity. If this need is not fulfilled, it can trigger uninformed, speculative dabbling in history writing, sometimes with dangerous consequences.

In today's world, it can be no one's case that curious and informed lay readers do not deserve good and accessible history. But how is this accessibility to be achieved without becoming simplistic or camouflaged propaganda?

Can academic historians, whether trained or professional, change their way of writing for popular audiences? Can those writing history without formal training get acceptance from academic historians? Or will popular and academic historians always remain separate categories, each thumbing their nose at the other? Are the criteria for writing popular history any different from those for academic history?

Kamini Dandapani's book *Rajaraja Chola: King of Kings* provokes many such questions. The Author's Note begins with a disclaimer: she is not a trained or professional historian. With a versatile career including teaching piano and Bharatanatyam, and stints at Chase Manhattan Bank and McKinsey, Dandapani currently teaches Carnatic music in New York.




**Rajaraja Chola**
**King of Kings**
By Kamini Dandapani
Aleph Book Company, 2022
**Pages: 392**
**Price: Rs.999**

Dandapani's book is an outcome of her passionate involvement with Tamil culture. She has extensively surveyed the extant literature, bringing order into the cornucopia of information, and writing it up in a lucid, lively style.

The Chola dynasty is indeed one of great significance in southern India. It was prominent during the Sangam centuries (3rd BCE to 3rd CE) about which we have moderate knowledge through the poetry. It again rose to prominence from 9th to 13th centuries CE. On this, there is considerable information, scattered over many sources but with few comprehensive publications.

## 400-YEAR REIGN

The much-lauded 10th century ruler Arulmozhi Varman, later known as Rajaraja Chola, is the central figure of Dandapani's book. But it also has a detailed backdrop on the 400-year reign of the second Chola dynasty, king by king, from Vijayalaya the founding monarch to Rajendra III and the disintegration and absorption of the dynasty into the Pandya kingdom. That is a mighty canvas to paint on.

*Rajaraja Chola* has four sections or "books". The first is on the Sangam Cholas, the second deals with Vijayalaya and his immediate successors before Rajaraja. The third book is entirely about Rajaraja Chola, with a chapter on his childhood, the turbulent process of his ascent to the throne and subsequent military conquests.

The next eight chapters deal with aspects of his reign including political organisation, trade, the army and navy, crime and punishment, the bhakti movement, the Brihadeeswara temple, Chola bronzes, and the world of Chola women.

The fourth book is about the 13 consecutive kings after Rajaraja Chola, beginning with his son Rajendra I and ending with Rajendra III, with a chapter for each king. There is a comprehensive bibliography, index, endnotes, a family tree and good quality photographs. A "Dynasty Directory", with short notes on the neighbouring kingdoms, such as Banas, Chalukyas, Pallavas, Pandyas, Rashtrakutas, Sinhalas, and their relationship with the Cholas, is a thoughtful addition for lay readers.

After the Sangam period, amidst political chaos and battles among rival dynasties, the Cholas faded into obscurity for more than five centuries, confined to their ancient capital, Uraiyur. Around 850 CE, Vijayalaya, an ambitious chieftain from Uraiyur, defeated the influential Muttaraiyar chieftains and founded the second Chola dynasty.

The story of the Cholas, as told by historians from Nilakanta Sastri onwards, is mainly through tapping the thousands of inscriptions on temple walls and copperplate grants. It is mostly about the reign of individual kings.

Dandapani, too, follows this format. She tracks the incessant warmongering, the annexing of neighbouring kingdoms, the victories and the defeats, the devastation wreaked upon the defeated, the political acumen in loyalty building, and the forging of strategic friendships and marital alliances towards the all-consuming goal of conquest and acquisition.

Some royal titles valourise this goal—for instance, *Gangai konda Cholan* for Rajendra I, whose conquest trail reached Odisha and Bengal, and *Veera Pandiyan thalai konda Koparakesari* for Aditya Karikalan, who beheaded Veera Pandiyan. There is a revealing snippet about how Rajaraja III was humiliated by the Pandyas who defeated him. The chief Chola queen and other senior royal women had to carry water pots and other ritual items for the Pandya victory ceremony.

## FOCUS ON RAJARAJA

However, Dandapani's treatment of the individual reigns is uneven, with Rajaraja, the eponymous hero of the book, getting pride of place. Other successful rulers like Aditya, Parantaka, Rajendra I, and Kulottunga I are given relatively lesser prominence. The later chapters become short and patchy, presumably because grand projects, including temples, declined with the waning of Chola power by the 13th century, and inscriptions were fewer.

Overall, the inscriptions on temple walls and copperplate grants, whose format was standardised by Rajaraja, are of historical value. Dandapani provides a useful note on them.

Inscriptions start with a Sanskrit *prasasti* (paean) praising the monarch who built the temple and move on from mythical origins to a constructed genealogy to a narration of the recent historical lineage. A Tamil *meykkirti* (literally, "true fame") follows, listing his military and other achievements.

Finally, the actual business being transacted is detailed. Activities in administrative, political, military, judicial, economic, agricultural, and socio-religious domains are meticulously recorded. The writer has trawled through multiple volumes of *Epigraphia Indica* and *South Indian Inscriptions* published by the Archaeological Survey of India, now thankfully available digitally. She has also sifted and selected material from a vast range of sources in translation: Sinhala and Chinese texts, hero stones, coins, saint poetry, and secondary literature by Indian and foreign scholars. She evaluates these and also adds comments on their veracity.

Her portrait of Rajaraja Chola is one of variegated colours and textures. He was "narcissistic, ambitious, power hungry, ruthless, far-sighted, shrewd, compassionate, generous...a brilliant blend of humility and chutzpah." He reconquered lost territory, organised military campaigns against hostile neighbours and "patched

**BRIHADEESWARA TEMPLE** in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, was an ode to Rajaraja Chola's devotion but served a political purpose too.

M. MOORTHY

**Kamini Dandapani's portrait of Rajaraja Chola is one of variegated colours and textures. He was "narcissistic, ambitious, power hungry, ruthless, far-sighted, shrewd, compassionate, generous... "**

together disparate elements of society into an imperial whole". She quotes Buddhist chronicles on the loot and plunder during his brutal campaigns in Ceylon.

Rajaraja was proactive in joining the thriving maritime trade nexus to the east up to China and to the west till the Arab regions. Dandapani quotes from a Chinese text *Song shi,* the official history of the Song dynasty, a letter by Rajaraja that he sent along with a Chola delegation that went to China on a trade mission. The letter is a "masterpiece of diplomatic sweet talk and self-effacement". It shows Rajaraja as ingratiating himself to the Song ruler in order to facilitate his trading ambitions. How the "canny publicist" Rajaraja projected the mission for domestic consumption is another matter.

**TEMPLE AS UNIFIER**

Rajaraja's harnessing and channelling of the Kaveri waters led to agricultural prosperity in the region and his contribution to its art and architecture are significant.

The Brihadeeswara temple—an architectural and cultural marvel—was an ode to his devotion, but as Dandapani points out, it also served other purposes. Rajaraja established the cult of the God-King. He was an exemplar of the Chola vision of themselves as anointed to the throne by the great god Siva. By identifying himself with Lord Siva of the Brihadeeswara temple, he gave himself the divine seal of approval, and consolidated his stature. The temple became a unifying symbol for a populace worshipping different gods.

Even in defeat, the temple's sanctity and power were not challenged by the conquerors. For example, Maravarman Sundara Pandyan added his own inscriptions to the famous Gangaikondacholapuram temple and instituted a special worship there in his name.

Dandapani's strength lies in her ability to give us a comprehensive overview, while highlighting lesser known, fascinating but also sometimes disturbing nuggets. An inscription in the Thiruvalangadu copperplates of Rajendra I narrates how his grandmother Vanavanmadevi, who was the mother of Rajaraja and chief queen of the handsome Sundara Chola, died by sati on her husband's funeral pyre.

She followed her husband, the inscription reads, as she was afraid that he would be allured by the beautiful celestial nymphs in heaven. Is this serious or an attempt at humour or plain patriarchy? How could sati be recorded so casually? Here was an opportunity for Dandapani to put on her popular historian's hat and make a trenchant remark. But she lets it pass in silence.

History has undergone radical transformations over the decades. From pursuing purely political histories to accepting social, cultural, and economic histories as valid; from using only documented, official sources to including oral, subaltern sources, the discipline has questioned its own biases and complicated its scope.

Scholars from other social sciences and the humanities have sometimes taken up serious history-writing. Ramachandra Guha is a prominent example. In our interdisciplinary times, this is welcome. Occasionally, history-writing by scientists like the brilliant mathematician D.D. Kosambi wins critical applause.

But when it comes to popular history, the academic canon is suspicious. Does this canon at all matter to those outside it? While historical fiction like Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* occupies a legitimate space, what about writing history like a novel?

Written in the 1950s, *Ponniyin Selvan* catapulted the Cholas into popular consciousness. Mani Ratnam's 2022 film based on Kalki's novel is a cinematic novel. Dandapani's book is mostly factual with a few inferences that, like a good historian, she declares as inferences. In only one instance—the prologue—does she write a completely imaginary description of the day of Rajaraja's coronation: "That day, the sun rose with extraordinary radiance, casting a golden glow over the land. In the distance the Kaveri twinkled and sparkled like a sea of diamonds.... The streets of Thanjavur, the Chola capital had been swept to an immaculate spotlessness, perfect canvases for kolams of staggering beauty and complexity." An appealing beginning to a serious book.

In my view, original material or original interpretations are important for research, but not for all history-writing. Much of what passes as academic history does not pass the originality test. The real difference then between academic history and popular history lies in the style of presentation, not in its substance.

South India has famously played second fiddle in writings on Indian history, in which the Mauryas, the Guptas, and the Mughals have occupied centre stage. While many have heard of the Cholas, especially their anicuts, temples, and bronzes, they remain hazy figures outside Tamil Nadu.

Kamini Dandapani's book has rendered a service to the cause of popular history by collating and systematising vast swathes of information, and presenting a cogent, complex, colourful and consolidated narrative. □

*Kamala Ganesh is a sociologist based in Mumbai.*