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Ideology and the State under the Early Medieval Pallavas and Colas: Puranic Religion and *Bhakti*

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Ideology has been a major concern in recent studies on the State in South India, which have raised important questions on the nature of the state under the brahmanical polities (monarchies) of the early medieval Pallavas and the Pāṇḍyas (6th to the 9th centuries AD) leading to the development of a more enduring state system under the Cōlas of Tanjavur (to the 13th centuries AD). The debate started by the characterization of the Cōla state as a peasant state and society and segmentary state with a ritual sovereignty and absence of a centralized administration has led to several empirical studies on the Cōla period, with a computerized statistical analysis of the rich inscriptions of the period and micro level studies of the institutions which sustained the Cōla state. Institutions such as the Brahmadeya and the Temple, which were regarded as legitimating institutions and as superordinate integrative forces have hence been an important part of such studies, which inevitably underlines the importance of the ideological base of such institutions.



Figure Aerial View of the Tanjavur Temple Showing the Cosmic Symbolism of the Royal Temple of Rajaraja I, Built in the Early 11th Century AD. Courtesy, Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Chennai.

This paper attempts to trace the evolution of the ideology that created these institutional bases in the formation of the medieval south Indian state under the sub-regional polities of the Pallavas and Pāṇḍyas and the more powerful regional polity/state of the Cōlas, during the 6th to the 13th centuries AD, which coincides with the emergence of a distinctive culture region i.e. the Tamil region.

Rich in literary and epigraphic sources, the Tamil region provides evidence of three major periods of development of a pre-state to a state society from the early historical period to the early medieval period. These periods represent a tribal chiefly organization in the early stages i.e. 3rd century BC to the 3rd century AD gradually turning into a well organized Brahmanical polity in the three politico-cultural regions of Tamiḷakam in the 6th to 9th centuries AD and integration of these sub-regions into a larger state society under the Cōlas, the most enduring among the peninsular states.

The Pallavas and Pāṇḍyas adopted the Brāhmaṇical tradition and built up a complex set of ideological constructs, which represented an amalgam of three major strands of the Brāhmaṇical tradition, i.e. the Vedic, Purāṇic-Itihāsic as the background for the evolution of a regional idiom of the Bhakti cult. Such an amalgam was imbibed by them from the northern regions like Deccan and Andhra, from which the Pallavas initially emerged as the first Brāhmaṇical polity to have created a territorial base in northern Tamiḷakam. Their early grants derived their format from the Ikṣvāku records, but more importantly relied on the *yajña* or sacrifice and land grants to Brāhmaṇas as their legitimating act, seeking a more stable territory in the Tamil country, replacing their military camps and migrations within Andhra. Gotra affiliations of the grantees were the main reference in these grants.

The later grants were not only bilingual but also coincide with the acquisition of a territorial base with Kāñci as the center of their power, from about the 5th–6th centuries AD. Genealogical connections, fabricated and derived from the Purāṇic Sūrya and Candra Vamśas became the major ideological construct, the *yajña* replaced by Vamśa (genealogy). At the same time the Brahmadeya with a Purāṇic temple also became a major part of the amalgam of the different strands in the Brāhmaṇical tradition. The expansive kingship now included many local chiefly and other powers southwards down to the Kaveri. Divine descent from Visnu and the associations with the epic and Purāṇic heroes are equally important. The Purāṇic worldview dominated the processes of the development of the nature of the state and society. The Pāṇḍyas placed greater accent on their Tamil Sangam connections and Agastya, although they also followed the Brāhmaṇical tradition in its developed form.

The Cōḷa genealogies, on the contrary, were not entirely fabricated, although the Sūrya Vamśa connections were emphasised, but historical events and Sangam connections with rulers like Karikāla for his flood control activities and Koccenḡaṇṇān as the prolific temple builder now became more conspicuous among the ancestors of the Vijayālaya line of “imperial” Cōḷas. More important was their systematic promotion of the Bhakti ideology, not merely as derived from the Epic-Purāṇic tradition, but of the regional/vernacular idiom of bhakti as propagated by the Bhakti saints, the ālvārs and nāyanārs. In effect the Bhakti tradition was built into the very processes of socio-economic developments like agrarian expansion and urbanization, institutional organization and restructuring of polity and society. It indeed increasingly influenced the expansionist activities, both agrarian and urban, through the pivotal role of the temple to Viṣṇu and Śiva, apart from the continued role of the Brahmadeya in such expansion in integrating not only the Cōḷa region, but also the regions of the erstwhile Pallava and Pāṇḍya rulers and the Kongu nāḍu through the concept of the maṇḍalam, the new designation for these politico-cultural regions, apart from the newly conquered Ila maṇḍalam or northern Srilanka. Within these maṇḍalams the agrarian nāḍus, kūrrams, kōṭṭams and the larger vaḷanāḍus together with the emergence of nagaram or market towns and larger urban centers like Tanjavur, Kancimanagaram and other temple towns were brought together into a web of economic and social activities and the restructuring of society within the Varna order. An entirely regional version of the caste system emerged enabling the accommodation or inclusivism of all socio-economic and ethnic groups and newly emerging occupational groups through a vertical paradigm, i.e. the Right and Left Hand castes in a tripartite scheme of social division and hierarchy. The direct royal patronage and promotion of the technological and constructional activities led to the culmination of the southern temple style i.e. the Drāviḍa in the stupendous royal projects of Taṅjāvūr and Gangaikoṅḍacōlapuram with their cosmic structures and unique iconographic programme equating royalty with divinity, a near total identity of king with God through various iconic forms. Although both the Purāṇic Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sects were initially important in the building up of a temple/agrarian landscape coinciding with the sacred geography of the temples of the bhakti hymns, the consolidation of the Śaiva against the Vaiṣṇava was achieved by the 11th century. Despite sectarian differences the sacred geography of the Vaiṣṇava and the Śaiva bhakti tradition ultimately helped the creation of a map of the Cōḷa state and the Tamil macro-region.

The Cōḷas were directly involved in the promotion of the Bhakti ideology through deliberate royal policy of collecting the hymns of the period from the 5th to the 9th centuries AD and later making them a part of the Śaiva canonical literature, along with the hagiographies, particularly of the Śaiva saints, allowing maṭha or monastic organizations to take the custody of the Bhakti or Hymnal literature and other philosophical treatises influenced by the Vedānta, which later created parallel structures of authority under religious/spiritual leaders. Initially coordinating with royalty in the temple administration and emergence of religious communities, built into such

parallel authority structures and relationships was an element of competition/rivalry, increasingly visible in the post-Cōḷa and Vijayanagara periods. Yet all these are traceable to the Bhakti ideology, to protect and promote which the resources of the Cōḷa period came to be over stretched. With the entry of alien powers and new military technologies pan-Indian ideological constructs became imperative/inevitable, which were incapable of preventing the gradual separation of the religious from the secular spheres of political and social life.

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