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A Functioning Indian Polity: Chengalpattu 1770



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES CHENNAI

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Chengalpattu: The Polity

From the perspective of today the affluence, caring and sophistication of India seem an unattainable ideal of some distant past. Fortunately, there is detailed information available about the way indigenous society, economy and polity were organised in the 1770's, in about two thousand localities of the Chengalpattu District of Tamil Nadu, just before the British set about disrupting and reorganising India according to their own ways and preferences.

The Chengalpattu information shows how the classical Indian view of the world—with its emphasis on seeing divinity and dignity in all sentient and insentient creation, on caring and providing for the needs of all, on painstakingly earning an affluence from nature and sharing it with all, on vesting the family, the community and the locality with the freedom and responsibility to organise their own affairs according to their own time-honoured discipline and customs—was made manifest in the institutions and practices of the society and the polity. It shows how such institutions and practices anchored in the *sanatana dharma*, in the Indian civilisational genius, continued to provide an affluent and fulfilling life for the people of India till as late as the latter part of the eighteenth century.



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Chengalpattu: High Agricultural Affluence

Chengalpattu localities of the eighteenth century produced, on the average, 5 tons of grains a year for a household. Since the number of persons per household was recorded to have been between 4 and 5, there was a ton of grain per person. This level of grain availability indicates a very high level of prosperity. India today produces one-fifth of a ton per person. The nations that are considered highly affluent today, like the USA, boast of per capita grain availability equalling that of the Chengalpattu of 1770's.

This amount of grain can be produced and consumed only in a society that supports high animal wealth and takes good care of its animals. Every household of Chengalpattu had about 3 heads of cattle on the average. Today we have no more than one cattle per household, and the animals receive an almost negligible share in the meagre grain produce of India.



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Chengalpattu: High Agricultural Practices

Chengalpattu is in the coastal region, where fertility of land is not comparable to that in the great alluvial plains of India. And in the 1770's the English and the French armies were rampaging through the region, disrupting its economy and polity. At that period the Chengalpattu region obtained an average yield of 2.5 tons of grain per hectare. Around sixty relatively better-endowed localities of the region, which between them contributed one third of the grain produce and one-sixth of the cultivation of the region, had an average yield of 4.5 tons per hectare. Of these, several fairly large localities reached the level of 9.0 tons per hectare.

This kind of yield is possible only when a society has achieved sophistication in every aspect of agricultural technology. The technological competence of Chengalpattu society is demonstrated best in the irrigation system of the area. In this coastal area, where the land slopes away sharply towards the sea, they made the waters tarry and irrigate their paddies, through the famed network of *erys*. The detailed maps of Chengalpattu seem to be splashed with the blue of the *erys*; about one-sixth of the land of the region was under various water bodies. Scholars believe that this spread of water and the consequent high humidity regime was the key to the extraordinary high productivity of several of the localities in the region.



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Chengalpattu: High Industrial Affluence

Like the rest of India before the coming of the British, Chengalpattu was not an exclusively agricultural society; it was equally an industrial society. Of about seventy thousand households of the region, only half were exclusively agricultural. Of the other half, at least twenty percent were involved in industrial and manufacturing activities. Weavers alone constituted 6.5 percent of the households; and another about 10 percent were engaged in activities like metal-working, stonemasonry, pottery, carpentry, cotton-refining, iron smelting and smithy, leather working, oil pressing, etc. And, every household, including those of the cultivators, contributed to spinning.

About one third of the households were engaged in what are called the service activities today. Every locality maintained a large complement of households engaged in these. The services provided by them included: Administrative services of the locality registrar and the corn-measurer; militia services of the *palayakkarar* and *tookiry*; economic services of the *vetti*, who maintained the *erys* and arranged the distribution of waters; cultural services of the temple servants, schoolmasters, the musicians and the dancers; the hygiene and health services of the barbers, washermen and doctors; and the intellectual services of high scholars and holy personages.



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Chengalpattu: The Polity of Sharing

The Chengalpattu polity was organised around the principle of sharing: Growing an abundance on the lands and sharing it widely, such as to effectively provide for all the households and institutions associated with the locality and the region, formed the basic premise and the major instrument of political, moral and economic organisation.

At the time of harvest, every locality of the region undertook an elaborate exercise of sharing. The households and institutions engaged in the provision of administrative, military, cultural, economic, intellectual and health and hygiene services were all given their share in the produce. Most of them received shares from the locality they served; but institutions that served the whole region, like the great temples, the great militia leaders and high scholars, received shares from hundreds of localities in the region.

This sharing was not nominal. About a third of the produce of a locality was shared thus. The sharing in its elaboration was akin to the budgeting mechanism of the State: Through such sharing the locality allocated resources for different functions essential to itself, and also provided for the larger polity of the region. The locality thus became not only the basic constituting unit, but also the constituting authority of the polity.



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Chengalpattu: Where Community was King

The locality was the constituting unit and authority of the Chengalpattu polity. And, the locality was constituted of the communities. The sharing arrangements, which constituted the main instrument of legitimisation in the polity, do not mention individuals, not even individual households. It is the locality that takes out shares, and these are taken out for specific institutions and functions that are looked after by specific communities. For example, the locality takes out a share for the function of the barber, and how this share is distributed between different households in the community of barbers in the locality is the business of the community.

It seems as if the Chengalpattu polity had worked out a way of sharing sovereignty among the localities and the communities. Such sharing of the attributes of sovereignty amongst many is the cherished ideal of Indian polity. Rama Rajya for the Indians is always the period when Rajakulas, the sharers in sovereignty, multiply several fold and all of them are allowed to blossom and flourish.

This is how the classical ideas of sharing and providing for all, and of allowing a share in the responsibility and dignity of running the public affairs to all communities and groups, were incorporated in the functioning polity of Chengalpattu.





Thirupporur: A Capital of the Communities

Halfway down the old road from Chennai to Mahabalipuram, one suddenly comes across a breathtakingly grand temple on the banks of an equally grand large square tank. For someone passing on this road for the first time, the sight is too magnificent to be missed.

This is the Kandasami Temple of Thirupporur. Thirupporur today is a small town of about five thousand persons. In the eighteenth century, Thirupporur was one of the capital cities of the region; the Kandasami Temple enjoyed a share in the produce of more than 250 localities. As many as forty-six communities of the region had their *mathams* here. These were institutions of high learning; they also received the temple honours on behalf of the community, provided a place of stay for the pilgrims and arranged for the performance of various rituals connected with pilgrimage. The *mathams* thus were the embassies of the local communities in this capital city of the region. The *mathams* were all located in the four streets around the temple, making it the capital complex.

It was through institutions and complexes like these that the localities and communities of Chengalpattu came together to constitute higher levels of polity. And, while coming together thus they also created high architecture and high culture, which is so obviously visible in the grandeur of the Thirupporur Temple and the carefully laid out plan of this town.

In the two thousand localities of Chengalpattu, there were at least a hundred temples of the size and grandeur of the Kandasami Temple of Thirupporur.

