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# **Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa**

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# **Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa**

**Reflections on the  
Chola Naval Expeditions  
to Southeast Asia**

*E D I T O R S*

**Hermann Kulke • K. Kesavapany • Vijay Sakhuja**



**INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES**  
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*Cover photo:* Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram, Tamil Nadu. Courtesy of Risha Lee.

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# FOREWORD

I am delighted to welcome a valuable addition to the limited canon of books on India's interaction with Southeast Asia. Indian Ocean studies still remain unexplored, though the Indian Ocean and its "Maritime Silk Road" have been the main focus of global and in particular Asian history in recent decades.

The book titled *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia* deals with several fascinating subjects, amongst them:

- the naval expeditions of the Cholas in the context of Asian history and Indian Ocean trade system;
- South Indian merchant guilds, whose fame is strongly associated with the Cholas and which are often regarded as a driving force behind the naval expeditions of the Cholas;
- developments in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, which were most directly affected by Chola expansionism.

India has been following a conscious "Look East Policy" since the early 1990s and India's present accentuated level of interaction with ASEAN is integral to this approach. There has been steady progress in the India-ASEAN relationship since this policy was initiated. India-ASEAN functional cooperation is diverse and includes cooperation in several sectors. As regards political and security issues, ASEAN also has expressed its desire to work with India to fight terrorism, transnational crimes and similar problems. Recently, India concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with ASEAN, which will ensure lower duties and a freer flow of trade in goods. In the cultural, educational and religious fields, India's efforts aim to promote people to people contacts, religious tourism and linkages among institutions of higher learning. This volume fits well within these objectives.

The present book *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, about the naval expeditions of the South Indian Chola Dynasty in the eleventh century, is a welcome contribution to Indian Ocean studies. I hope it will enhance its readers' awareness of a vital and sadly-neglected aspect of India's involvement with its broader neighbourhood.

*Dr Shashi Tharoor*  
*Minister of State for External Affairs*  
*India*  
*10 October 2009*

# MESSAGE

At a time when the Indian psyche is slowly losing touch with its glorious traditions and legacies of the past, ISEAS efforts to put together a conference and publish this book, *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa*, is of great significance.

This particular volume throws light on the naval expeditions during the Chola Dynasty to Southeast Asia and its cultural impact on that part of the globe.

I am sure the informative deliberations in this volume will be of great interest to researchers, academics, scholars and students of history alike and inspire them to undertake further research in this domain.

We the members of the Murugappa family in Chennai, India, through our AMM Foundation are proud to be associated with this project, though in a small way.

*M. V. Subbiah*  
*Managing Trustee*  
*AMM Foundation of the Murugappa Group*  
*Chennai, India*

# PREFACE

The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) hosted an international conference on “Early Indian Influences in Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-cultural Movements” from 21 to 23 November 2007 in Singapore. We acknowledge the generous funding provided by the AMM Foundation of the Murugappa Group, Chennai, India, who co-sponsored the conference. Two volumes have emerged from the proceedings of the above conference: the current volume *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, and one on the main theme of the conference, that is, *Early Indian Influence in Southeast Asia*.

The South Indian Chola kings had developed a sophisticated maritime enterprise centred on sea-based commerce with trading contacts in Malaya, Sumatra, and China. This had produced an ocean-going fleet that was dispatched by the Chola King Rajendra Chola I against the Srivijaya Kingdom. The essays in this volume reflect on the naval expedition, which is also mentioned in the inscription dated 1030–31 of the big temple of Tanjavur in South India.

The volume contains seminal contributions by eminent historians and scholars of Asian history who have meticulously presented their findings in these essays. Perhaps the most significant contribution of this volume to Asian maritime history are the translations of ancient and medieval Tamil and Sanskrit inscriptions relating to Southeast Asia and China, and of the Chinese texts describing or referring to the Chola Kingdom as Zhu-nian.

I am thankful to the contributors of this volume for sharing valuable insights into their understanding and interpretation of the Chola naval expedition to Southeast Asia. ISEAS is particularly indebted to Professor Hermann Kulke for the intellectual leadership he provided for the project. It is hoped that this volume will provide greater understanding of early Indian influences in Southeast Asia and generate further research on the subject.

My sincere thanks to Professor P. Ramasamy and other ISEAS colleagues who worked tirelessly towards the preparation and organization of this major three-day conference that attracted over a hundred synopses, and in which fifty-two short-listed papers were presented.

I am also thankful to Betty Kwan from ISEAS who worked very efficiently to take care of the finer details of the conference; Y.L. Lee, Head of Administration, for the administrative support and cooperation in the organization of the conference; and Triena Ong, Managing Editor of the Publications Unit, for the successful production of the current volume.

*Ambassador K. Kesavapany*  
*Director*  
*Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*

# INTRODUCTION

Next to the study of the continental Silk Road, the Indian Ocean and its “Maritime Silk Road” have been the main focus of global, and in particular, Asian history in recent decades. But strangely enough, Indian Ocean studies still remain oddly bipartite. They emphasize predominantly the “classical” period, with its strong Mediterranean connections on the one hand, and the “early modern” period, with its rise of European dominance in the Indian Ocean on the other. The long millennium from the fifth to the sixteenth centuries, when the Indian Ocean finally emerged as an Asian Mediterranean Sea, still remains underrepresented in international studies. The present volume about the naval expeditions of the South Indian Chola dynasty to Southeast Asia in the eleventh century is meant as a modest contribution to fill this historiographical gap.

The great naval expedition of the Chola king, Rajendra I, who claimed in his inscriptions to have “despatched many ships in the midst of the rolling sea” and conquered more than a dozen harbour cities altogether of the famous Southeast Asian kingdom of Srivijaya in Sumatra, and on the Malay Peninsula in about AD 1025, was a unique event in the otherwise peaceful and culturally exceedingly fruitful relation of India with its neighbours in Southeast Asia. Already the last centuries of the first millennium BC witnessed increasingly extending trade activities between India and Southeast Asia, and the peacefulness of the spread of India’s culture across the Bay of Bengal throughout the first millennium AD is unparalleled in world history. Buddhism and Hinduism alike left their deep and lasting imprint on the emerging cultures of mainland and maritime Southeast Asia. The first distinct South Indian influences are usually linked with the famous Buddhist art of Amaravati, and the Pallava Grantha of present-day Indonesia’s earliest inscriptions in the fifth century AD, followed by the strong impact of Pallava and Chola art and architecture in Southeast Asia.

In view of these lasting peaceful relations of India, and of South India in particular, with Southeast Asia, the great Chola invasions of Srivijaya in 1025, followed by another smaller naval expedition in c. 1070, are an issue that still remains a conundrum for historians. In 1955, Nilakanta Sastri, the late doyen of South Indian historians, rightly asked in his magnum opus on the Cholas, “why was this expedition against the king of Kadāram [Srivijaya] undertaken and what were its effects?”<sup>1</sup> and he concluded his detailed analysis of the sources: “We have to assume either some attempt on part of Srivijaya to throw obstacles in the way of the Cōla trade with the East, or more probably, a simple desire on the part of Rājendra to extend his *digvijaya* [“world conquest”] to the countries across the sea so well-known to his subjects at home, and thereby add lustre to his crown.”<sup>2</sup> The American historian G.W. Spencer, on the other hand, in 1983 speaks, in the only existing monograph on the Chola conquests of Sri Lanka and Srivijaya so far, of “politics of expansion”,<sup>3</sup> and in a previous paper (1976), even of “politics of plunder”.<sup>4</sup> More recent studies instead emphasize trade as the major incentive of Rājendra’s unique naval expedition. In her study of the medieval merchant guilds of South India, Meera Abraham concluded that “the raid was undertaken partly at least to establish trading rights for Tamil-speaking merchants in those areas, a trade from which the ruler, the merchant and the Cōla bureaucracy could expect sizable profit”.<sup>5</sup> In the most recent substantial contribution to India’s medieval relation with Southeast Asia and China, Tansen Sen concludes that the examination of hitherto unexplored Chinese sources and reinterpretation of others “strengthens the commercial-motive theory shared by a majority of scholars”.<sup>6</sup> However, he also refers to the often quoted passage of the Song work *Zhufan zhi* that those ships which tried to avoid the payment of taxes at the ports of Srivijaya were attacked and destroyed. “If true, then, both the Srivijayan diplomatic and military attempts to block direct maritime links between Indian ports and the Song markets may have been the principal factors for the Chola naval raids in 1025 and the 1070s.”<sup>7</sup> Other scholars interpret Rājendra Chola’s raid on Srivijaya’s harbours in the wider context of the Indian Ocean trade system as the culmination of increasing tensions,<sup>8</sup> caused by the rise of new imperial Asian powers since the late tenth century and their struggle for their share in the lucrative maritime trade.

An important result of the Singapore conference at which these papers were presented was the confirmation of the cognition that the conundrum of the naval expedition of the Cholas has been and is still caused primarily by the scarcity of archaeological and literary sources. In fact, details of the expedition are known only from a single source, viz. the often quoted and, in

this volume, also frequently referred to Tamil *praśasti* (eulogy) of Rajendra's inscriptions.<sup>9</sup> And what is perhaps even more surprising, Chinese sources are completely silent about Rajendra's naval raid on Srivijaya. However, we do possess a considerably large number of contemporary Sanskrit, Tamil, and especially Chinese sources<sup>10</sup> about direct relations of the Cholas with Southeast Asian countries and China that allow us to "contextualize" their naval expeditions in the Indian Ocean trade system, and to draw relevant, though often still hypothetical, conclusions about their causes. But several of these sources are either difficult to access, or are not even translated yet. Scholars of Indian history and Indian Ocean studies, and in particular the editors of this volume, are, therefore, grateful to Professors Noboru Karashima, Y. Subbarayalu, and Tansen Sen for agreeing after the conference to prepare for the first time in two appendices to this volume a critical edition of the texts as well as (partly new) translations of all relevant Indian and Chinese sources of Chola activities in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the editors are obliged to Professor Karashima and Professor Subbarayalu to have also contributed additional papers about the famous South Indian merchant guilds. Together with these and the appendices, the proceedings of the conference provide not only a state-of-the-art picture of the maritime activities of the Cholas but also sufficient critically re-evaluated source material and stimulating theories for future research on one of the most fascinating periods in the history of South India and the Indian Ocean.

The first three chapters locate the naval expeditions of the Cholas in the context of contemporary Asian history and the Indian Ocean trade system. H. Kulke's introductory chapter interprets Rajendra's raid on Srivijaya's harbour cities as the culmination of the systematic quest of Rajaraja and his son Rajendra for domination of maritime South India and its surrounding islands in order to control the trade between the new emerging maritime powers of the Fatimids in Egypt and the Song dynasty of China. The emerging dominating position of the "Imperial Cholas" in the central portion of the Indian Ocean trade system was bound to clash with Srivijaya's hegemony over the Strait of Malacca, the gate to the Chinese market. Another salient point of the chapter is Srivijaya's finally futile "ritual policy" to establish friendly relations with the Cholas through temple donations at Nagapattinam. Whereas Kulke focuses his deliberations on the rivalry and competition in the Bay of Bengal, Tansen Sen extends in his paper on the "Chola-Srivijaya-China triangle" the range of view further to the East by a detailed introductory description of China's rise to hegemony in the Indian Ocean trade system under the Song dynasty from the late tenth century. Contrary to most scholars working on the Cholas' naval expeditions, he bases his analysis

primarily on Chinese sources and argues that even initially the relations between Srivijaya and the Cholas were not as friendly as suggested by, for example, K.A.N. Sastri. On the contrary, the Srivijayans, as the main informants of Song scribes about the “barbarians of the Southern Sea”, seem to have been systematically passing wrong information about the Chola kingdom to them. This may be the reason Chinese annals failed to mention the Chola raids, and later, even depict the Cholas as a tributary state of Srivijaya. Another important contribution is that Sen revitalizes R.C. Majumdar’s theory (which had been rejected by Sastri) that Rajendra attacked Srivijaya for the first time by a minor invasion already in 1017. He concludes that the invasions were a “retaliation for Srivijayan interference in direct trade between southern India and Song China”. Karashima’s detailed summary of the results of his recent survey of Chinese ceramics on South Indian and Sri Lankan coasts sheds new light on Chinese trade with South India from the ninth century and its tremendous increase from the thirteenth century. The different discovery spots of Chinese ceramics which he surveyed on the Coromandel and Malabar Coasts (for example, Periyapattinam and Kayal; Kollama/Quilon, and Pandalayini-Kollam) are identified with toponyms mentioned in Chinese sources which are quoted. Of particular interest for this volume is his discovery of the *yingqing*-type porcelain sherds of the eleventh/twelfth centuries at Gangaikondacholapuram, Rajendra’s capital, “which might have been pieces brought from China by the envoys sent by Rajendra.” The paper moreover contains important information about merchant guilds that will be referred to below.

The following two chapters deal with nautical perspectives and the navy, two subjects of central importance in examining the naval expeditions of the Cholas. In their deliberations about the nautical aspects of Rajendra’s great expedition in 1025, V. & S. Sakhuja are taking up an essential subject which, however, requires a lot of “professional imagination” to rectify the deplorable lack of historical source material. But they rightly point out that in 1025 the Cholas were not only endowed with the accumulated nautical knowledge of the seafaring Tamils of at least a millennium, but also with their own experience of having already successfully organized naval expeditions to Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and to the Andaman Islands at least, if not up to the Malay Peninsula. They refer to the sophisticated knowledge of the Chola seafarers of nautically relevant celestial bodies and important navigational marks, and discuss moreover questions of logistics and provisioning, possible shipbuilding centres, ports of departure, and the route followed. As for the “Chola armada”, they rightly point out that it might largely have consisted of ships taken from trade. Y. Subbarayalu’s paper on the Chola navy also brings

us back to the reason for the conundrum of the naval expeditions of the Cholas. As an epigraphist, he rightly reminds us that due to the predominantly donative character of the inscriptions, we get only very fragmentary pieces of information about the actual mode of land-based warfare — and even less about the navy of the Cholas. The only known epigraphical reference to it so far comes from an inscription of the year 1187 which mentions a commander of “the army of the seashore” which was certainly the navy. In Rajendra’s inscriptions, only the term *kalam* occurs, which is the usual word for “ship”. The famous 1088 inscription of the Tamil merchant inscription at Barus/Sumatra refers to *marakkalam* or “ship made of timber”.

The next two chapters deal with Rajendra’s political and maritime centres at Gangaikondacholapuram and Nagapattinam. According to S. Vasanthi, Gangaikondacholapuram was founded by Rajendra probably after his sixth regnal year and remained the imperial capital of the Cholas until it was razed by the Pandyas in late thirteenth century. Apart from Rajendra’s still existing monumental Brihadisvara temple, the fate of the architectural remains of the once flourishing capital, as known from contemporary Tamil poems, was sealed by the nearby villagers who even today take bricks from them for the construction of their houses. Excavations by the Archaeological Survey of Tamil Nadu, however, revealed important antiquities, decorative objects, and Chinese ceramics. G. Seshadri’s article contains a comprehensive survey of the literary sources of the history of Nagapattinam. His critical re-evaluation of pre-sixth century sources (e.g. of the Sangam Age, Ptolemy, Pali literature, etc.) dismisses all previous attempts to trace Nagapattinam in these early sources. The earliest definite reference to it is provided by Saint Appar in the early seventh century. Particular emphasis is given to Narasimhavarman II’s embassies to China and his construction of the “Chinese Pagoda” of which Seshadri publishes for the first time an eighteenth-century drawing held in the British Library when most of the building was still extant. The article concludes with the heyday of Nagapattinam under the Cholas, when it became the focal point of Srivijaya’s attempt to establish friendly diplomatic relations with the Cholas through temple donations.

The following two papers are devoted to South Indian merchant guilds, whose fame is strongly associated with the Cholas and which are often regarded as a driving force behind the naval expeditions of the Cholas against Srivijaya. N. Karashima’s article, to which the second part of his already introduced first article has to be added, is based on his research project on the South Indian merchant guilds. Together with his colleagues Y. Subbarayalu and P. Shanmugam, both of whom are also featured in this volume, he collected more than three hundred inscriptions relating to these guilds, thus

doubling the number of known inscriptions. The article focuses on the most important guild, the Ainurruva, also known as Ayyavole, which became active in Tamil Nadu from the middle of the tenth century. The detailed depiction of its organization and unique eulogies is followed by an analysis of the crucial question of its relation with the Cholas. Karashima explains the puzzling decrease in guild inscriptions in Tamil Nadu during the heyday of the Chola state in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (in contrast to their increase in Karnataka) not as an indication of a decline in the guilds' trade, but of their strong control by the Cholas, which restricted their own cultural activities that are the major theme of their inscriptions. The Añjuvaṇṇam guild is a smaller, but in the context of the Indian Ocean trade system, perhaps even more significant guild which Y. Subbarayalu defines in his paper as "a body of West Asian traders", consisting variously of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traders and operating in the ports of the Malabar and Coromandel coasts and Java. Thus a Syrian Christian grant at Kottayam of c. AD 1220 bears signatures in Arabic, Hebrew, and Pahlavi scripts and a twelfth-century Tamil text refers to a group of Muslim Anjuvannam traders in Nagapattinam. Subbarayalu's deliberations about the various modes of local cooperation of "maritime" Anjuvannam traders with other South Indian guilds, particularly the Manigramam, which were more directly linked with India's "sub-continental" trade, are very informative with respect to the organization of South India's international trade.

These detailed studies of South Indian merchant guilds are followed by two more general chapters which also add new aspects to the debate. A. Meenakshisundararajan, too, concedes to the merchant guilds a great share in the trade policy of the Cholas. But he links their expansionism to a remarkable change in the Asian maritime trade system around AD 1000. Partly influenced by the rise of the Cholas, situated right in the centre of the Indian Ocean trade, the transoceanic pre-emporia trade from the Near East to China changed to a sectorial emporia trade, focusing on the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the South China Sea, together with the Java Sea. This development enhanced the importance of the harbour emporia in South and Southeast Asia and the need to control them and, at the same time, to ensure unrestricted access to them. H. Devare's paper contains an overview of various aspects of Indian influences on the cultures of Southeast Asia. Special emphasis is given to India's trade in textiles with Southeast Asia which Devare regards as "the binding factor in the cultural history of these two regions", particularly during the Chola period when weaving and dyeing industries saw great development.

The next three papers pertain to Sri Lanka and Indonesia, the two countries which were most directly affected by Chola expansionism.

A. Manatunga's article on Sri Lanka is an important complementary contribution to the study of early Indian influences in Southeast Asia, the grand theme of the conference, as it gives a comprehensive account of Sri Lanka's close cultural relations with Southeast Asia during the Polonnaruva period. Polonnaruva is relevant to this volume too, as it was the chief administrative centre of the Cholas after their conquest of Sri Lanka by Rajaraja. Situated near its eastern coast with the important harbour of Trincomalee, it played, as pointed out by Manatunga, an important role in Rajendra's naval policy against Srivijaya. P. Shanmugam begins his article with a short survey of the few clear literary and archaeological evidences of maritime trade relations between Tamil Nadu and Southeast Asia during the Sangam Age in the first centuries AD. He emphasizes that these friendly relations were only temporarily interrupted by Rajendra's naval expeditions. Then follows a report on his survey of Chola influence on architecture, sculpture, and iconography in Indonesia, particularly at Jambi, the Dieng Plateau, and Prambanan. Despite obvious similarities, he is careful to speak in all these cases only of "traces" and suggested "influence" as he rightly admits that "it is very difficult to identify the Chola idiom". N. Susanti traces the rise and rule of Airlangga in the age of increasing competition between Srivijaya and Java to control the lucrative spice trade with the new maritime powers of the Cholas and Song China. Rajendra's defeat of Srivijaya allowed Airlangga to reunite East Java and establish a flourishing kingdom, and to posthumously become early East Java's most famous king.

It is one of the ironies of the history of Indo-China relations that the extant Tamil inscriptions in China date only from 1281, two years after the final fall of the Cholas. They were the Indian dynasty that had not only been most actively involved in maritime trade with China, but were also the most productive one in issuing thousands of marvellous inscriptions in South India and a few in Southeast Asia too (see appendix I). In her article on the Indic carvings of Quanzhou, R. Lee links the foundation of a Shiva temple, about whose consecration the Tamil-Chinese bilingual inscription reports, with yet another important event of the year 1279 — Kublai Khan's final conquest of Southern China.

Under the Mongols of the Yuan Dynasty, who were themselves foreigners in China, the community of foreign traders in Quanzhou, which had actively supported them, gained greater privileges. Apart from a stylistic analysis of the nearly three hundred still existing fragments of the destroyed temple, the salient points of her deliberations are considerations about their authorship. Although many of the carvings are strikingly South Indian in style, they reveal according to Lee "conceptual and craft influences from multiple communities". Particularly the columns, in which "Indian and Chinese subject

matters are nearly interchangeable”, might have been built by “collaborating Chinese and Tamil artisans” and the temple as a whole might be the outcome of “reliance on a shared community of local Quanzhou artisans”.

The already mentioned appendices of Indian and Chinese sources of this volume by N. Karashima, Y. Subbarayalu and T. Sen speak for themselves. They are a most appropriate documentation of South Indian maritime activities in the age of the Cholas even beyond Nagapattinam and Suvarnadwipa, from Cochin to Quanzhou.

It is a pleasure for me to record my thanks to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, its Director Ambassador K. Kesavapany, its staff and in particular to Professor Tansen Sen, Dr Geoffrey Wade and Ms Rahilah Yusuf for their unfailing help in the production of this volume.

*Professor Hermann Kulke (emeritus)*  
*Chair of Asian History*  
*Kiel University*  
*Germany*

## Notes

1. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Cōlas*, 2nd revised ed. (Madras, 1955), p. 218.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
3. G. W. Spencer, *The Politics of Expansion: The Chola Conquest of Sri Lanka and Sri Vijaya* (Madras, 1983).
4. *Idem*, “The Politics of Plunder: The Cholas in Eleventh Century Ceylon”, in *Journal of Asian Studies* 35 (1976): 405–20.
5. M. Abraham, *Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India* (New Delhi, 1988), p. 142.
6. Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu, 2003), p. 223; see also K. R. Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 1985); R. Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization: South India 300 BC to AD 1300* (Delhi, 1996).
7. Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 225.
8. For example, K. R. Hall, “International Trade and Foreign Diplomacy in Early Medieval South India”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 21 (1978) 75–98; Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*; and H. Kulke, “Rivalry and Competition in the Bay of Bengal in the Eleventh Century and Its Bearing on Indian Ocean Studies”, in *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500–1800*, edited by Om Prakash and Denys Lombard (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 17–36.
9. See Appendix I, No. 6.
10. See Appendix II.

## THE CONTRIBUTORS

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