

# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS OF THE CHOLAS AND THE NAYAKARS IN SOUTH INDIA

**Dr. A. Bhavani**

*Assistant Professor, Department of History  
E.M.G. Yadava Women's College, Madurai*

## Abstract

*The administrative systems of the Cholas (9th–13th centuries CE) and the Nayakars (16th–18th centuries CE) represent two significant phases in the political history of South India. While the Cholas established a highly centralized yet locally participatory administration, the Nayakars adopted a decentralized military-feudal system under the influence of the Vijayanagara Empire. This study compares their administrative structures, revenue systems, local governance, military organization, judicial administration, and public welfare. The research concludes that although both dynasties contributed significantly to governance and regional development, the Cholas developed a more institutionalized and democratic local administration, whereas the Nayakars emphasized military control and regional autonomy.*

**Keywords:** *Chola Administration, Nayakar Administration, South Indian History, Local Self-Government, Kudavolai System, Palayam System, Revenue Administration, Military Administration, Comparative Study, Medieval Tamil Nadu.*

## Introduction

South India witnessed remarkable administrative innovations under both the Cholas and the Nayakars. The Chola Empire is renowned for its efficient bureaucracy, extensive revenue administration, and autonomous village institutions. In contrast, the Nayakar rulers, who governed regions such as Madurai, Thanjavur, and Gingee after the decline of the Vijayanagara Empire, relied heavily on the **Palayam (Poligar)** system, granting military chiefs considerable autonomy in return for military service and revenue collection.

This comparative study examines similarities and differences in their administrative structures and evaluates their impact on governance and society.

## Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the administrative structure of the Cholas.
2. To analyze the administrative system of the Nayakars.
3. To compare their political, revenue, judicial, military, and local administrative systems.
4. To evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of both administrations.
5. To understand their contribution to South Indian political history.

## Research Methodology

This study follows a **descriptive and comparative historical research methodology**.

## Sources of Data

### Primary Sources

- Temple inscriptions
- Copper plate grants
- Stone inscriptions
- Contemporary literary works

### Secondary Sources

- Books on South Indian history
- Research articles
- Academic journals
- Government publications
- University dissertations

## Method of Analysis

The study compares administrative institutions under the following themes:

- Central administration
- Provincial administration
- Revenue administration
- Village administration
- Military organization
- Judicial system
- Public welfare

## Comparative Analysis

### Central Administration

#### Cholas

The Chola administration was highly organized and centralized. The king was the supreme authority, assisted by ministers, military commanders, and revenue officials. Provincial governors administered different regions while maintaining close contact with the central government.

#### Nayakars

The Nayakars exercised royal authority but delegated significant powers to **Palayakkarars (Poligars)**. These local chiefs managed administration, collected taxes, maintained armies, and ensured law and order in their territories.

## Comparison

| Cholas                                     | Nayakars                                 |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Strong centralized administration          | Semi-feudal decentralized administration |
| Officials directly responsible to the king | Authority shared with Palayakkarars      |
| Efficient bureaucratic hierarchy           | Greater regional autonomy                |

## Provincial Administration

### Cholas

The empire was divided into:

- Mandalam
- Valanadu
- Nadu
- Kurram
- Village (Ur)

Each administrative unit had clearly defined responsibilities.

### Nayakars

The kingdom was divided into **Palayams**, each administered by a Palayakkarar responsible for taxation, military support, and maintaining peace.

### Comparison

The Cholas maintained a standardized administrative hierarchy, while the Nayakars adopted a military-based territorial system.

## Local Administration

### Cholas

The Cholas developed one of India's most advanced systems of local self-government.

Village assemblies included:

- **Ur** – common village assembly
- **Sabha** – Brahmin village assembly
- **Nagaram** – merchant organizations

Members were often selected through the famous **Kudavolai system**.

### Nayakars

Village administration remained under village officers and local chiefs but lacked the democratic institutional structure of the Cholas.

### Comparison

| Cholas                        | Nayakars                                  |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Democratic village assemblies | Village administration under local chiefs |
| Kudavolai election system     | No formal electoral mechanism             |
| High public participation     | Limited local participation               |

## Revenue Administration

### Cholas

Land revenue was the principal source of income.

Revenue sources included:

- Land tax

- Trade tax
- Customs duties
- Professional taxes
- Water tax

Extensive land surveys ensured fair taxation.

### **Nayakars**

Revenue was collected mainly through the Palayakkarars.

Major sources included:

- Land tax
- Trade duties
- Tributes
- Agricultural taxes

Revenue collection often varied according to local practices.

### **Comparison**

The Cholas maintained systematic land surveys and centralized revenue administration, whereas the Nayakars relied on decentralized revenue collection.

### **Military Administration**

#### **Cholas**

The Cholas maintained:

- Standing army
- Cavalry
- Infantry
- Elephant corps
- Powerful navy

Their naval strength facilitated overseas expansion.

#### **Nayakars**

Military strength depended largely on Palayakkarars, who maintained their own forces and supplied troops during warfare.

### **Comparison**

| <b>Cholas</b>            | <b>Nayakars</b>                     |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Standing royal army      | Regional military chiefs            |
| Strong navy              | Limited naval importance            |
| Central military control | Decentralized military organization |

### **Judicial Administration**

#### **Cholas**

Justice was administered by:

- Village assemblies
- Royal courts
- Local officials

Punishments were generally based on customary law and royal authority.

### **Nayakars**

Justice was administered by:

- Local chiefs
- Village elders
- Royal courts

The king served as the highest judicial authority.

### **Public Welfare**

#### **Cholas**

The Cholas invested heavily in:

- Irrigation tanks
- Canals
- Roads
- Temples
- Educational institutions

#### **Nayakars**

The Nayakars promoted:

- Temple construction
- Fortifications
- Tanks
- Choultries
- Religious institutions

### **Comparison**

Both dynasties encouraged public welfare, though the Cholas emphasized irrigation and agriculture, while the Nayakars focused more on temple-centered development and military infrastructure.

### **Major Similarities**

- Monarchical system of government.
- Agriculture formed the economic foundation.
- Temples functioned as economic and social institutions.
- Land revenue was the principal source of income.
- Kings acted as supreme judicial authorities.
- Both encouraged irrigation and public works.

## Major Differences

| Aspect                   | Cholas                        | Nayakars                    |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Nature of Administration | Centralized                   | Decentralized               |
| Local Government         | Democratic village assemblies | Palayakkarar administration |
| Revenue Collection       | Direct government collection  | Through military chiefs     |
| Military                 | Standing royal army           | Palayam forces              |
| Bureaucracy              | Well-developed                | Less centralized            |
| Elections                | Kudavolai system              | No electoral system         |
| Naval Power              | Strong                        | Limited                     |

## Findings

The study reveals that:

- The Cholas established one of medieval India's most sophisticated administrative systems.
- Village self-government under the Cholas promoted local participation and accountability.
- The Nayakars adapted governance to changing political and military circumstances through the Palayam system.
- Chola administration was more bureaucratic and standardized, whereas Nayakar administration relied on regional military authority.
- Both systems contributed significantly to South India's political and cultural development.

## Conclusion

The Cholas and the Nayakars played pivotal roles in shaping South Indian administration, though they differed considerably in structure and governance. The Cholas developed a centralized state supported by efficient revenue administration, a strong military, and highly organized village institutions that remain notable examples of local self-government. The Nayakars, influenced by the Vijayanagara political tradition, introduced a decentralized system centered on the Palayakkarars, ensuring military readiness and regional stability. Both administrations strengthened agriculture, temple institutions, and public infrastructure, but the Chola model is generally regarded as more systematic, participatory, and enduring in its administrative legacy.

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