Gangaikondacholapuram, bustling capital

With a highway linking it to Thanjavur, it was a major commercial centre during Rajendra Chola’s time

Why did Rajendra Chola shift the Chola capital to Gangaikondacholapuram? “First, Rajendra needed a large tract of land, to station his army of nine lakh men, which was available there. Secondly, Thanjavur was surrounded by rivers, and so logistically Gangaikondacholapuram was a better choice. Thirdly, recruitment of soldiers was easier. Before Rajendra’s time, many soldiers and even generals in the Chola army were from Kerala. Many of Raja Raja’s soldiers were from Pandya land. But Rajendra’s army had mainly Surutimans (now called Moopanars) and Vanniyars, who lived in the areas around Gangaikondacholapuram,” says Dr. L. Tyagarajan, retired Principal of Government Arts College, Ariyalur, who recorded 513 new inscriptions in Ariyalur and Perambalur districts. His Ph.D. thesis on the Historical Archaeology of Ariyalur region won plaudits from many scholars.

“Since Gangaikondacholapuram was a major commercial centre, many towns nearby became important trade centres,” says Tyagarajan. Powerful merchant guilds, like disai ayirathu ainootruvar, manigramathar, padinen vishayattar, sankarappadiyar and anjuvannathar migrated to these areas.

A bustling city called Vikramacholapuram (now called Vikramangalam) came up. A highway linking Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram passed through Vikramangalam. Coin moulds found near Vikramangalam indicate the presence of a mint there. Muthuvaancheri was a pearl centre. Terracotta pipes for melting iron found in Alavai show that weapons were made here. “Places named Keezhvannam and Melvannam point to the presence of gold assayers (vannakkan) here,” says Tyagarajan. Inscriptions say that orders were passed by Chola kings seated on a golden throne under a pearl-studded canopy in the Vikramangalam palace.

Powerful community

The Nagarathars (merchants), who lived in the huge business city of Madurantakapuram, were very powerful — they had the right to auction temple
properties and to grant tax exemptions. Pandya inscriptions (14th century CE) show that these merchants continued to be influential, even after the end of Chola rule in the area.

In the Sangam age, merchant guilds were called sathu and the head of the guild was called maasaathuvaaan. Export was ‘etru sathu’ and import was ‘irakku sathu!’

“Places where merchants lived often had the prefix ‘satha.’ So businessmen must have lived in places like Sathampadi, in Ariyalur district, during Rajendra’s time. Names of their Gods, also invariably had ‘Satha’ in them. The deity in Peria Thirukkonam Ayyanar temple is called Uthanda Sathanar, and even today it is the family deity of many Vaaniya Chettis,” explains Tyagarajan.

“We find inscriptions to show that many merchants were Jains or Buddhists. An inscription in Kamarasavalli says that the street where oil merchants lived was called Jina Chintamani theru. In the inscription, the merchants say that Mahabodhi (Buddha) was born in their community. These oil merchants were called Vaaniya Mudalis and Vaaniya Nagarathars. An inscription in Anbil Siva temple talks of a Jain temple in Idaikudi, which is probably the place now known as Kalvikudi. There is no trace of the Jain temple today, but there is a lone Jain icon, which, interestingly, is referred to by the villagers as Chettiar Sami!”

Because of the Muslim invasions, the merchants left their settlements. When Kumara Kampana overthrew the Madurai Sultanate, Ariyalur and the surrounding areas came under Vijayanagar rule. Two inscriptions dated 1371 C.E. found near Vikramangalam say that Kampana’s officer brought back the merchants to the area.

“Vijayanagar was a Hindu empire that stood up to the might of the Muslim Sultanates. So the merchants might have thought that their interests would be best protected if they converted to Hinduism. In course of time, the Buddhist and Jain temples in the area must have fallen into disuse. That perhaps explains why we now find only stray sculptural relics of these religions,” says Tyagarajan.

Social changes

There were social changes too, as a result of Rajendra’s recruitment of Surutimans and Vanniyars into his army. They had originally lived in hilly regions, but later came down to the plains. They began to buy land, and when Chola power began to dim, they were among the most powerful landowning castes.

Even before Rajendra’s time, Ariyalur had attracted the attention of the Chola kings. Some examples of early Chola art are seen in Kizhaiyur. Gandaraditya established an Agraharam called Gandaraditya Chaturvedi mangalam (now called Gandaraditam). A Siva and Vishnu temple built in Uthama Chola’s period can still be seen there, albeit modernised. Sembian Madevi built a lake in Gandaraditam called Sembian Madevi Pereri. “Spanning 416 acres, it fills up with excess water from Nandi Aru. When the
Gandaraditam lake is full, water flows to Vettakudi lake and from there to Sukran Eri,” says Tyagarajan.

When I visit the Gandaraditam lake, I find that only a small portion of it is used. The rest is covered with ‘seema karuvelam’ (prosopis juliflora). Old villagers say that 50 years ago, the lake was periodically desilted, and looked like an ocean. If it were cleaned up, we could easily have three crops a year here, say the villagers.

Any account of Ariyalur district would be incomplete without the mention of the Pazhuvekkattaiyars. The Anbil copper plates say that Parantaka married the daughter of ‘Kerala mannan Pazhuvekkattaiyar.’ Thevaram says ‘Malayala andanargal ethum… Pazhuvur.’ “In the Alanduraiyar temple, built by the Pazhuvekkattaiyars, an Uttama Chola period inscription says three angas of Chakkai Koothu (from Chera Nadu) were performed here. So, clearly the Pazhuvekkattaiyars were from Kerala. They had their own army, which went to the aid of the Cholas when required, and we even get the names of some regiments of this army,” says Tyagarajan.

Why is it that we don’t hear about the Pazhuvekkattaiyars later on? “Raja Raja and his son Rajendra centralised power, and so prominent families lost their royal status and became mere administrators. During the time of Kulottunga I, families like the Malayamans and Irungolars regained power, but we don’t hear of the Pazhuvekkattaiyars. Maybe the line had ended by then.”

Were there any disputes over succession, when Rajendra died? “The Thiruvindalur copper plates say that when his end was near, Rajendra told his ministers that he wanted his second son to succeed him. But after Rajendra’s death, his second son had his elder brother Rajadhi Raja crowned. Since the king’s favourite son voluntarily stepped aside for his brother, the copper plates compare the brothers to Rama and Bharata.”

(The World Heritage Day was observed on April 18)