Chola Administration – Uthiramerur Inscriptions, Kudavolai System, Ur, Sabha & Nagaram, Variyams, Rajaraja I, Rajendra I, Naval Expeditions & Brihadisvara Temple | TNPSC Notes

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The **Imperial (later) Cholas** (c. 850 – 1279 CE), beginning with Vijayalaya's capture of Thanjavur, built under **Rajaraja I** (985–1014) and **Rajendra I** (1012–1044) an empire covering much of South India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and sent naval expeditions as far as Kadaram (Srivijaya). Their administration is best known for **village self-government**: the **Uthiramerur inscriptions** of **Parantaka I** (919 and 921 CE) describe in detail the **kudavolai** (pot-ticket) election of members of the village sabha, the rules of eligibility and disqualification, and the committees called **variyams**. The **Brihadisvara (Peruvudaiyar) temple** at Thanjavur became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987; with the temples of Gangaikonda Cholapuram and Darasuram added in 2004, the site is called the **Great Living Chola Temples**.

தமிழில் படிக்க

These notes are written for TNPSC Group 1, 2/2A and 4 aspirants. Chola history appears in both the **Indian history** unit and the unit on **History, Culture and Heritage of Tamil Nadu**; the Uthiramerur kudavolai system is also linked to questions on local bodies and Panchayati Raj. Related note: Local governance in Tamil Nadu.

Important Chola Rulers at a Glance

Ruler (reign)	Key achievements
Vijayalaya (c. 850–871)	Captured Thanjavur from the Muttaraiyars and founded the Imperial Chola line.
Aditya I (871–907)	Ended Pallava rule and brought Thondaimandalam under the Cholas.
Parantaka I (907–955)	"Madurai Konda" – took the Pandya country; covered the Chidambaram temple with gold; the **Uthiramerur inscriptions** belong to his reign; defeated at Takkolam (949) by the Rashtrakuta Krishna III.
Rajaraja I (985–1014)	Born Arulmozhivarman; naval battle of Kandalur Salai; conquest of northern Sri Lanka – Polonnaruwa renamed Jananathamangalam; the Maldives ("Munnir Pazhantheevu Panniraayiram"); Brihadisvara temple (1010); land survey; meikeerthi tradition ("Thirumagal pola"); titles Mummudi Chola, Sivapadasekara.

Rajendra I (1012–1044)	Conquest of all Sri Lanka; Ganga expedition – "Gangaikonda Chola"; new capital **Gangaikonda Cholapuram** with the Cholagangam tank; 1025 naval expedition to **Kadaram** (Srivijaya) – "Kadaram Kondan"; "Pandita Chola".
Kulothunga I (1070–1120)	Union of the Chalukya and Chola lines; abolished tolls – "**Sungam Thavirtha Cholan**"; embassy to China in 1077.
Rajaraja II (1146–1173)	**Airavatesvara temple**, Darasuram.
Rajendra III (1246–1279)	Last Chola ruler; Chola rule ended with the rise of the Pandyas.

Central Administration

- **King:** hereditary rule; the heir (yuvaraja) was often made co-ruler in the king's lifetime (e.g. Rajendra from 1012). **Meikeerthis** (royal eulogies) listing the king's achievements open the inscriptions.
- **Officials:** perundaram (higher officials) and sirutharam (lower officials); posts such as the Thirumandira Olai Nayagam who recorded royal orders.
- **Revenue:** land tax was the main income; under Rajaraja a detailed land survey graded the lands; tolls and professional taxes also existed.
- **Army:** elephants, cavalry, infantry; regiments close to the king such as the Velaikkarar; a strong **navy**.

Administrative Divisions

Division	Description
Mandalam	Province (e.g. Cholamandalam, Thondaimandalam; Sri Lanka – Mummudi Cholamandalam)
Valanadu	Sub-division of a mandalam
Nadu (Kootram)	Group of villages; assembly of the nattar
Ur / village	Basic unit – with the assemblies ur, sabha and nagaram

Local Assemblies: Ur, Sabha, Nagaram

Assembly	Where	Members
Ur	Ordinary (non-brahmadeya) villages	Landholders of the village
Sabha / Mahasabha	**Brahmadeya** villages (granted to Brahmins; e.g. Uthiramerur Chaturvedimangalam)	Brahmin landholders
Nagaram	Trade centres	Merchants

The executive committees of the sabha were called **variyams** and their members **variyapperumakkal**. They managed irrigation, temples, land and local justice, and helped in collecting the village's dues.

The Uthiramerur Inscriptions – the Kudavolai System

Uthiramerur (now in Kanchipuram district) was then the brahmadeya "Uthiramerur Chaturvedimangalam". On the walls of its **Vaikunda Perumal temple**, inscriptions of the **12th and 14th regnal years of Parantaka I** (**919** and **921 CE**) describe how members of the sabha were chosen. The second (921) inscription gives the detailed, revised rules.

Element	Rule
Wards	The village was divided into **30 kudumbus** (wards); one member from each
Land	Owner of **more than a quarter veli** of tax-paying land
House	Lives in his own house built on his own site
Age	**35 to 70**
Learning	Knows the Mantra Brahmana and can teach it; alternatively, one owning only one-eighth veli was eligible if he knew one Veda and one Bhashya
Other	Of good conduct, honest earnings and ability in affairs
Disqualification	Those who served on a committee in the previous three years; those who served but **did not submit accounts**, and their relatives; those guilty of grave sins or of taking others' property
Kudavolai	Names of eligible men were written on palm leaves, bundled ward-wise and put in a **pot (kudam)**; in front of the assembly a **young boy** drew one leaf for each ward – that person was chosen
Term	One year (360 days); removal at once for misconduct

Variyams (Committees)

Variyam	Function
Samvatsara variyam	Annual committee – general supervision and justice; elders with learning who had served on the garden and tank committees
Thotta variyam	Gardens and lands
Eri variyam	Tanks and irrigation water
Pon variyam	Testing gold / coins, finance
Panchavara variyam	Revenue-related duties (scholars differ on its exact function)

- **Significance:** written election rules, eligibility and disqualification, rotation (three-year gap) and financial accountability (submission of accounts) make these among the oldest written records of village democracy.
- **Limits:** property, Vedic learning and age requirements excluded women, the landless and most people – it cannot be equated with universal adult franchise; Uthiramerur was a brahmadeya.
- **Present link:** cite it as a historical precedent in answers on the Gram Sabha and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992).

The Chola Navy and Overseas Expeditions

Year (c.)	Event
988	Rajaraja – battle of Kandalur Salai (Kerala coast)
993	Rajaraja – northern Sri Lanka conquered; Anuradhapura destroyed; Polonnaruwa made capital (Jananathamangalam)
Late in Rajaraja's reign	Conquest of the Maldives ("Munnir Pazhantheevu Panniraayiram")
1017–18	Rajendra – all Sri Lanka; King Mahinda V captured
1019–1023	Rajendra – Ganga expedition; Ganga water brought to the Cholagangam tank
1025	Rajendra – naval expedition against the ports of the **Srivijaya** empire, including **Kadaram** (Kedah in present Malaysia)

These expeditions showed Chola sea power to the point that the Bay of Bengal is often described as a "Chola lake"; protecting South-East Asian trade routes was one aim. On 27 July 2025, at the **Aadi Thiruvathirai** festival in Gangaikonda Cholapuram marking 1,000 years of Rajendra's South-East Asian expedition, the Prime Minister released a commemorative coin.

Brihadisvara and the Great Living Chola Temples

Temple	Builder	Note
Brihadisvara (Peruvudaiyar, Rajarajeswaram), Thanjavur	Rajaraja I; completed 1010	Vimana about 216 ft (66 m); architect Kunjara Mallan Rajaraja Perunthachan; Chola murals; monolithic Nandi; **UNESCO 1987**; millennium celebrated in 2010
Gangaikondacholisvaram, Gangaikonda Cholapuram (Ariyalur district)	Rajendra I	Built in the new capital to mark the Ganga victory; **UNESCO 2004** (extension)
Airavatesvara temple, Darasuram (near Kumbakonam)	Rajaraja II	Chariot-shaped mandapa, fine sculpture; **UNESCO 2004** (extension)

- The Thanjavur inscriptions record temple staff, dancers, musicians and endowments – showing the temple as an **economic and social centre**.

- Chola bronzes, especially the Nataraja, are world-famous.

Writing Mains Answers (Group 1 / Group 2)

Village self-government under the Cholas – significance of the Uthiramerur inscriptions (about 150–250 words)

- **Introduction:** Parantaka I, 919 and 921 CE; Vaikunda Perumal temple, Uthiramerur.
- **Structure:** ur, sabha, nagaram; 30 kudumbus; variyams.
- **Election:** kudavolai; eligibility (over a quarter veli of land, own house, age 35–70, learning).
- **Accountability:** those failing to submit accounts and their relatives barred; three-year gap; one-year term.
- **Assessment:** an early written democratic practice, but with exclusions based on property, learning and gender.
- **Conclusion:** a historical forerunner of today's Gram Sabha and the 73rd Amendment.

Chola sea power (about 150 words)

- Rajaraja – Kandalur Salai, Sri Lanka, Maldives.
- Rajendra – all Sri Lanka; 1025 Kadaram / Srivijaya.
- Aims: protecting trade routes, expanding the empire, prestige.
- Results: cultural and commercial links with South-East Asia; Kulothunga's embassy to China (1077).

Practice: Match the Following

Item	Match
Uthiramerur	Parantaka I – kudavolai
Kadaram Kondan	Rajendra I
Sungam Thavirtha Cholan	Kulothunga I
Darasuram	Rajaraja II
Battle of Takkolam (949)	Krishna III (Rashtrakuta)
Eri variyam	Tank / irrigation management

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- The Uthiramerur inscriptions are **not of Rajaraja I** – they belong to Parantaka I.
- Uthiramerur was a **brahmadeya**, so its assembly was a "sabha" (mahasabha), not an "ur".
- Age limit 35–70; land qualification more than a quarter veli.
- Thanjavur was inscribed by UNESCO in 1987; 2004 was the extension that added the other two temples.
- Gangaikonda Cholapuram was built by Rajendra I and Darasuram by Rajaraja II – do not credit them to Rajaraja I.

Key Terms – Tamil / English (for the bilingual paper)

தமிழ்	English
குடவோலை	Pot-ticket (lot) system of election
குடும்பு	Ward
வாரியம்	Executive committee
பிரம்மதேயம்	Land / village granted to Brahmins
மெய்க்கீர்த்தி	Royal eulogy (prasasti) in inscriptions
வளநாடு	Sub-division of a mandalam
பெருந்தரம் / சிறுதரம்	Higher / lower officials
சதுர்வேதிமங்கலம்	Brahmadeya village of scholars of the four Vedas

Quick Revision Table

Year	Event
c. 850	Vijayalaya captures Thanjavur
919, 921	Uthiramerur inscriptions (Parantaka I)
949	Battle of Takkolam – Parantaka defeated
985	Accession of Rajaraja I
1010	Brihadisvara temple completed
1012	Rajendra becomes co-ruler
1019–1023	Ganga expedition
1025	Kadaram / Srivijaya naval expedition
1070	Kulothunga I
1279	End of Chola rule
1987	Thanjavur temple – UNESCO
2004	Gangaikonda Cholapuram and Darasuram added – Great Living Chola Temples
27 July 2025	Aadi Thiruvathirai at Gangaikonda Cholapuram; commemorative coin

TNPSC Key Points (PYQ-style facts)

- Founder of the Imperial Cholas: Vijayalaya.
- Uthiramerur inscriptions: Parantaka I, 919 and 921 CE; Kanchipuram district.
- Kudavolai – palm leaf + pot + boy; 30 kudumbus.

- Eligibility: over a quarter veli of land, own house, age 35–70, Vedic learning.
- Variyams: Samvatsara, Thotta, Eri, Pon, Panchavara.
- Ur – ordinary village; Sabha – brahmadeya; Nagaram – merchants.
- Divisions: mandalam → valanadu → nadu → ur.
- Rajaraja's birth name: Arulmozhivarman; meikeerthi "Thirumagal pola".
- Rajendra's titles: Gangaikonda Chola, Kadaram Kondan, Pandita Chola.
- Kulothunga I – Sungam Thavirtha Cholan.
- Great Living Chola Temples: Thanjavur (1987), Gangaikonda Cholapuram and Darasuram (2004).

Frequently Asked Questions

What was the kudavolai system?

The lot system used to choose members of the Uthiramerur sabha. In each kudumbu (ward), names of eligible men were written on palm leaves and put in a pot; in front of the assembly a young boy drew one leaf, and the person named on it was chosen.

To whose reign do the Uthiramerur inscriptions belong?

They were engraved in the 12th and 14th regnal years of Parantaka I Chola, i.e. 919 and 921 CE, on the walls of the Vaikunda Perumal temple at Uthiramerur. The second inscription gives the detailed election rules.

What was the difference between ur, sabha and nagaram?

The ur was the assembly of landholders in ordinary villages; the sabha (mahasabha) was the assembly of brahmadeya villages granted to Brahmins; the nagaram was the assembly of merchants in trade centres. The executive committees of the sabha were the variyams.

Which are the Great Living Chola Temples?

The Brihadisvara (Peruvudaiyar) temple, Thanjavur (Rajaraja I; UNESCO 1987), the Gangaikondacholisvaram temple, Gangaikonda Cholapuram (Rajendra I), and the Airavatesvara temple, Darasuram (Rajaraja II) – the last two added in 2004.

Why is Rajendra I called "Kadaram Kondan"?

In 1025 CE Rajendra sent a naval expedition that attacked and took ports of the Srivijaya empire in South-East Asia, including Kadaram (Kedah in present Malaysia), earning him this title.

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Practice questions

1. The Uthiramerur inscriptions belong to the reign of which Chola king?

A. Parantaka I
B. Rajaraja I
C. Rajendra I
D. Vijayalaya

2. In which district is Uthiramerur today?

A. Thanjavur
B. Kanchipuram
C. Ariyalur
D. Thiruvarur

3. As per the Uthiramerur inscription, what was the age limit for members?

A. 25–60
B. 30–60
C. 35–70
D. 40–75

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4. Into how many kudumbus (wards) was Uthiramerur divided?

A. 12
B. 18
C. 30
D. 48

5. In the kudavolai system, who drew the palm-leaf ticket?

A. A young boy
B. A royal officer
C. The village headman
D. The temple priest

6. What was the rule for those who did not submit accounts of committee work?

A. Fine only
B. They and their relatives were disqualified
C. One-year prison
D. Exile

7. What was the function of the Eri variyam?

A. Testing gold
B. Gardens
C. Tanks and irrigation water
D. Justice

8. What was the assembly of brahmadeya villages called?

A. Ur
B. Nattar
C. Nagaram
D. Sabha

9. Correct order of Chola divisions (largest first)?

A. Mandalam – Valanadu – Nadu – Ur
B. Nadu – Valanadu – Mandalam – Ur
C. Valanadu – Mandalam – Ur – Nadu
D. Mandalam – Nadu – Ur – Valanadu

10. Who founded the Imperial Chola line?

A. Karikalan
B. Vijayalaya
C. Aditya I
D. Parantaka I

11. What was the birth name of Rajaraja I?

A. Madhurantakan
B. Rajakesari
C. Arulmozhivarman
D. Kulothungan

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12. In which year was the Brihadisvara temple, Thanjavur, completed?

A. 985

B. 1010

C. 1025

D. 1035

13. When was the Thanjavur Brihadisvara temple inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site?

A. 1984

B. 1987

C. 2004

D. 2010

14. Which temples were added in 2004 to form the Great Living Chola Temples?

A. Mamallapuram, Kanchi

B. Gangaikonda Cholapuram, Darasuram

C. Chidambaram, Srirangam

D. Madurai, Rameswaram

15. Who built the Airavatesvara temple at Darasuram?

A. Rajaraja I

B. Rajendra I

C. Rajaraja II

D. Kulothunga I

16. Who took the title "Kadaram Kondan"?

A. Rajaraja I

B. Parantaka I

C. Kulothunga I

D. Rajendra I

17. Who was called "Sungam Thavirtha Cholan"?

A. Kulothunga I

B. Rajaraja II

C. Vijayalaya

D. Aditya I

18. Who defeated Parantaka I at Takkolam (949)?

A. Pulakesin II

B. Krishna III

C. Vikramaditya VI

D. Amoghavarsha I

19. What name did Rajaraja I give Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka?

A. Mummudi Cholapuram

B. Gangaikonda Cholapuram

C. Jananathamangalam

D. Jayankondam

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20. On the walls of which temple are the Uthiramerur inscriptions?

A. Kailasanathar temple
B. Ekambaranathar temple
C. Brihadisvara temple
D. Vaikunda Perumal temple

Answers with explanations

1. A) Parantaka I – 919 and 921 CE – Parantaka I's 12th and 14th regnal years.

2. B) Kanchipuram – Uthiramerur is in Kanchipuram district.

3. C) 35–70 – Between 35 and 70 years.

4. C) 30 – 30 wards, one member from each by kudavolai.

5. A) A young boy – A young boy drew it from the pot before the assembly.

6. B) They and their relatives were disqualified – They and their relatives were barred from standing.

7. C) Tanks and irrigation water – Eri variyam – tanks and irrigation.

8. D) Sabha – Sabha in brahmadeyas; ur in ordinary villages; nagaram for merchants.

9. A) Mandalam – Valanadu – Nadu – Ur – Mandalam → valanadu → nadu → ur.

10. B) Vijayalaya – Vijayalaya captured Thanjavur around 850 CE.

11. C) Arulmozhivarman – Rajaraja was born Arulmozhivarman.

12. B) 1010 – Completed in 1010; millennium in 2010.

13. B) 1987 – 1987; extended in 2004.

14. B) Gangaikonda Cholapuram, Darasuram – Gangaikondacholisvaram and Airavatesvara, Darasuram.

15. C) Rajaraja II – Built by Rajaraja II.

16. D) Rajendra I – Rajendra I, after the 1025 Srivijaya expedition.

17. A) Kulothunga I – Kulothunga I, who abolished tolls.

18. B) Krishna III – The Rashtrakuta king Krishna III.

19. C) Jananathamangalam – Polonnaruwa was renamed Jananathamangalam.

20. D) Vaikunda Perumal temple – The Vaikunda Perumal temple at Uthiramerur.

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