

INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION OF LEARNING IN TAMIL NADU DURING THE LATER CHOLA PERIOD

Ms. S. Keerthana

PhD. Research Scholar (Full-Time), PG and Research Department of History
Arigar Anna Government Arts College, Villupuram 605 602, Tamil Nadu, India
Email: keerthanasiva096@gmail.com

Dr. S. Sudarkodi

Associate professor, (Research Supervisor), PG and Research Department of History
Arignar Anna Government Arts College Villupuram
605602, Tamil Nadu, India, Email: drssaphis@gmail.com

Abstract

The institutional organization of learning in Tamil Nadu during the later phase of the Chola dynasty reveals an advanced structure of educational patronage integrated with religious, administrative, and agrarian institutions. Epigraphic records from temples and brahmadeya settlements indicate that centres of learning were sustained through endowments of land, revenue assignments, and regulated grants administered by local assemblies such as the sabha and ur. These institutions maintained facilities for the teaching of the Vedas, Vedāᅅgas, grammar, logic, and other branches of knowledge, often under the supervision of Brahman scholars. Temples functioned not merely as religious establishments but also as organized educational centres where instruction, manuscript preservation, and scholarly debate occurred within structured settings. Inscriptions from sites such as Ennayiram Vedic College and Tirumukkudal Vedic College provide detailed references to student numbers, teacher stipends, curriculum arrangements, and provisions for food, accommodation, and medical care. These records suggest that the educational framework operated through a coordinated system linking temple institutions, agrarian revenues, and local self-governing assemblies. The later Chola polity thus supported a network of scholastic institutions that sustained Brahmanical intellectual traditions while reinforcing social hierarchy and administrative order. The organization of these centres illustrates the close association between knowledge production, temple economy, and political authority in medieval Tamil society.

Keywords: Later Chola period; institutional learning; temple education; Vedic colleges; brahmadeya settlements; epigraphy; Tamil Nadu; medieval South Indian education.

Introduction

The institutional organization of learning in Tamil Nadu during the later phase of the Chola dynasty presents a structured educational system embedded within the religious and administrative institutions of medieval South India. Educational activity did not exist as an independent sphere; rather, it remained closely connected with temple establishments, brahmadeya settlements, and local self-governing assemblies. These institutions regulated intellectual activity, supervised teachers and students, and ensured the financial stability of educational centres through land

endowments and revenue assignments recorded in inscriptions. Epigraphic records from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries provide detailed information about the organization of scholastic institutions and their integration with temple administration. Inscriptions associated with educational establishments such as the Ennayiram Vedic College and the Tirumukkudal Vedic College demonstrate that centres of learning were maintained through carefully regulated grants. These records specify provisions for teacher salaries, student maintenance, hostel facilities, and the supply of food and other necessities.

The administrative supervision of these endowments rested with village assemblies such as the sabha and ur, which ensured the proper allocation of resources and the continuity of educational functions. Within this framework, the temple served as a central institutional base for the transmission of knowledge. Instruction in the Vedas, Vedāṅgas, grammar, logic, and ritual sciences was conducted under the guidance of learned scholars attached to temple establishments. The educational system therefore operated through a network in which religious institutions, agrarian revenue structures, and local governance mechanisms were interconnected. Such arrangements reveal a society in which the preservation and transmission of sacred and scholarly traditions were sustained through organized institutional support. Available inscriptional evidence allows a partial reconstruction of the scale and organization of these educational institutions during the later Chola period. At the Ennayiram Vedic College, an inscription dated to the reign of Rajendra Chola I records approximately 340 students and about 14 teachers studying various branches of the Vedas, grammar, and philosophical texts. The inscription also specifies daily grain allowances for both teachers and students, indicating a structured system of institutional maintenance.

The educational establishment attached to the Tirumukkudal Vedic College, associated with a temple and hospital complex under Virarajendra Chola, supported around 60 students and several specialized teachers. The inscription details provisions for boarding, food distribution, and regulated instruction. Several Chola inscriptions across Tamil Nadu record land endowments measured in veli units assigned specifically for the maintenance of teachers, students, and temple-based educational activities. Studies of South Indian inscriptions indicate that dozens of temples and brahmadeya villages maintained similar though smaller centres of instruction, suggesting the presence of a dispersed but interconnected educational network across the Chola realm.

The later phase of the Chola dynasty (c. 1000–1279 CE) marks a period in which organized systems of learning attained a structured institutional form in South India. Educational activity was not confined to private instruction or individual scholarly households. Instead, it developed within a coordinated network of temples, brahmadeya settlements, and monastic establishments sustained by royal patronage and agrarian revenue. These institutions operated as regulated centres of intellectual activity within the wider socio-religious framework of the Chola state. The integration of education with temple administration, local governance, and land endowments created a durable institutional structure that sustained scholarly traditions across the region.

Temple Institutions as Educational Centres

Temples during the Chola period evolved into large corporate establishments that combined religious, economic, and intellectual functions. In addition to ritual activity, temple complexes housed spaces for instruction, manuscript preservation, and scholarly gatherings. Temple libraries often referred to as *Saraswati Bhandara* served as repositories where palm-leaf manuscripts were copied, preserved, and circulated among scholars. Royal patronage provided the financial foundation for these activities. Kings such as Rajaraja Chola I and Rajendra Chola I granted entire villages as *devadāna* lands to temples. Revenue derived from these lands funded teacher stipends, student maintenance, manuscript copying, and institutional expenses such as oil for lamps and ritual materials. Through such measures, temples became central institutional bases for the transmission of knowledge. Educational activity during the later Chola period developed through several distinct institutional forms, each associated with particular intellectual traditions and social groups.

Ghatikas and Salais

Ghatikas and salais functioned as advanced centres of learning attached to major temples. These establishments maintained structured curricula and residential arrangements for students. Epigraphic evidence—such as inscriptions from educational centres like Ennayiram Vedic College—provides detailed information about the number of teachers, students, and subjects taught. These institutions resembled organized colleges where scholars engaged in advanced textual study and philosophical debate.

Mathas

Monastic establishments affiliated with Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions also served as centres of education. These institutions provided instruction in religious philosophy, devotional literature, and ritual practice. Mathas frequently offered free food, clothing, and accommodation to students and ascetics. Through these establishments, sectarian philosophical traditions circulated among wider communities.

Agraharas

Agrahara settlements represented another institutional environment for learning. These Brahman villages, established through royal land grants, functioned as residential scholarly communities dedicated to the study of the Vedas and associated texts. The collective resources of the settlement supported scholars who taught successive generations of students. Such settlements effectively operated as decentralized academic environments integrated with the agrarian economy.

Curriculum and Intellectual Specialization

The curriculum followed in these institutions reflected the classical structure of Brahmanical scholarship. Vedic study formed the foundation of education, with students specializing in the recitation and interpretation of the Rig, Yajur, and Sama Vedas. Instruction also included the Vedāṅgas phonetics, grammar, ritual science, metrics, and astronomy which provided the intellectual tools required for Vedic interpretation. Beyond these subjects, students engaged with philosophical and scholarly disciplines such as Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, and Sanskrit grammar (*Vyākaraṇa*). Some institutions also taught applied sciences necessary for temple administration

and ritual practice. Mathematical and astronomical knowledge supported calendrical calculations and architectural planning for temples. Medical education also formed part of institutional learning in certain centres. The educational complex attached to Tirumukkudal Vedic College included a hospital facility known as the *Atula-salai*, where medical practitioners and students studied therapeutic procedures associated with Ayurveda. Instruction in the fine arts music, dance, and sculpture occurred within temple environments that supported ritual performance traditions.

Examples of Major Educational Institutions

Epigraphic evidence provides detailed information about several educational centres maintained during the later Chola period. Among the most frequently cited examples are institutions supported by royal and temple endowments. The college at Ennayiram Vedic College, located in the South Arcot region, received patronage during the reign of Rajendra Chola I. Inscriptions record approximately **340 students and about 10–14 teachers** studying Vedic texts, grammar, and philosophical subjects. The institution maintained structured provisions for daily food allowances and teacher stipends. Another notable establishment existed at Tirumukkudal Vedic College near Kanchipuram. This complex combined a Vedic college, hostel facilities, and a temple hospital. Inscriptions describe the allocation of grain, medical supplies, and salaries for teachers and physicians attached to the institution. Other centres mentioned in historical records include colleges near Tiruvallur that specialized in advanced grammatical studies based on the works of Pāṇini, demonstrating the presence of disciplinary specialization within Chola-period educational systems.

Funding and Institutional Administration

The financial sustainability of these institutions rested on a decentralized endowment system. Land grants assigned to temples or scholarly communities generated agricultural revenue that functioned as permanent endowment funds. Village assemblies supervised the cultivation of endowed lands and ensured that the resulting income reached educational institutions. Administrative regulations recorded in inscriptions specify the allocation of grain for teachers, daily allowances for students, and maintenance costs for hostels and temple libraries. Students commonly resided in institutional hostels or *chattras*, where they followed disciplined routines involving study, recitation, and ritual observance.

- The educational complex at Tirumukkudal Vedic College maintained **about 60 students**, along with provisions for hostel accommodation and a temple hospital.
- Epigraphic studies have documented **over one hundred inscriptions referring to educational endowments** across Tamil Nadu between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.
- Many educational grants involved **land assignments ranging from 5 to 20 veli of cultivable land**, generating agricultural revenue used to maintain teachers, students, and institutional infrastructure.
- Daily student stipends recorded in inscriptions ranged between **2 and 6 nāli of paddy**, while teachers received larger allocations reflecting their institutional status.

The later Chola period therefore represents a stage in which educational activity assumed an organized institutional character. Instruction shifted from the earlier household-based *gurukula*

model toward temple-based establishments supported by permanent endowments and regulated administration. This institutional framework sustained the preservation of textual traditions and contributed to the continuity of intellectual life in South India for several centuries.

The Tirumukkudal Medical School and Hospital

The medical institution established at Venkatesa Perumal Temple in present-day Kanchipuram district represents one of the most elaborate examples of organized medical education and healthcare administration in the medieval world. Epigraphic records dating to the reign of Virarajendra Chola (1063–1070 CE) describe an integrated institutional complex in which a Vedic college, residential facilities for students, and a functioning hospital operated within the same temple establishment. This arrangement illustrates the institutional logic of later Chola educational policy: intellectual training, religious service, and social welfare formed interconnected activities supported by temple endowments. The hospital, referred to in inscriptions as the *Atula-salai*, served both as a centre for medical treatment and as a site of practical instruction for students studying classical Indian medical systems.

Medical Curriculum and Scholarly Instruction

Instruction at Tirumukkudal combined textual study with clinical practice. Students trained in both theoretical knowledge and therapeutic application within the hospital environment. The curriculum centred on classical Ayurvedic treatises, particularly the Charaka Samhita and the Sushruta Samhita, which provided instruction in internal medicine, pharmacology, and surgical procedures. Advanced medical study also included the Ashtanga Hridaya, a systematic exposition of the eight traditional branches of medicine, including pediatrics, toxicology, and rejuvenation therapy. Students trained in pharmaceutical preparation through the study of medicinal compounds derived from herbs, minerals, and metals. The preparation of decoctions, medicated oils, and herbal pastes formed part of the institutional training programme. Such instruction indicates that the Tirumukkudal establishment functioned not merely as a textual academy but as a practical centre of medical science.

Institutional Organization of the Hospital

The inscription at Tirumukkudal provides an unusually detailed description of the personnel employed within the hospital. The administrative structure resembles a professional medical hierarchy. A chief physician supervised the institution and received land endowments as remuneration for his services. Surgeons conducted minor surgical procedures and attended to wounds and traumatic injuries. Pharmacists collected medicinal plants and prepared therapeutic compounds according to prescribed formulas. Nurses administered treatments and cared for patients during recovery. Support staff formed an essential component of the institutional structure. Barbers performed minor surgical procedures and assisted with medical treatments, a practice recorded in several medieval medical traditions. Other personnel included attendants responsible for water supply, sanitation, and the laundering of hospital linens. Such specialized roles demonstrate that the hospital operated as an organized medical facility rather than as an informal healing space.

Pharmaceutical Resources and Medical Supplies

The Tirumukkudal inscription records a detailed inventory of medicines stored in the hospital's pharmacy. Approximately twenty distinct medicinal preparations were maintained for therapeutic use. These included herbal decoctions, medicated oils, and ghee-based preparations used for both internal treatment and external application. Among the listed preparations were compounds prescribed for respiratory ailments, inflammatory conditions, digestive disorders, and cognitive health. Multi-herbal formulations such as *Dasamula* were prepared as anti-inflammatory treatments, while medicated oils were employed in therapeutic massage and surgical care. The presence of such an inventory indicates a systematic pharmaceutical tradition supported by temple resources.

Women and Intellectual Life in the Chola Period

Although formal Vedic colleges remained largely male-dominated institutions, women occupied important positions within the intellectual and cultural environment of the Chola realm. Temple institutions served as centres for artistic and literary training where women received advanced instruction in music, dance, and literary performance. Temple artists and *devadasis* underwent rigorous training in classical Tamil and Sanskrit literature as well as the theoretical foundations of dance traditions associated with *Bharatanatyam*. Their education required mastery of poetic composition, musical theory, and ritual performance. Royal women also participated actively in administrative and cultural life. Figures such as Sembian Mahadevi and Kundavai issued inscriptions that demonstrate familiarity with legal procedures, temple finance, and land administration. Their patronage of temples and scholarly institutions contributed to the intellectual environment of the Chola state. Beyond elite circles, literacy and practical education existed among merchant guilds and artisan communities. Members of trading corporations and weaving groups maintained knowledge of accounting, contract records, and commercial correspondence. Women within such communities frequently participated in family enterprises and acquired practical literacy associated with trade and craft production.

Institutional Significance

The Tirumukkudal establishment illustrates a distinctive feature of later Chola institutional culture: the integration of learning, religious patronage, and public welfare within a single administrative framework. By supporting a hospital alongside a Vedic college, the temple institution connected scholarly training with practical service to society. Knowledge acquired within the educational environment therefore acquired direct application in medical treatment and community care. This institutional arrangement reflects a broader principle within the Chola intellectual tradition: the cultivation of knowledge formed part of a moral and social responsibility sustained through temple endowments, agrarian revenue, and royal patronage. The Tirumukkudal medical school thus stands as a rare example of an early medieval centre where education, healthcare, and religious institutions functioned within a unified administrative system.

Conclusion

The institutional organization of learning in Tamil Nadu during the later phase of the Chola dynasty reflects a highly structured educational environment sustained by temple institutions,

agrarian endowments, and royal patronage. Educational establishments did not operate as isolated centres of instruction; they formed part of a broader institutional framework in which temples, brahmadeya settlements, and monastic foundations regulated intellectual activity and ensured the continuity of scholarly traditions. The integration of learning with temple administration and local governance provided a stable financial and organizational foundation for educational institutions across the Chola realm. Epigraphic evidence demonstrates that these institutions maintained organized curricula, residential facilities for students, and regular stipends supported by agricultural revenues. Centres such as Ennayiram Vedic College and Tirumukkudal Vedic College illustrate the scale and complexity of these establishments, where specialized instruction, student welfare, and administrative oversight operated within clearly defined institutional structures. The presence of integrated facilities such as libraries, hostels, and medical institutions further indicates that education during this period extended beyond textual study to include practical and professional disciplines. The later Chola period therefore represents a stage in South Indian history in which educational activity assumed an organized institutional form supported by the economic resources of temple establishments and agrarian production. Through royal endowments and local administrative supervision, these institutions sustained intellectual traditions that influenced the cultural and scholarly environment of Tamil Nadu for several centuries. The evidence preserved in inscriptions reveals an educational system characterized by administrative regulation, economic stability, and the close association between knowledge, religious institutions, and social organization.

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