



INDIA  
GOLD POLICY  
CENTRE

# **God, Gold and Governance: a network analysis of Trans-Oceanic trade, wealth accumulation and early empire-building in the South Deccan**

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# Section I: Indo-Roman Trade



**Pliny the Elder (23 CE – 79 CE)**

“In no year does India absorb less than **50 million sesterces (500,000 gold aureus coins)** of our empire’s wealth, sending back goods to be sold with us at a **100 times** its prime cost.”

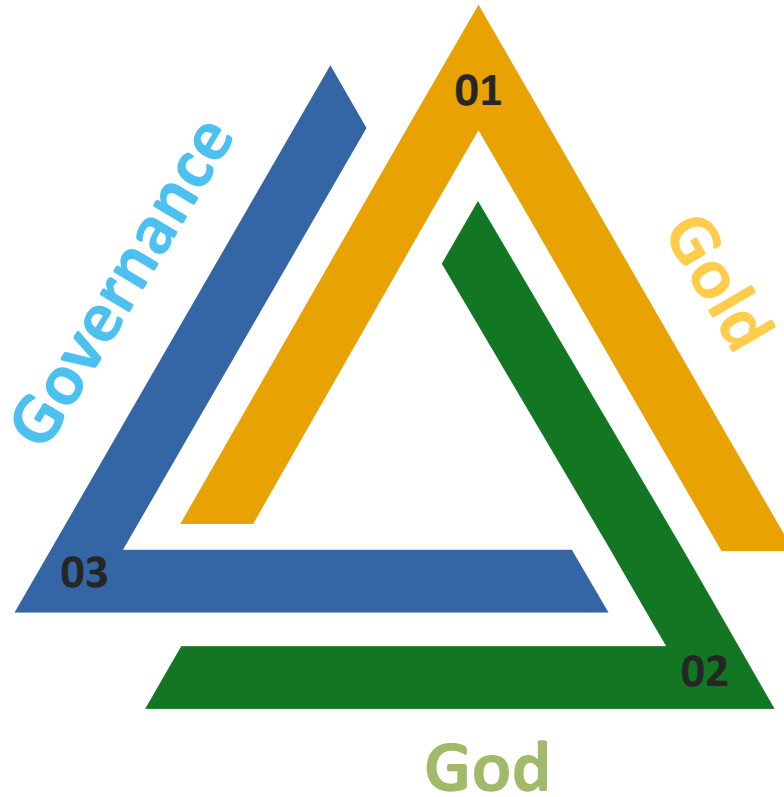
“At the lowest reckoning, India, China, and the Arabian peninsula take from our empire **100 million sesterces** every year – this is the sum which our luxuries and our women cost us.’

*(Natural History [77CE] – trans. Rackham*

<sup>1945)</sup>  
**For Context:**

- A Roman legionary received 225 denarii per year (~ 27% or about 60 denarii) went towards buying grain for the soldier
- Modern estimates of the Roman Empire’s GDP range between **9-20 billion sesterces**
- 1 Aureus = 100 sesterces (brass) / 25 denarii (silver)

# Network Connections



## Gold

Roman gold and silver were used as high-value coins in procurement of commodities as well as items of prestige. Hoards of coins found in the hinterlands point to extent of trade.

## God

The proximity of highly influential temples to major overland trade routes hints at their dual roles as both spiritual and temporal agents of community formation and coalescence

## Governance

Various echelons of rulers exercised control of maritime trade, developing ports, levying tolls, endowing temples and ensuring security. They were major consumers of Roman luxury goods.

# Extent of Trade: Scale & Scope

Beyond these places, the fierce winters and great ice formations make travelling hard, and by the powers of the gods, these places are unexplored



Periplous of the Erythraean Sea  
Περίπλους τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς Θαλάσσης  
1st century AD

Beyond these places, the unexplored ocean curves around towards the west and mingles with the western sea

- ■ ■ ■ Periplous
- ■ ■ ■ Land route
- Roman Empire
- Kingdom of Aksum  
*King Zoscales*
- Himyarite Kingdom  
*King Charibael*
- Nabataean kingdom  
*King Eleazus*
- Indo-Scythian Kingdom  
*King Nambanus*
- Cheras
- Pandian
- Damerica
- Parthian Empire
- Others
- Spices
- Ivory
- Aromatic flowers
- Wine
- Metals
- Silk
- Gold
- Cloth
- Precious stones

# Section II: Urbanisation

The process of agrarian settling began later than in north India and can be broadly divided into three phases:

- **Phase I:** agriculture was conducted with primitive technology and cultivation was confined to slopes of the Western & Eastern ghats.
- **Phase II:** Oxen and plough-based agriculture spread to the river-valleys. This occurred concurrently with **expansion of inland trade.**
- **Phase III:** non-cultivating groups made part of the agrarian sector as early temples receive large arable land.

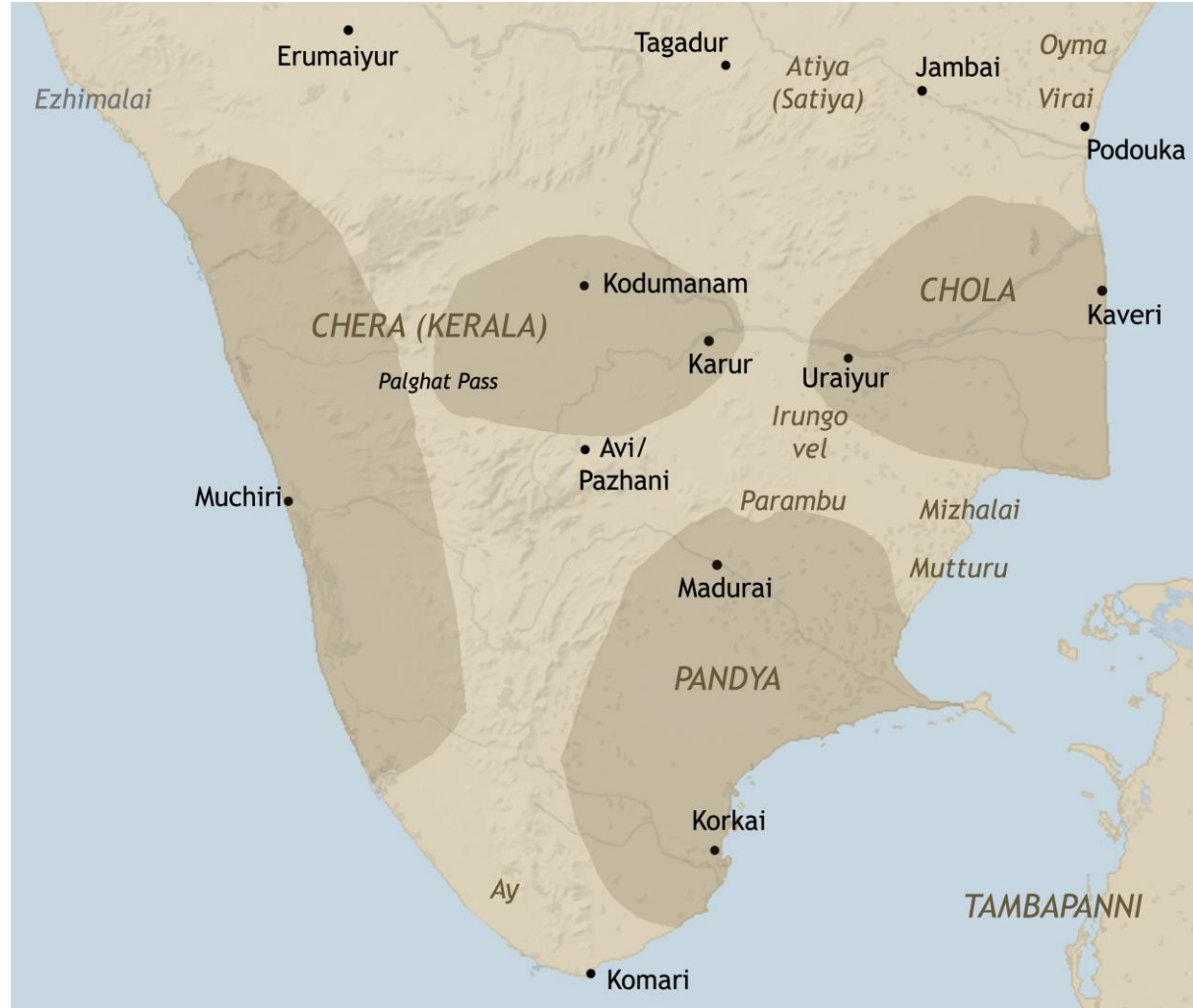


# Land Divisions: The Tinais

Tinai	Ecozone	Activity	Deity
Kurinji	Hilly region	Subsistence-level hunting-gathering	Murugan
Mullai	Pastoral tract/ forest	Animal husbandry, shifting cultivation	Mayon
Neytal	Coastal/ littoral	Fishing	Varunan
Marudam	Riverine wetland/ plains	Agriculture	Vendan
Palai	Parched/ arid zone	Cattle-lifting/looting	Korravai

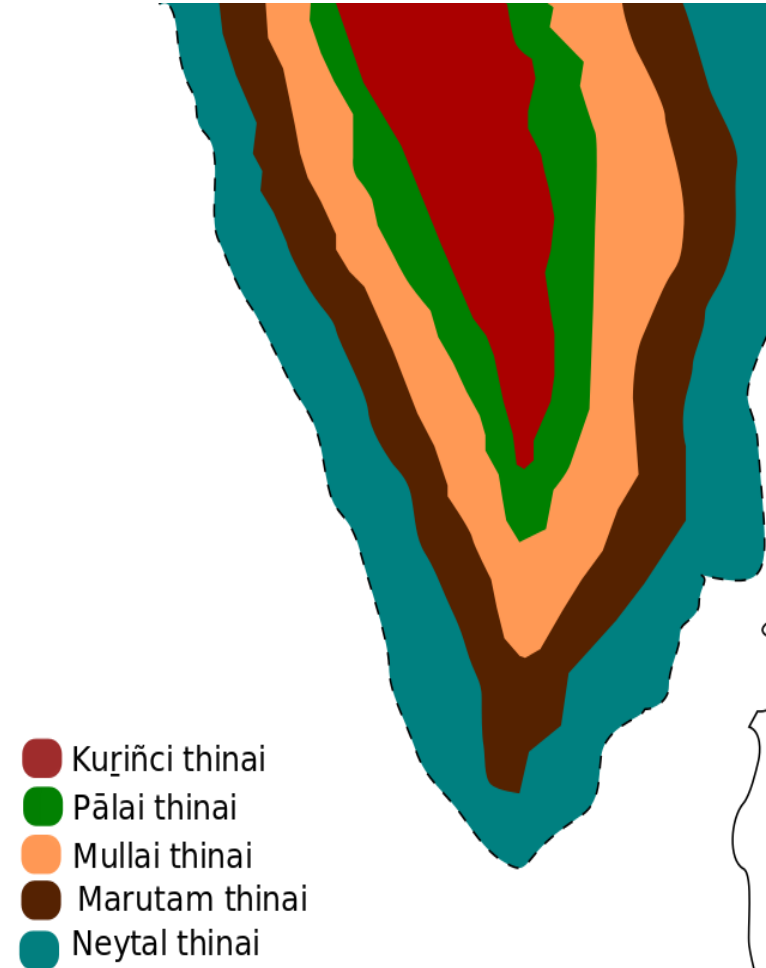
# Tamilakam (300 BCE – 300 CE)

- The land in between the hills of Venkatam and Kanyakumari, ancient Tamilakam includes the whole of modern Tamil Nadu and Kerala.
- The three principal chiefdoms, the **Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas**, had their strongholds both in the interior as well as on the coastline.
- The Cheras' capital was **Karur** in the interior and **Muziris** on the west coast. The Cholas had their capital at **Uraiyur (Trichy)** in the interior and **Puhar (Kaveripattinam)** on the Coromandel coast as their strongholds. Similarly, the Pandyas had **Madurai** and **Korkai (Tuticorin)** as their interior and port cities.



## The Aintinai: trade and inter-dependence

- Most of the five tinais are **fragmented**, ecologically and socially – giving Tamilakam different forms of subsistence as determined by the region.
- People from each tinai interacted with each other, and created a **system of bartered goods**. The hill people exchanged honey, meat, fruits and other wild goods; the pastoralists traded dairy products and the coastal people sold fish and salt.
- The small, self-sustaining tinais developed into larger **economic zones** of productivity and non-productivity through such **interaction and interdependence**.
- While productive zones developed **social division of labour**, society was centred around **clan-based kinship** models elsewhere.
- In the absence of a powerful state power, Tamilakam had a complex society of unevenly developed parts sharing a common culture.





# Political Structure

## Vendar

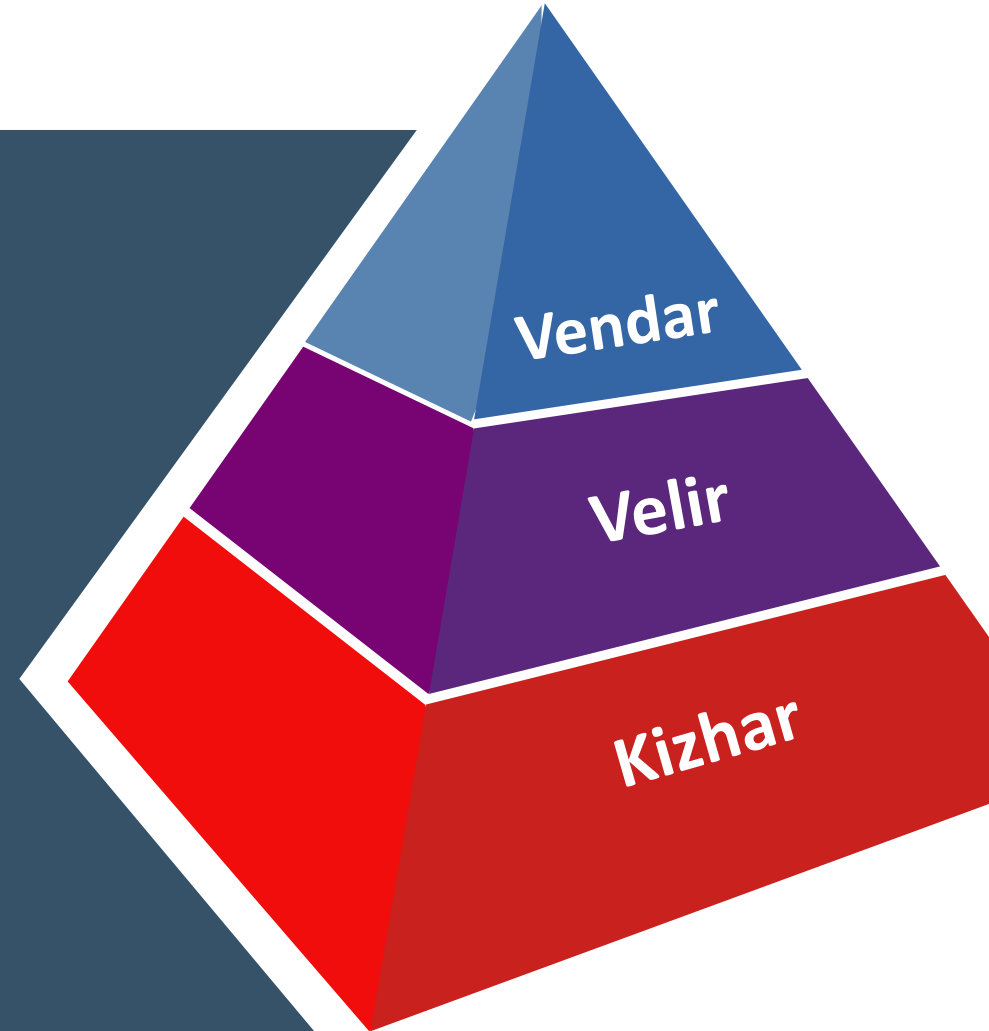
Kings controlling larger, fertile territories. The Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas were known as **muvedar**, 'the three crowned kings', who controlled major agrarian territories, trade routes and towns

## Velir

Chieftains who controlled territories, mainly hilly and forest areas, between the Vendars' fertile lands. Each commanded a big area, rich in natural resources, and had military might to engage in frequent conflicts to raid cattle. On occasion, they collaborated to fight against one or more of the muvendars.

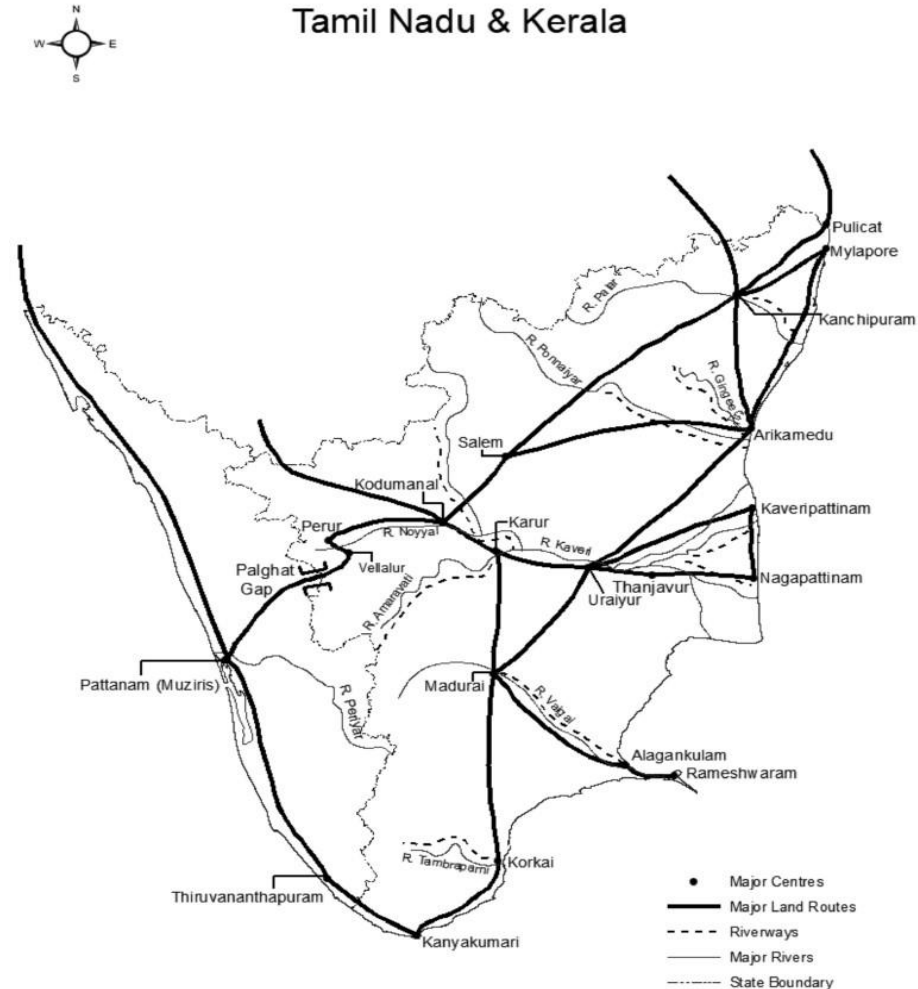
## Kizhar

Local warlords who nominally headed the villages or a small territory, later known as '**nadu**'. They were typically the chiefs of tribal communities living in specific areas.

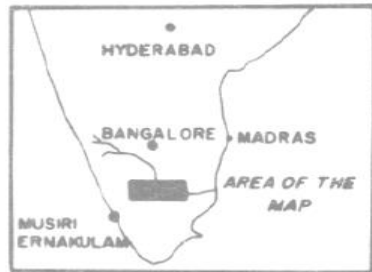
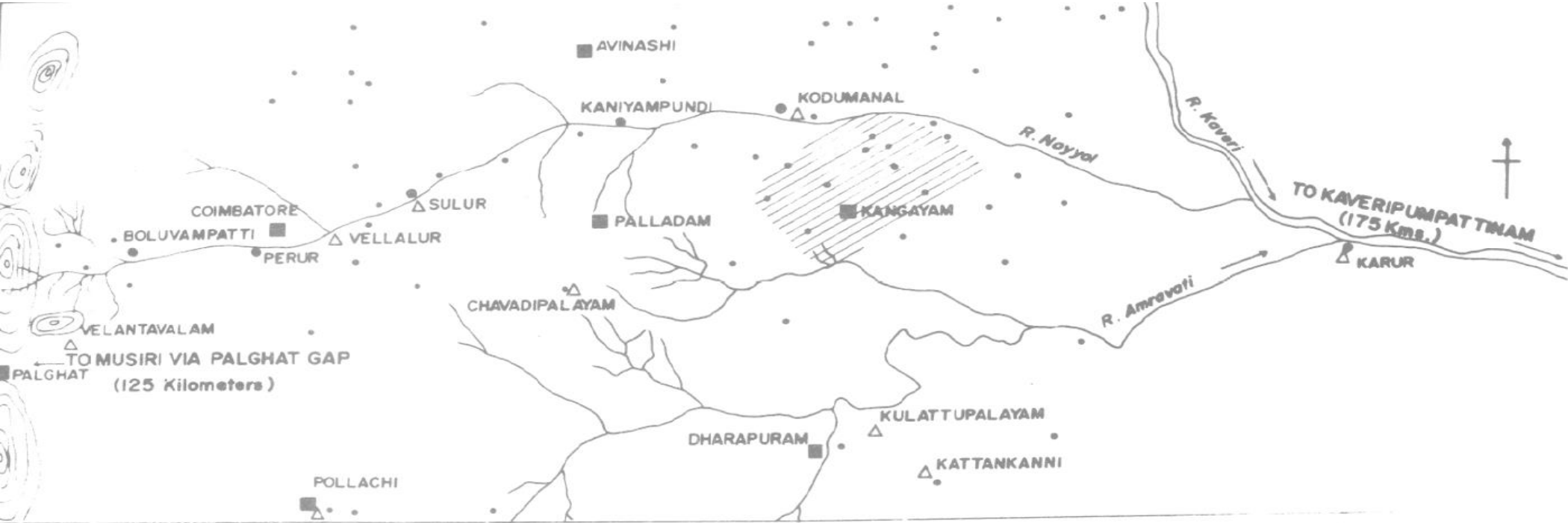


# Emerging Empires: Controlling territory & Wealth

- The Muvendar's primary concern was the subjugation of some 15 velir chiefs who had control over strategic points of exchange: **ports, highway junctions and hill passes.**
- The **influx of gold** through Indo-Roman trade elevated hubs of commerce into nodes of **contested power** – inviting direct **military challenges as well as offers of marriage relations** from the Muvendars
- Weaker velirs and kizhars were subjugated and **made subservient** – serving under the vendar during **plunder raids.**
- All chiefs had to plunder cattle and grain (but also gold, precious stones and clothes) and **redistribute the booty** among their kinsmen
- Kizhars assisting the vendar were given control of seized villages but not resources – linking them in an early **hierarchy of control**



# Spread of Urbanisation in Cheranadu (Muziris to Karur)



- OTHER TOWNS
- EXCAVATED SITES
- MEGALITHIC SITES
- △ ROMAN COINS
- ▨ AREA YIELDING SEMI-PRECIOUS STONE (BERYL)

# Section III: Ancient Temples

- The early society **worshipped nature**, and later started making images of deities and worshipped them at river and pool banks, fertile groves, tree shadows and caves.
- The typical deity or image worship of the south Indian village emerged through the worship of '**gramadevada**' or the village god or deity, lodged amidst nature.
- Village shrines appear later dedicated to local gods and goddesses, ancestral worship and other early religious practices, some of which continue to the present day.
- The **Bhakti movement** succeeded in partially merging some of these local traditions within the umbrella of **Vedic worship** practices.
- The Tamilakam temple begins as simply one holy place (**tirtha**) among several others, a place of sacred rituals and performances, vows (**vratas**) and supplications for the local people of the area/region



Sacred grove in a Kerala village

# Medieval Temples

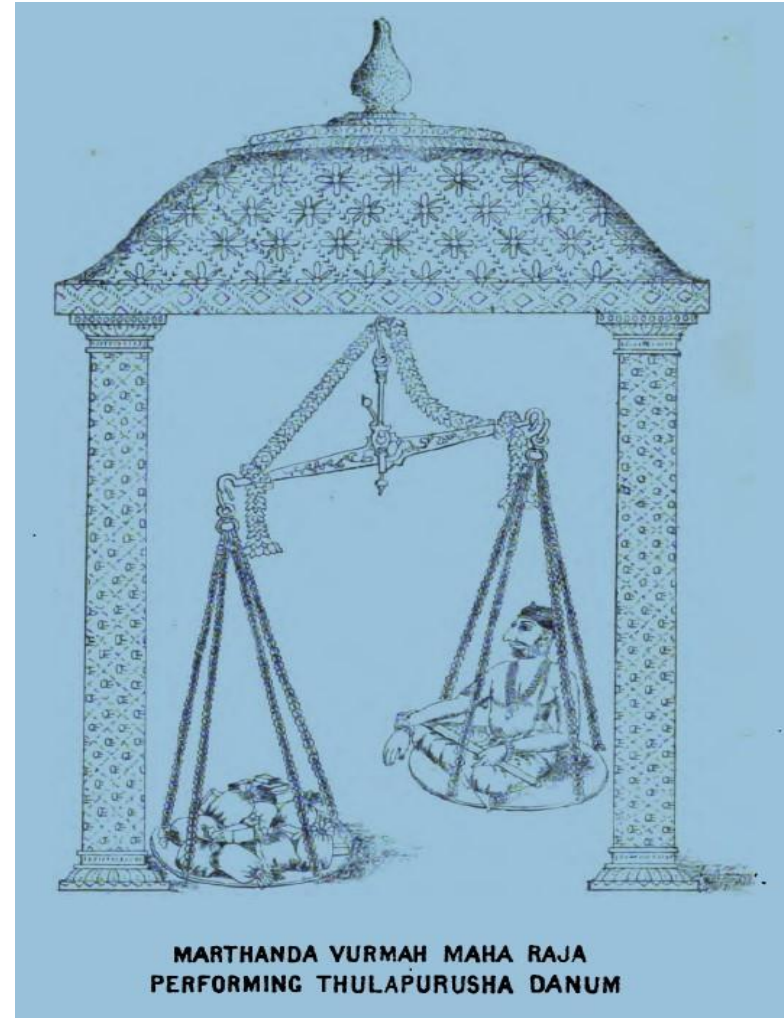
- The first large **temple rock-cut constructions** in Tamilakam are attributed to the **Pallava dynasty**, which ruled from 6-7th century CE.
- During the Chola empire, massive and elegant structures were developed. Under the **Pandya**s, the **Vijayanagar** kings and **Nayak rule**, giant temples with attractive mandapas, huge pillars, soaring towers (**gopuram**) and large temple tanks (**teppakulam**) were built.
- During the **Bhakti movement**, construction of temples and temple-related institutions and propagation of religious ideas became prominent.
- Mostly temples were built by kings as acts of devotion, to mark **significant victories**, to **commemorate the ancestors**, and for the fulfillment of the **desires of the subjects**.



Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur (1010 CE)

# Patronage & Golden Gifts

- Gold's sacred ritual status made it central to gift-giving linkages (*dana*) between patrons (mostly rulers but also prosperous mercantile guilds) and temples.
- The use of Puranic rites to **legitimise royal authority** led to the '**mahadanas**' (great gifts) becoming the main ritual patronage system alongside land grants,
- Chief among the 16 Mahadanas were the '**Tulapurusha**' (or **Tulabharam**), gifting the weight of the donor in gold and the '**Hiraṇyagarbha**', the gift of the golden womb
- While temples benefited from royal and elite patronage, these rituals conferred on **rulers** with obscure lineages (such as the **velir**) and newly-settled **traders** with no prior links to the area both **acceptance** and a **sense of trustworthiness** among the people



# Temple and Urbanisation



- As endowments and patronage grew and accumulated over time, the prosperous temple developed into a **repository of gold** and silver and precious jewels as well as the regular town-hall **place of assembly** for the **ruling elite**.
- This necessitated **exclusiveness and protection**, leading to the development of the temple to a **fortress-like complex** with several circles of streets within streets, maze-like bazaars and **in-house armed forces**.
- Temples also became the nexus for service activities. **Hospitals** and apothecaries were often located in the temple precincts. **Schools** imparted education and hosted scholarly debates. The maṭhas or **monasteries** provided aid to the poor, tended to the afflicted. In **wartime**, temples provided **sanctuary** to refugees.
- On occasion, temples served as de facto **courts of law**. The local assemblies and even kings **passed judgments and settled disputes** in the mandapa.
- Temple **festivals** provided **popular entertainment** – wrestling matches, ram and rooster fights and other attractions.

# Economic Functions of Temples

- **Landed magnate:** Properties endowed to the temple (**devadana**) by rulers and prosperous merchant guilds were commonly exempted from all kinds of taxes (**sarvamanya**) with only nominal taxes collected.
- These lands were chiefly cultivated by dependant **tenant farmers or leaseholders**, who had to perform **contracted service**, work on the land and to supply the required materials (grain, paddy crops) for which the land was intended.
- The **stipulated annual rent** (usually crop shares but also money and other services) had to be paid according to detailed agreements entered into by all parties at the time of lease
- Richer temples also used their funds to undertake public works on their lands, to repair water tanks and irrigation canals. This helped **localise and organise agrarian activities**.
- Relationship similar to **landed chief and landed intermediaries**, other subordinates, and tillers. The formation of devadanam made the temple as an **important landlord** over the villages and initiated many types of economic exchanges.



# Economic Functions of Temples

- **Employer:** The construction and maintenance of temples provided work and means of livelihood for **hundreds and even thousands** of people – with temples becoming the second major source of employment next only to the state sovereign.
- Besides employing priests, temples engaged masons, artisans, architects, **goldsmiths** and craftsmen to make idols, improvements to the structure and **various sacred jewels and adornments**.
- Flower garland-making, sandal-paste, incense, oil and clarified butter (for burning lamps) procurement, special textiles, vegetable and and **numerous other ancillary industrial activities** developed. **Securities** were demanded and **penalties** enforced on defaulters.
- **Regularised employment** for crucial **spiritual posts** like priests and teachers and **secular officials** like accountants, cooks, security personnel etc. became **hereditary appointments** and these employees were all granted land for their maintenance.
- Temple employees were also paid **wages** (either produce or money) and **pensions** for their services. Other employees included musicians, dancing girls and cleaners.

# Economic Functions of Temples

- **Banker:** Temple endowments and treasuries enabled it to serve as a **money-lender** or even a **prototype bank** for the predominantly agrarian society.
- Temples loaned money to **private bodies** and **village assemblies** with or (rarely) without security; cultivators borrowed cash from the treasury for **farming activities**; private individuals were lent funds if the reasons were **sufficiently important**. For example: distressed parents anxious, but unable, to marry off their daughters.
- Borrowers had a **moral duty** to repay the loan **with interest** (or items in lieu of such). Besides financial penalties and fines, defaulters also faced **societal pressure to repay**. Those unable to do so had to **sell lands to wipe off debts**.
- Broader temple economy incorporated **existing barter exchange systems** traditionally practised by the villages. It regularly participated in the **market transactions**, stipulating conditions for them and it **standardised inter-commodity exchange rates**.
- Temple inscription records refer to a **stable gold – paddy exchange ratio** that was used to determine what was due to the temple.

# The Temple: Integrating the Network

- It served as an **agency** for easier and more efficient **extraction of surplus** from the **agrarian economy** and contributed to the growth of agriculture and landlordship
- In the new hierarchy, the temple served as an **integrating player** linking the high and low **in service** as clients
- As a nexus for **community coalescence**, temples became central to socio-religious and economic lives of the area
- Temple-supported state power cemented regional monarchies of south India, lending legitimacy to the new polity in exchange for guaranteed state patronage

