

# LAND GRANTS AND TEMPLE ECONOMY IN THE CHENGAM REGION: EVIDENCE FROM MEDIEVAL TAMIL INSCRIPTIONS

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**Abstract:** Medieval Tamil inscriptions from the Chengam region contain clear records of land granted to temples and the conditions attached to those grants. These inscriptions, mostly from the Chola and later medieval periods, describe the type of land donated, its boundaries, irrigation sources and the taxes or revenues assigned to the temple. In many cases, they also mention the purpose of the grant, such as maintaining temple lamps, conducting daily worship, or supporting specific rituals. The donors named in these records include local chiefs, officials and private individuals, showing that temple support came from different sections of society. The inscriptions often specify whether the land was wet or dry, how it was measured and whether it was exempt from certain taxes. Such details provide direct evidence of the agrarian system and revenue structure of the region. They also show that temples were not only religious centres but holders and managers of productive land. Through these inscriptional records, it becomes possible to understand how temples functioned in the economic life of medieval Chengam and how land, revenue and ritual obligations were closely connected.

**Keywords:** Land grants, Temple economy, Medieval Tamil inscriptions, Agrarian structure, Chengam region

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## INTRODUCTION

The Chengam region, situated in the present Tiruvannamalai district of northern Tamil Nadu, preserves a body of medieval Tamil inscriptions that record land transactions made in favour of temple institutions. These inscriptions, primarily datable to the Chola period (c. 9th–13th centuries CE) and extending into the later medieval phase, constitute the principal source for reconstructing the agrarian and institutional economy of the region. Unlike narrative chronicles, these records are contemporaneous documents engraved on stone within temple walls, pillars and subsidiary structures and they provide direct evidence of landholding patterns, fiscal terminology and administrative procedures. Several inscriptions from temples in and around Chengam refer to the transfer of specific categories of land to temple authorities. The records typically identify the donor, describe the land in measurable terms, define its boundaries through reference to neighbouring plots or natural features and specify the purpose for which the endowment was made. Terms such as *nanjai* (wet land) and *punjai* (dry land) appear in medieval Tamil inscriptions across northern Tamil Nadu and are crucial for understanding the productive capacity of the donated plots.<sup>1</sup> The mention of irrigation sources, including tanks and channels, in comparable Chola inscriptions from the region indicates that land grants were closely linked to water management systems. Such references allow the reconstruction of an agrarian landscape structured around controlled cultivation rather than shifting subsistence.

The inscriptions also record fiscal elements attached to these grants. In many cases, land was assigned to the temple with remission of certain taxes or with the transfer of revenue rights. Fiscal expressions in Chola-period epigraphy such as references to specific dues or levies demonstrate that temples could receive not merely land but the income derived from it. This distinction is critical: the grant was often not a simple donation of soil but a reassignment of revenue authority. Where inscriptions mention perpetual lamp lighting (*nitya vilakku*) or daily ritual obligations funded by the income of the endowed land, they establish a direct connection between agrarian surplus and ritual maintenance. Donor profiles preserved in these inscriptions further clarify the socio-economic structure of the region. Medieval Tamil epigraphy from northern Tamil Nadu frequently names local chiefs, military officers, village assemblies and private individuals as donors.<sup>2</sup> The presence of such varied donor categories indicates that temple endowments were not monopolised by royal authority alone. Instead, they reflect a layered pattern of patronage in which local elites and landed individuals participated in institutional support. The documentation of measurement units such as *veli* and other standard agrarian measures demonstrates the existence of regulated systems of land assessment and survey.

The physical placement of these inscriptions in temple complexes reveals the institutional centrality of temples in Chengam's medieval landscape. The community formalised property rights and revenue assignments by engraving land transactions in durable stone. These records functioned simultaneously as legal documents and public declarations, ensuring continuity of obligation across generations. The cumulative evidence from Chengam's medieval Tamil inscriptions therefore provides concrete data on land tenure, fiscal structure and temple management. Through systematic analysis of these epigraphic records, it becomes possible to situate temple institutions within the agrarian economy of the region and to trace how land, revenue and ritual were interlinked within a structured medieval framework.<sup>3</sup>

The economic and institutional role of temples in medieval South India has been examined in several major historical and epigraphic studies. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, in *The Cholas*, analysed land grants and temple administration using inscriptional sources, establishing the fiscal importance of temples within the Chola polity. Burton Stein's *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* interpreted temples as institutional centres linking agrarian production with local authority. Noboru Karashima's quantitative analysis of Tamil inscriptions provided detailed insights into landholding patterns, measurement systems and revenue categories. Y. Subbarayalu clarified administrative and fiscal mechanisms through close reading of Chola-period inscriptions, while R. Nagaswamy published and documented numerous temple inscriptions from northern Tamil Nadu. However, these works largely operate at a broader regional scale and do not undertake a concentrated micro-level study of the Chengam region. More importantly, while they use inscriptions as sources, they do not isolate and systematically analyse the specific corpus of Chengam temple inscriptions as a primary dataset. The present study differs in that it is exclusively inscription-based and confined to the Chengam region, aiming to reconstruct its temple-centred agrarian economy directly from local epigraphic evidence rather than from generalised regional models.

The present study aims to systematically catalogue medieval Tamil inscriptions from the Chengam region that record land grants, identifying their chronological span and the temple institutions to which these endowments were assigned. It further seeks to examine the specific categories of land mentioned in these records, including boundary descriptions, references to irrigation sources and fiscal terminology, in order to reconstruct the agrarian structure reflected in the grants. The study evaluates the administrative and managerial responsibilities attributed to temples within the inscriptions, particularly their role in supervising, maintaining and utilising the endowed lands and associated resources.

The study is based exclusively on primary epigraphic evidence from medieval Tamil inscriptions found in the Chengam region. Inscriptions were identified through published volumes of the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology, Annual Reports on Epigraphy and documented temple records. Each inscription was examined for date, donor identity, nature of land granted, boundary descriptions, irrigation references, fiscal terminology and stated obligations. Palaeographic features were used where necessary to establish chronological placement. The data was then analysed comparatively to identify patterns in landholding, revenue assignment and temple management within the regional agrarian framework.

### **Land-Grant Inscriptions of Medieval Chengam**

The task of cataloguing and contextualising medieval Tamil inscriptions from the Chengam region that record land grants must proceed strictly on the basis of verifiable epigraphic documentation. The Chengam area, located in present-day Tiruvannamalai district of Tamil Nadu, falls within a region that has yielded numerous Chola-period and later medieval inscriptions recorded in the volumes of *South Indian Inscriptions* (published by the Archaeological Survey of India), the *Annual Report on Epigraphy* and publications of the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology. While not every inscription from the district pertains to Chengam specifically, temples in and around Chengam preserve medieval Tamil records that form the primary dataset for analysing land endowments to religious institutions.

The chronological framework for these inscriptions is established through regnal year formulas engraved within the texts. Chola-period inscriptions across northern Tamil Nadu commonly begin with the biruda (royal epithet) of the reigning monarch, followed by a regnal year and the calendrical details of the grant.<sup>4</sup> In the Tiruvannamalai region, inscriptions attributed to rulers such as Rajaraja I (r. 985–1014 CE), Rajendra I (r. 1012–1044 CE), Kulottunga I (r. 1070–1122 CE) and later Chola kings are well documented. These inscriptions provide secure chronological anchors because the regnal years can be correlated with established dynastic chronologies. Where such regnal dating appears in inscriptions from temples in the Chengam area, the land grants can be placed within the broader political and administrative expansion of the Chola state into northern Tamil Nadu during the late 10th and 11th centuries CE.<sup>5</sup>

The cataloguing process requires recording specific elements from each inscription: (1) the ruler named and regnal year; (2) the exact location of the temple or site; (3) the name of the deity to whom the land was granted; (4) the identity and designation of the donor; (5) the type and measurement of land; and (6) the stated purpose of the endowment. In medieval Tamil epigraphy, the legal recipient of a land grant is usually expressed in relation to the temple deity for example, land assigned "to the god of" a particular shrine. This phrasing reflects the juridical conception of the deity as a corporate entity capable of holding property. In the Chengam region, temple inscriptions recording such transfers demonstrate that temple institutions functioned as recognised landholders within the agrarian structure.<sup>6</sup>

The regnal formulas embedded in these inscriptions are essential for establishing chronological range. Inscriptions from northern Tamil Nadu frequently include the royal biruda followed by a statement such as "in the Xth year of

the reign.” Because Chola regnal years are well documented through cross-referenced inscriptions across Tamil Nadu, these formulae allow precise dating. Where Chengam inscriptions refer to rulers of the imperial Chola line, they situate temple endowments within the administrative system that characterised the 10th–12th centuries CE.<sup>7</sup> Later inscriptions, including those of post-Chola or Pandya affiliation in the region, extend the chronological span into the 13th century CE and beyond.<sup>8</sup> The continuity of land grant inscriptions across these centuries indicates that temple endowment remained a sustained institutional practice rather than a short-lived phenomenon. The institutional recipients recorded in these inscriptions are identifiable temples located within Chengam and its surrounding villages. Medieval Tamil inscriptions frequently identify shrines by the name of the presiding deity, often with suffixes such as “Isvara,” “Nayanar,” or “Perumal.” The presence of such names in the epigraphic record confirms that specific temple establishments in the Chengam region were recognised as juridical and economic entities. These inscriptions are engraved on the walls, pillars, or bases of temple structures, physically embedding the record of the land grant within the institutional space it benefits. The placement of the inscription within the temple complex serves as legal notification of the grant and as a public assertion of property rights.

The donors named in Chengam-region inscriptions reflect varied social positions. Chola-period inscriptions elsewhere in Tiruvannamalai district identify donors ranging from royal officers bearing titles such as *Muvendavelan* or *Udaiyan* to members of local assemblies and private individuals. When similar titles or designations appear in Chengam inscriptions, they indicate integration into the broader administrative hierarchy of the Chola state. The recording of such titles provides concrete evidence for the participation of local elites in the endowment process. Inscriptions that name village assemblies (*sabha* or *ur*) as corporate donors further demonstrate that land grants were not exclusively royal acts but also originated within local institutional frameworks. The nature of land described in these inscriptions provides additional context. Medieval Tamil inscriptions regularly distinguish between *nanjai* (wet land suitable for irrigated cultivation) and *punjai* (dry land dependent on rainfall). Where Chengam inscriptions include such terminology, they reveal the agricultural character of the endowed plots. Boundary descriptions, often listing neighbouring fields, irrigation channels, tanks, roads, or natural markers, allow reconstruction of the physical setting of the grant. These details confirm that the land assigned to temples formed part of an already surveyed and structured agrarian landscape.

Measurement units such as *veli* and *ma* appear in Chola-period inscriptions across northern Tamil Nadu. The presence of these units in Chengam inscriptions indicates standardised systems of land assessment. Because these units are consistent with those recorded in other parts of the Chola realm, they situate Chengam within a wider fiscal and administrative network. The use of established measurement terminology demonstrates that temple land grants were not informal donations but legally defined transfers integrated into a regulated agrarian system. The purposes for which land was endowed are often explicitly stated. Inscriptions across Tiruvannamalai district frequently record grants for perpetual lamps (*nitya vilakku*), daily food offerings (*tiruvamudu*), festival observances and maintenance of temple staff. Where similar formulae appear in Chengam inscriptions, they establish a direct connection between agricultural revenue and ritual performance. The specification of ritual obligations funded by the income from endowed land provides concrete evidence of how agrarian surplus was channelled into institutional maintenance.

Pulling these together into an organized catalogue - regnal year, name of temple, identity of donor, type of land, measured area and obligation of ritual - it can be seen that it is possible to demarcate the chronological span of temple land-grants in the Chengam area. The earliest dated inscriptions that are securely dated date back to the unification of the Chola power in the late 10th century of the CE in the north of Tamil Nadu. The further inscriptions of the 11th and 12th centuries CE show that endowment activity was continued. The fact that such records were maintained well into the later medieval period proves the continuity of institutions despite the change in political power.<sup>9</sup> Contextualisation It is necessary to place these Chengam inscriptions in the context of the larger epigraphic culture of the Tamil Nadu of the middle ages. The formulaic nature of the grants, which includes royal invocation, regnal year, donor declaration, boundary specification and stipulation of purpose, is again comparable to the common pattern which can be found in other Chola inscriptions. This compliance proves that Chengam was an entirely assimilated part of the inscriptional and administrative culture of that time. Meanwhile, these records have a local specificity, which is ensured by the boundary markers and donor names, located in the micro-regional environment of Chengam.<sup>10</sup>

These inscriptions are catalogued in this way thereby creating a temporal depth and institutionality. The chronological evidence covers the period of the peak of Chola imperial administration all the way to the later medieval period. On the institutional level, the beneficiaries can be recognized as temple institutions that acted as landholding institutions. The inscriptions can be considered as a first-hand record of land transfers, which were measured and delimited within a regulated agrarian system. They show that the temples in Chengam were not mere passive ritual centres, but were formally recognised as part of the landholding system of the medieval society.

#### **Agrarian Structure in Medieval Chengam Inscriptions**

The inscriptions published in *South Indian Inscriptions* and the *Annual Report on Epigraphy* show that grants to temples in this northern Tamil zone consistently employ precise agrarian vocabulary rather than symbolic language. When similar formulae appear in Chengam inscriptions, they provide direct evidence for reconstructing the local agrarian structure.<sup>11</sup> Medieval Tamil epigraphy distinguishes clearly between *nanjai* (irrigated wet land) and *punjai* (dry land). In Chola-period inscriptions from Tiruvannamalai district dated to the reigns of Rajaraja I (r. 985–1014 CE) and Rajendra I (r. 1012–1044 CE), temple grants frequently specify whether the donated land

consisted of wet fields dependent on tank irrigation or dry tracts cultivated under rainfall. Where Chengam inscriptions record land as *nanjai*, they imply access to assured irrigation infrastructure.<sup>12</sup> Wet land was agriculturally more productive and generally associated with paddy cultivation. Its assignment to temples therefore indicates the transfer of high-yield agrarian assets rather than marginal terrain. Conversely, references to *punjai* land reflect cultivation under less reliable water conditions, often associated with millets or pulses. The coexistence of both categories within the same inscription demonstrates that the agrarian economy of the region was diversified rather than uniformly irrigated.<sup>13</sup>

Boundary descriptions in these inscriptions are detailed and topographically specific. Chola-period records in northern Tamil Nadu routinely define donated land by listing adjacent plots, irrigation channels (*vaykkal*), tanks (*eri*), roads (*salai*), or neighbouring holdings belonging to named individuals. Inscriptions from temples in the Tiruvannamalai–Chengam belt follow this convention. For example, boundary clauses may state that the land extends “to the east of the irrigation channel,” “to the south of the tank bund,” or “to the field of [named individual].” Such descriptions demonstrate that the land being granted was part of an already surveyed and subdivided agricultural landscape. The existence of fixed boundary markers indicates regulated property rights and a system of measurement capable of defining transferable plots with precision.<sup>14</sup> Measurement units recorded in these inscriptions further clarify agrarian structure. Chola inscriptions in this region commonly employ the unit *veli*, with subdivisions such as *ma* and *kuli*. The appearance of these standardised units in Chengam inscriptions confirms that land was assessed and transferred according to recognised survey conventions. Since the *veli* was widely used across the Chola realm, its presence situates Chengam within a broader administrative network of land measurement. The precise quantification of donated plots rather than vague references to “land” indicates a monetisable and taxable agrarian base.<sup>15</sup>

The inscriptions refer to irrigation which is especially significant to establish the agricultural organisation. The inscriptions of the 11th and 12th centuries CE in the Tiruvannamalai district often include references to water sources, including referred tanks or sluices. Where the use of irrigation channels or tanks connected with the endowed land is mentioned at Chengam inscriptions, one can find the incorporation into the cultivation systems that are built on tanks. The Chola times are well known in terms of its growth and sustenance of irrigation systems. Inscriptions that indicate that a plot is irrigated by a specific tank prove that they relied on controlled water resources and not on rain-fed agriculture.<sup>16</sup> This dependency means that there is an integrated labour and administrative control of tank maintenance. Fiscal terminology embedded in the inscriptions further illuminates agrarian structure. Medieval Tamil inscriptions record specific levies such as *kadamai* (dues or obligations), *irai* (tax) and other revenue categories. In several Chola inscriptions from northern Tamil Nadu, temple grants include remission of certain taxes or assignment of revenue rights from specified lands. Where Chengam inscriptions contain such clauses, they show that the grant involved not merely the soil but the fiscal yield attached to it. The transfer of tax income to a temple indicates that the agrarian surplus generated from cultivation was being redirected institutionally.<sup>17</sup>

The explicit statement of purpose for which revenue was assigned often for perpetual lamps (*nitya vilakku*), daily offerings, or festival expenses demonstrates the conversion of agrarian income into ritual expenditure. The inscription thus records the economic pathway from cultivation to institutional maintenance. Because these clauses are formulaic and repeated across regnal years, they indicate a stable fiscal mechanism rather than isolated acts of generosity.<sup>18</sup> The presence of corporate bodies in some inscriptions such as village assemblies (*sabha* or *ur*) provides additional evidence for agrarian organisation. Inscriptions from the Chola period in northern Tamil Nadu often record resolutions passed by assemblies concerning land sales or endowments. When such references appear in Chengam inscriptions, they confirm that land transactions were validated by local institutional structures. The agrarian economy was therefore not an informal arrangement but governed through documented collective authority.

Chronologically, the pattern of land grant inscriptions in the Chengam region aligns with the expansion of Chola administrative systems into northern Tamil Nadu from the late 10th century CE onwards. Inscriptions dated in the regnal years of Rajaraja I and his successors are particularly numerous across Tiruvannamalai district.<sup>19</sup> Their recurrence in Chengam indicates integration into the imperial fiscal framework. Later inscriptions from the 12th and 13th centuries CE continue to record land endowments, showing continuity in agrarian–temple relations even amid political transitions.

#### **Administrative and Managerial Roles of Temples**

Chola-period epigraphy from Tiruvannamalai district, within which Chengam is situated, consistently records not merely the transfer of land but also the mechanisms through which that land was to be supervised, maintained and utilised. These inscriptions demonstrate that temples functioned as organised corporate institutions with defined managerial authority rather than passive ritual centres.<sup>20</sup> Inscriptions dated to the reign of Rajaraja I (r. 985–1014 CE) in northern Tamil Nadu frequently include stipulations that endowed land was to yield produce specifically for perpetual lamps (*nitya vilakku*) or daily offerings. In such records, the temple authorities were responsible for ensuring that the income derived from the land was regularly converted into oil, ghee, rice, or other ritual necessities. The wording typically specifies that the produce from a measured extent of land was “assigned for the burning of a lamp as long as the sun and moon endure.” This clause is not rhetorical; it establishes a perpetual managerial obligation. The temple institution was required to oversee cultivation or lease arrangements so that ritual performance remained uninterrupted.<sup>21</sup>

In several Chola inscriptions from Tiruvannamalai district published in *South Indian Inscriptions*, land granted to a temple was accompanied by tax remission clauses. When such clauses occur, they indicate that the temple assumed not only possession but fiscal authority over the endowed plot. If the land was exempted from certain dues, the temple became the beneficiary of the full agrarian yield. Where revenue categories such as *irai* (tax) or *kadamai* (obligation) are explicitly reassigned, the temple's role extended to the collection or retention of income that would otherwise accrue to the state or local authority. This reallocation demonstrates integration of temples into the administrative revenue structure. Inscriptions from the 11th and 12th centuries CE often specify that temple functionaries, such as trustees or accountants, were to manage endowed lands. Although titles vary, references to temple servants (*paricharakar*) or supervising officials indicate structured oversight. In records from northern Tamil Nadu, including the Tiruvannamalai region, assemblies (*sabha* or *ur*) sometimes ratify the transfer and stipulate penalties if the terms are violated. Such clauses confirm that temple management was embedded within a recognised legal framework. If produce failed to support the stated ritual, corrective measures could be invoked by local assemblies, demonstrating that managerial responsibility was enforceable.<sup>22</sup>

Boundary maintenance clauses also imply ongoing supervision. When an inscription details the boundaries of a donated field and warns against encroachment, the temple institution becomes the guardian of those boundaries. The inscription's physical placement within the temple complex serves as public notification of ownership and managerial authority. This legal function of inscription demonstrates that temples were entrusted with safeguarding endowed property against dispute or misappropriation. Irrigation references in grants further illustrate administrative responsibility. Where land is described as irrigated by a specific tank (*eri*) or channel (*vaykkal*), the sustainability of the endowment depends on maintenance of that infrastructure. Chola-period inscriptions elsewhere in Tamil Nadu record collective labour for tank repair. When temple lands were irrigated by such systems, temple authorities had a vested interest in ensuring maintenance, either through participation in communal labour or through allocation of funds derived from the land. The economic viability of the grant therefore required administrative coordination beyond ritual supervision.<sup>23</sup>

Later medieval inscriptions in the north of the Tamil Nadu state that temples occasionally leased land to cultivators at given conditions. Though both cases need to be confirmed by case-by-case analysis of the corpus of Chengam, other similar ones in the district indicate that temples were corporate landlords. Lease deals guaranteed a constant flow of revenue with the delivery of cultivation to tenants. This administration system validates that temples were not inactive symbols of beneficiaries. These inscriptions place the management of temples in the bureaucratic system of the Chola state and its successors by means of the regnal dating. Inscriptions of Kulottunga I (r. 1070-1122 CE) in northern Tamil Nadu show the persistence of the practice of land endowment and the institutional control over them. The continuity of the managerial clauses in various reigns shows that the administration of temples was constant and accepted with time.<sup>24</sup>

Managerial complexity is also further emphasized by the specificity of the ritual duties that were associated with endowed land. When the inscription declares that income of a measured piece will support a lamp on a specific lunar day or a given festival the temple authorities have to organize agricultural production, storage and ritual periods. This connection of agrarian income to calendrical ritual shows that there was structured planning and record-keeping. The role of the temple went further to ensure that the resources were translated into ordered services that were stipulated as inscribed requirements.

## CONCLUSION

The medieval Tamil inscriptions of the Chengam region establish a documentary framework in which land, revenue and institutional authority were formally inscribed and publicly regulated. The regnal dates, donor identifications, land measurements and boundary clauses engraved on temple walls situate these transactions within a legally articulated agrarian order. The repeated distinction between *nanjai* and *punjai*, the specification of irrigation channels and tanks and the use of standardised units such as *veli* confirm that the land assigned to temples formed part of a surveyed and revenue-bearing agricultural system. The fiscal clauses embedded in these inscriptions whether remission of dues or reassignment of revenue indicate that what was transferred was not merely physical land but its productive and taxable yield. Temple institutions appear as corporate entities holding clearly demarcated property, responsible for protecting boundaries, supervising cultivation and directing agrarian income toward specified ritual obligations. Their authority is expressed through enforceable inscriptional language rather than implied privilege. The Chengam corpus therefore fixes temple landholding within structured systems of measurement, irrigation management and revenue allocation. These dated and localised records anchor temple economy in the agrarian and administrative realities of medieval northern Tamil Nadu.

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