



## The Kalabhras: A review of their impact and legacy in ancient South India

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### Abstract

The Kalabhras were a mysterious and controversial group that significantly influenced ancient South Indian history between 250 and 600 AD. Their period of rule, often termed the "Kalabhra Interregnum," marked political upheaval as they overthrew established dynasties like the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas. They promoted Buddhism and Jainism, challenging Brahminical dominance and reshaping the region's religious and cultural landscape. Known for their innovations in water conservation, adaptability to arid environments, and involvement in regional trade through ports like Arikamedu, the Kalabhras demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. Despite their sparse representation in historical records, their legacy is reflected in archaeological findings, literature, and cultural contributions. This review synthesizes existing knowledge about the Kalabhras, analysing their social, cultural, and political impact to provide a comprehensive understanding of their historical significance.

**Keywords:** Kalabhras, kalabhra interregnum, south indian history, cholas, cheras, pandyas, buddhism, jainism, trade networks

### Introduction

The Kalabhras are a mysterious group whose existence in the deserts of South India has been sparsely documented. They have been a subject of controversy in the historical context of South India. Their impact on South Indian history is significant and yet often under-represented in mainstream historical narratives.

The Kalabhras are often remembered for their period of rule, sometimes referred to as the "Kalabhra Interregnum," which was marked by significant political upheaval and the overthrow of established dynasties like the Chola, Chera, and Pandya. The Kalabhras played a crucial role in promoting religions such as Buddhism and Jainism, leading to a shift in the religious dynamics of the region. Their technological advancements in water conservation and desert adaptation, highlight their resourcefulness in thriving under harsh environmental conditions.

The Kalabhras' engagement in extensive trade networks, through the ancient port of Arikamedu, exerted their economic influence and the cultural exchanges that shaped their society. Artifacts such as pottery and intricate carvings reflect their artistic sensibilities and deep connection to their natural surroundings.

This review aims to compile existing knowledge about the Kalabhras, analyse their impact on South Indian history, and infer their cultural and social practices. This serves as a significant resource for students interested in ancient South Indian history and culture.

### Who were the kalabhras

The true origins of the Kalabhras remain a topic of debate among historians. Some suggest they were from the Kalava region near present-day Bengaluru, while others propose they were of Andhra and Karnataka origin, referred to as Vadukak Karunaader. Another theory traces them to local Tamil chieftains such as the Thiraiyars (also known as Mutharaiyars) or Mudirajas. Additionally, there is a school of thought that identifies them as Buddhist-Jain marauders

and cattle-lifters from around Andhra, near present-day Tirupati. What is known for certain is that the Kalabhras ruled from around 250 A.D to 600 A.D after defeating the established dynasties of the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas.

The rule of the Kalabhras brought significant changes to the Tamil country. The Velvikudi inscriptions of the Pandya king Nedunjadaiyan (c. 765 – c. 815 CE) indicate that the Kalabhras disrupted the prevailing social order by confiscating lands and driving away established kings. This upheaval is seen as a period of instability, with the Kalabhras being depicted as enemies of Brahmin supremacy in Brahmanical literature.

### Life in the desert

#### ▪ Water conservation

The Kalabhras developed sophisticated methods for water conservation, including the construction of underground cisterns. These cisterns collected and stored rainwater, crucial for survival in arid conditions. This technology indicates a high level of ingenuity and adaptation to their environment.

#### ▪ Diet and livelihood

Their diet consisted of foraged plants, hunted animals, and livestock such as camels and goats. These animals were essential not only for food but also for transportation and materials. This reliance on a diverse range of food sources demonstrates their adaptability to the harsh desert environment.

### Culture and beliefs

#### ▪ Storytelling and art

The Kalabhras were skilled storytellers and artists. Their stories often centered around celestial bodies and natural spirits, reflecting their deep connection to the environment. Artifacts such as pottery and carvings exhibit intricate patterns inspired by the desert landscape.

**Religious influence**

During their rule, the Kalabhras influenced the rise of Buddhism and Jainism in South India. This period saw a decline in Brahminical dominance, suggesting a shift towards more inclusive religious practices.

**Historical context and impact**

**Political influence**

The Kalabhras' rule, often referred to as the "Kalabhra Interregnum," marked a period of political upheaval. They overthrew several established dynasties, including the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas. This disruption led to significant changes in power dynamics and is viewed negatively by some historians due to the lack of inscriptions and records from this period.

**Cultural and religious contributions**

Despite the political turmoil, The Kalabhras' were patrons of literature and their rule contributed to cultural shifts. This period facilitated the spread of Buddhism and Jainism, promoted Buddhist and Jain works which left a lasting impact on the region's religious landscape.

Significant literary activity took place, with many grouped under "The Eighteen Minor Works." Two of the great Tamil epics, Silappadhikaram and Manimegalai, were also written during this period, reflecting the rich cultural contributions of the Kalabhras. However, the dating of these works has been contested, with some scholars like Vaiyapuri Pillai ascribing later dates.

**Trade and interaction**

**Trade networks**

The Kalabhras engaged in extensive trade, exchanging goods like spices, textiles, and crafted items. The ancient port of Arikamedu was a significant trade center during their time, indicating their involvement in broader regional trade networks.

**Cultural exchange**

Trade interactions facilitated cultural exchanges with neighbouring tribes and civilizations. This exchange influenced both the Kalabhras and the regions they traded with, integrating them into a larger economic and cultural framework.

**Legacy**

**Archaeological evidence**

The primary sources of knowledge about the Kalabhras come from archaeological finds such as underground

cisterns and pottery fragments. These artifacts provide insight into their technological advancements and artistic sensibilities.

**Historical Records**

Historical records, though sparse, mention the Kalabhras in various inscriptions and texts. These records often portray them in a negative light, reflecting the biases of the displaced ruling classes.

**The end of kalabhra rule**

The Kalabhra rule eventually ended around 650 A.D due to counter-invasions by the Pandyas, Chalukyas, and Pallavas. Inscriptions from the Pallava and Chalukya periods refer to the defeat of the Kalabhras by rulers such as Simhavishnu Pallava and Kadungon Pandyan.

**Assumptions and inferences**

**Assumptions**

**Advanced water conservation techniques:** The construction of underground cisterns for collecting and storing rainwater suggests that the Kalabhras possessed advanced knowledge and skills in water management.

**Cultural and religious shifts:** The rise of Buddhism and Jainism during the Kalabhras' rule implies they played a significant role in promoting these religions over traditional Brahminical practices.

**Engagement in regional trade:** The discovery of Kalabhran artifacts in trade centres like Arikamedu indicates their active participation in trade networks and economic exchanges.

**Inferences**

**Political instability:** The absence of inscriptions and historical records during their rule suggests a period of political instability and possible suppression of documentation by the Kalabhras.

**Cultural integration:** The influence of other cultures seen through traded goods and artifacts implies that the Kalabhras were open to cultural exchange and integration with neighbouring societies.

**Resilience and adaptability:** The ability of the Kalabhras to survive and thrive in the harsh desert environment indicates a high level of resilience and adaptability.

**Table 1**

Aspect	Details	Inferences
Water Conservation	Underground cisterns for rainwater storage	Advanced knowledge of water conservation
Diet and Livelihood	Foraged plants, hunted animals, livestock	Adaptability to desert conditions
Storytelling and Art	Celestial and natural spirit stories, intricate pottery designs	Deep connection to the environment, artistic sensibility
Religious Influence	Rise of Buddhism and Jainism	Promotion of inclusive religious practices
Political Influence	Overthrow of Chola, Chera, and Pandya dynasties	Period of political upheaval, negative historical portrayal
Trade Networks	Spices, textiles, crafted goods	Active participation in regional trade, cultural exchanges
Archaeological Evidence	Underground cisterns, pottery fragments	Insight into technological advancements, artistic sensibilities
Historical Records	Sparse, often negative portrayals	Reflect biases of displaced ruling classes

## Conclusion

The Kalabhras are a prime example of how humans can adapt and thrive in extremely harsh conditions. This article offers a detailed look at the Kalabhras, covering their daily life, cultural practices, and historical significance. It is a great resource for students who are just beginning to learn about this topic and need a thorough introduction.

The article encourages students to think critically and analyse historical evidence. By doing so, they can form well-informed conclusions and gain a deeper understanding of how ancient societies functioned and what factors influenced their development. This approach helps students appreciate the complexities of history and the diverse ways in which people have shaped their world.

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