

CHAPTER – 5

INDUSTRY AND FOREIGN TRADE OF ANCIENT TAMILAKAM

Dr. A. RENUKA

The Principal
Government Arts College,
Komarapalayam, Namakkal- 638183.

Introduction

Ancient Tamils were active traders in various commodities, both locally and outside Tamil country. The kingdoms of northern India sought pearls, cotton fabrics and conch shells from Tamilakam in exchange for woollen clothing, hides and horses. Locally most trading was in food products – agricultural produce was supplemented by products from hunters, fishermen and shepherds who traded in meat, fish and dairy products. In addition, people bought other goods such as items for personal hygiene, adornment and transportation. Mercantile transactions took place in busy market places. Traders used various modes of selling: hawking their goods from door to door, setting up shops in busy market places or stationing themselves at royal households. Sellers of fish, salt and grain hawked their goods, the textile merchants sold cloths from their shops in urban markets and the goldsmith, the lapidary and sellers of sandalwood and ivory patronised the aristocrats' quarters.

Merchants dealt in conches and ivory. Most trade was by barter. Paddy was the most commonly accepted medium of exchange, followed by purified salt. Honey and roots were exchanged for fish liver oil and arrack, while sugarcane and rice flakes were traded for venison and toddy. Poems in Purananuru describe the prosperous house in Pandya land well stocked with paddy that the housewife had exchanged for grams and fish. Artisans and professionals traded their services for goods. Quantities were measured by weighing balance, called the Tulakkol named after Tulam, the standard weight. Delicate balances made of ivory were used by the goldsmiths for measures of Urai, Nali and Ma. A different kind of barter involving deferred exchange was known as Kuriedirppai – this involved taking a loan for a fixed quantity of a commodity to be repaid by the same quantity of the same commodity at a later date. Since barter was prevalent locally, coins were used almost exclusively for foreign trade.

Markets

Sangam works such as Maduraikkanci and Pattinappalai give a detailed description of the markets in big cities. The market, or angadi, was located at the centre of a city. It had two adjacent sections: the morning bazaar (nalangadi) and the evening bazaar (allangadi). The markets of Madurai were cosmopolitan with people of various ethnicities and languages

crowding into the shops. Foreign merchants and traders came to Madurai from such northern kingdoms as Kalinga to sell merchandise wholesale. According to the Mathuraikkanci, the great market was held in a large square and the items sold included garlands of flowers, fragrant pastes, coats with metallic belts, leather sandals, weapons, shields, carts, chariots and ornamented chariot steps. Garment shops sold clothing of various colours and patterns made of cotton, silk or wool, with the merchandise neatly arranged in rows. On the grain merchants' street, sacks of pepper and sixteen kinds of grains (including paddy, millet, gram, peas and sesame seeds) were heaped by the side.

The jewellers, who conducted business from a separate street, sold precious articles such as diamonds, pearls, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, topaz, coral beads and varieties of gold. Vanchi, the capital of the Cheras, was a typical fortified city, with two divisions inside the fort – the Puranakar and the Akanakar. The Puranakar was the outer city adjacent to the fort wall and was occupied by the soldiers. The Akanakar, the inner city, included the king's palace and the officers' quarters. The city market was located between these two divisions; the artisans and traders lived close to the market. Kaveripumpattinam, the port city of the Cholas, had its market in a central open area close to the two main suburbs of the city – Maruvurpakkam and Pattinapakkam. Maruvurpakkam was adjacent to the sea where the fishermen and the foreign merchants lived. The main streets of the market met at the centre where there was a temple dedicated to the local guardian deity of the city. The market of Kaveripumpattinam was similar to the one in Madurai. Large quantities of dyes, scented powder, flowers, textiles, salt, fish and sheep were sold. Flowers were in great demand, especially during festivals such as Indira vizha. Near the bazaar were warehouses with little ventilation located underground. Since merchants from various places thronged the bazaar, each package for sale had the name and details of its owner written on it. Simple advertisements were used to indicate the goods available at different locations.

Merchants Organization

There were different types of merchants who operated in the ancient Tamil market, which gave rise to a wealth-based class distinction among them. Merchants in the lower levels of the hierarchy were of two varieties: the itinerant merchants who sold goods that they manufactured themselves and the retailers who sold goods manufactured by others. Itinerant traders were found in both the rural and urban markets, but the retailers were concentrated in the cities. In the rural markets, salt and grain merchants usually produced the goods, transported them and sold them directly to the consumers. Salt merchants, known as umanar, travelled with their families in trains of carts. In the cities, artisans such as the blacksmiths and the oil mongers sold their products directly to the consumers. The bulk of the retailers operated in the textile industry. The textile dealers (aruvaivanigar) bought their products from the weavers (kaarugar) and resold them to the consumers. Merchants selling agricultural produce in the cities were also retailers. At the upper end of the merchant hierarchy, were the rich merchants who participated in the export trade. There were three classes among them ippar, kavippar and perunkudi - based on the extent of their wealth; the perunkudi made up the wealthiest class. Foreign merchants,

mainly Romans, also did business in the Tamil markets – not just in the port cities, but in inland cities such as Madurai, where they exchanged indigenous goods for their offerings. Another category of merchants were the intermediaries or the brokers who acted as information channels and offered their services mainly to the foreign merchants.

Merchants organized themselves into groups called Sattu or Nikamam. Stone inscriptions at Mangulam (200 BC) and pottery inscriptions found at Kodumanal refer to merchant guilds as nikamam and the members of the guilds as nikamattor. These findings suggest that merchant guilds were established at several industrial and trade centres of ancient Tamil country. Many of these merchant associations acted in union in their public activities. They were autonomous, meaning that they enjoyed freedom from state interference but also suffered from the lack of state backing. Merchants were expected to abide by a code of conduct, which was: “Refuse to take more than your due and never stint giving to others their due”. Therefore, they went about running their business by openly announcing the profit they were aiming at, known as Utiyam. The mercantile community of Tamilakam was aware of elementary banking operations. Lending through houses specializing in monetary transactions and fixation of rates were common. This was, evidently, necessitated by the extensive overseas trade. Accountants were in demand in view of monetary transactions and considerable trading activity. Merchant groups from Madurai and Karur made endowments, or donations, as attested by inscriptions found in Alagarmalai (1st century BC) and Pugalur (3rd century AD). These inscriptions also mention that the various commodities traded by such merchants included cloth, salt, oil, plowshares, sugar and gold.

Trade To Other Countries

The economic prosperity of the Tamils depended on foreign trade. Literary, archaeological and numismatic sources confirm the trade relationship between Tamilakam and Rome, where spices and pearls from India were in great demand. With the accession of Augustus in 27 BC, trade between Tamilakam and Rome received a tremendous boost and culminated at the time of Nero who died in 68 AD. At that point, trade declined until the death of Caracalla (217 AD), after which it almost ceased. It was revived again under the Byzantine emperors. Under the early Roman emperors, there was a great demand for articles of luxury, especially beryl. Most of the articles of luxury mentioned by the Roman writers came from Tamilakam. In the declining period, cotton and industrial products were still imported by Rome. The exports from the Tamil country included pepper, pearls, ivory, textiles and gold ornaments, while the imports were luxury goods such as glass, coral, wine and topaz. The government provided the essential infrastructure such as good harbours, lighthouses, and warehouses to promote overseas trade.

Trade Route

The trade route taken by ships from Rome to Tamilakam has been described in detail by writers such as Strabo and Pliny the Elder. Roman and Arab sailors were aware of the existence of the monsoon winds that blew across the Indian Ocean on a seasonal basis. A Roman captain named Hippalus first sailed a direct route from Rome to India, using the monsoon winds.

His method was later improved upon by merchants who shortened the voyage by sailing due east from the port of Cana or Cape Guardafui, finding that by this way it was possible to go directly from Rome to Tamilakam. Strabo writes that every year, about the time of the summer solstice, a fleet of one hundred and twenty vessels sailed from Myos Hormos, a port of Egypt on the Red Sea, and headed toward India. With assistance from the monsoons, the voyage took forty days to reach the ports of Tamilakam or Ceylon.

Pliny writes that if the monsoons were blowing regularly, it was a forty day trip to Muziris from Ocelis located at the entrance to the Red Sea from the south. He writes that the passengers preferred to embark at Bacare (Vaikkarai) in Pandya country, rather than Muziris, which was infested with pirates. The ships returned from Tamilakam carrying rich cargo which was transported in camel trains from the Red Sea to the Nile, then up the river to Alexandria, finally reaching the capital of the Roman empire. Evidence of Tamil trading presence in Egypt is seen in the form of Tamil inscriptions on pottery in Red Sea ports.

Conclusion

The role of the state in trade related to two aspects: first, to provide an adequate infrastructure necessary to sustain the trade and second, to organise an efficient administrative apparatus for taxation. During the Sangam period, the main trade routes, such those going over the Western Ghats, went through thick forests. It was the duty of the state to protect the merchant caravans on these trade routes from robbers and wild life. Main roads, known as Peruvali, were built that connected the distant parts of the country. These roads were as important to the army as they were to the merchants. Commodities like salt had to be transported long distances, such as from the sea coast to the interior villages. The state also built and expanded the infrastructure for shipping such as ports, lighthouses and warehouses near the ports to promote overseas trade. Several ports were constructed on both the east and the west coasts of Tamilakam. Kaveripumpattinam (also known as Puhar) was the chief port of the Cholas; their other ports were Nagapattinam, Marakkanam and Arikamedu, all on the east coast.

The Pandyas had developed Korkai, Saliyur, Kayal, Marungurpattinam (present day Alagankulam) and Kumari (present day Kanyakumari) as their centers of trade along the east coast, while Niranam and Viliyam were their west coast ports. Muchiri, Tondi, Marandai, Naravu, Varkkalai and Porkad were the principal ports of the Cheras, all of them on the west coast. To collect revenue from commerce, the state installed customs check posts (sungachavadi) along the highways and the ports. In the ports, duty was collected on inland goods, before being exported, and on overseas goods meant for the local markets, which were stamped with the official seal before being allowed into the country.

The volume of trade in the port cities was high enough to warrant a large workforce to monitor and assess the goods. The state issued licenses to liquor shops, which were required to fly the license flag outside their premises. Flags were used by foreign merchants too, to indicate the nature of goods they were selling. The state also kept records of the weights and counts of

all the goods sold by merchants. One of the significant aspects of the state intervention in commerce was that it reinforced the authority of the ruler.

END NOTES

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