

## CHAPTER – 41

# INDUSTRIAL ACTIVITY ANDECONOMIC CONDITION OF ANCIENT TAMIL COUNTRY

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### **Introduction**

The economy of the ancient Tamil country (Sangam era: 200 BC – 200 AD) describes the ancient economy of a region in southern India that mostly covers the present-day states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The main economic activities were agriculture, weaving, pearl fishery, manufacturing and construction. Paddy was the most important crop; it was the staple cereal and served as a medium of exchange for inland trade. Pepper, millets, grams and sugarcane were other commonly grown crops. Madurai and Urayur were important centers for the textile industry; Korkai was the center of the pearl trade. Industrial activity flourished.(1) Inland trading was conducted primarily through barter in busy market places by merchant associations and commercial lending institutions. Merchants formed associations that operated autonomously, without interference from the state.

The people of ancient Tamil country engaged in brisk overseas trade with Rome; the trade reached a peak after the discovery of a direct route for merchant ships between Tamilakam and Egypt, taking advantage of the monsoon winds. Pepper, pearls, ivory, textiles and gold ornaments were exported from Tamilakam, and the main imports were luxury goods such as glass, coral, wine and topaz. Foreign trade brought in a large amount of internationally convertible Roman currency.(2) The state played an important role in building and maintaining infrastructure such as roads and ports—funded through taxation—to meet the needs of economic and social activity. Wealth was unequally divided among the people, giving rise to distinct economic classes.

### **Industry In Ancient Tamil Country**

During the Sangam age, industrial activity was considered ancillary to agriculture and was mostly domestic, not factory-based. Simple workshops where the blacksmith made the wheel or the carpenter his wooden wares could be called factories of a sort. Weaving, pearl

fishing, smithy and ship building were some of the prominent industries of the ancient Tamil country. Cotton and silk fabrics from Madurai and Urayur were in great demand; the textiles from these regions were well known for their high quality. Korkai was the center of pearl trade and produced pearls that were sought after not only in Tamilakam, but in the kingdoms of north India and Rome. Smithy was an essential industry, because the blacksmith manufactured many of the tools and objects used in daily life. The flourishing overseas trade was supported by the shipbuilding industry that produced a variety of ocean and river craft. There were several ancillary industries such as carpentry, fishing, salt manufacture and construction that supported the trade and economic activity of this age.(3)

## **Weaving**

Weaving was the most important industry. Spinning and weaving were widely practised crafts, next only to agriculture. In addition to being the full-time occupation of many people, weaving was practised parttime by the farmers in rural areas. Women spent their spare time spinning cotton threads and continued to spin during the night, by the faint light of a wick lamp. Madurai and Urayur were the important centers of the industry and were well known for their cotton textiles. The muslins carried very fine floral work of different colors and were compared to silk and cotton fabrics, cloth made of wood fibre called Sirai Maravuri and Naarmadi was used by the priestly class. Silk, wool and other fabrics are referred to as cloths of natural origin. In the markets of Madurai, woollen goods were sold alongside the cotton and silk goods. The cloth manufacturers wove long pieces of cloth at a time and delivered it to the dealers. The textile dealers then scissored off bits of required length, called aruvai or tuni, at the time of sale. The dealers themselves were called aruvaivanigar and the localities where they lived aruvaividi. Stitched garments were worn by the people and there were tailors called tunnagarar in Madurai and other big towns. Weaving was not associated with the hilly regions, as the descriptions of life in such regions do not indicate any use of cotton garments (4).

## **Pearl fishing**

Pearl fishing was another industry that flourished during the Sangam age. The Pandyan port city of Korkai was the center of pearl trade. Written records from Greek and Egyptian voyagers give details about the pearl fisheries off the Pandyan coast. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea mentions that “Pearls inferior to the Indian sort are exported in great quantity from the parts of Apologas and Omana”. The inferior variety of pearls that the Tamils did not require for their use was in very great demand in the foreign markets. Pearls were woven along with nice muslin cloth, before being exported. The most expensive animal product that was imported from India by the Roman Empire was the pearl from the Gulf of Mannar.(5) The pearls from the Pandyan kingdom were also in demand in the kingdoms of north India. Several Vedic mantras refer to the wide use of the pearls. The royal chariots were decked with pearls, as

were the horses that dragged them. The use of pearls was so high that the supply of pearls from the Ganges could not meet the demand.(6) Literary references of the pearl fishing mention how the fishermen, who dive into the sea, avoid attacks from sharks, bring up the right-whorledchank and blow on the sounding shell. Convicts were used as pearl divers in Korkai (7)

### **Smithy**

The smithy, or the Panikkalari (literally: workplace), played an important role in the lives of ancient Tamils. Some of the essential items forged or repaired in the smithy include weapons of war, tools such as the plough, domestic utensils and the iron wheel.(8) These ancient factories used a blow pipe or a pair of bellows (a turutti) to light the fire that was used for smelting and welding. These workplaces were not numerous, especially in the rural areas. Each smithy catered to the needs of many neighboring villages and hence was overworked. The art of the goldsmith seems to have caught the fancy of foreign markets and Tamil made ornaments were shipped to foreign lands mainly from Karur.(9)

### **Ship building**

Shipbuilding was a native industry in Tamilakam. Ocean craft of varying sizes, from the small catmaran which was a bunch of logs tied together to the big ships with mast and sail, were used in Tamil ports. Among the smaller crafts were ambi andpadagu that were used as ferries across rivers and the timil which was a fishing boat. Pahri, Odam, Toni, Teppa, and Navaiwere other smaller craft. The large ship was called Kappal had masts (Paamaram) and sails (10)

### **Agriculture**

Agriculture was the main occupation of the ancient Tamils and the most respected. Farmers were aware of different soil types, the best crops to grow and the various irrigation systems suitable for any given region. In the five geographical divisions of the Tamil country in Sangam literature, the Marutam region was the most fit for cultivation, as it had the most fertile lands. Land was classified, according to its fertility, as Menpulam (fertile land), Pinpulam (dry land), Vanpulam(hardland) and Kalarnilam or Uvarnilam (salty land). Menpulam yielded rich produce on a variety of crops, but Pinpulam was cultivated only with dry crops due to limited irrigation facilities. The yield from Vanpulam was limited, while Kalarnilam was unfit for cultivation. Some of the well known types of soil were alluvial soil, red soil, black soil, laterite soil and sandy soil (11) The Tamils cultivated paddy, sugarcane, millets, pepper, various pulses, coconuts,beans, cotton, plantain, tamarind and sandalwood. Paddy was the main crop, with different varieties grown in the wetland of Marutam,such as Vennel, Sennel,Pudunel, Aivananel and Torai.

The peasants lived in groves of trees close to the farmlands and each house had jack, coconut, palm, areca and plantain trees.[citation needed] Peasants grew turmeric plants in front of their houses and laid flower gardens in between the houses. Farmers believed that ploughing, manuring, weeding, irrigation and the protection of crops must be done according to a specific method in order to obtain a good yield. A wide range of tools needed for agriculture, from ploughing to harvesting, were manufactured. The basic tool was the plough also known as meli, nanchil and kalappai. Palliyadutal referred to the process of removing weeds using a toothed implement attached to a plank and drawn by oxen. Lower-class peasants used stone sling devices to scare animals and birds away from the standing crops. Sickles were used for harvesting mature ricepaddies. Since the rivers of the region were not perennial, several irrigation techniques were developed to ensure an adequate and continuous supply of water. Farmers used a bullock-propelled device called Kapilai for bailing out water from deep wells and a manual setup called Erram, for shallow wells. Tanks, lakes and dams were used as water storage systems and the water regulated using sluices and shutters. Kallanai, a dam built on river Kaveri during this period, is one of the oldest water-regulation structure in the world. Surface irrigation, sprinkler mechanism and drip irrigation methods were followed to prevent wastage of water. (12) Most farmers cultivated their own plots of land and were known by different names such as Mallar, Ulutunbar, Yerinalnar, Vellalar, Karalar and Kalamar. There were also absentee landlords who were mostly brahmins and poets who had received donations of land from the king and who gave these donations to tenant farmers. Sometimes independent farm laborers, known as Adiyor, were hired for specific tasks. Landlords and peasants paid tax on the land and its produce – the land tax was known as Irai or Karai and the tax on produce was called Vari. One sixth of the produce was collected as tax. Taxes were collected by revenue officials known as Variya and Kavidi, who were assisted by accountants called Ayakanakkar. For survey and taxation purposes, various measurements were used to measure the land and its produce. Small lots of land were known as Ma and larger tracts as Veli. Produce was measured using cubic measures such as Tuni, Nali, Cher and Kalam and weight-measures such as Tulam and Kalanju. (13)

## **Trade**

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.(14)

## **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. 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 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.[citation needed] 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.(15)

### **Foreign trade**

The economic prosperity of Tamilakam 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.[36] The government provided the essential infrastructure such as good harbours, lighthouses, and warehouses to promote overseas trade. Fine muslins and jewels, especially beryls (vaiduriyam) and pearls were exported from Tamilakam for personal adornment. Drugs, spices and condiments as well as crape ginger and other cosmetics fetched high prices.

Even greater was the demand for pepper which, according to Pliny, sold at the price of 15 denarii (silver pieces) a pound. Sapphire, called kurundham in Tamil, and a variety of ruby were also exported. The other articles exported from Tamilakam were ivory, spikenard, betel, diamonds, amethysts and tortoiseshell. The Greek and Arabic names for rice (Oryza and urz), ginger (Gingibar and zanjabil) and cinnamon (Karpion and quarfa) are almost identical with their Tamil names, arisi, inchiverand karuva. The imports were mostly luxury items such as glass, gold and wine. Horses were imported from Arabia(16)

### **Foreign exchange**

The flourishing trade with the Romans had a substantial impact on the economy of ancient Tamil country and the royal treasury and the export traders accumulated large sums of

Roman currency. Pliny writes that India, China and Arabia between them absorbed one hundred million sesterces per annum from Rome. This sum is calculated by Mommsen to represent 1,100,000 pounds, of which nearly half went to India, the preponderance to South India (17) Coins hoarded by the early Roman emperors from Augustus to Nero have been found in the vicinity of the South Indian beryl mines which produced the best and purest beryl in the world. At fifty-five different locations, mostly in Madurai and Coimbatore districts, these coins have been unearthed; the number of gold coins discovered has been described as a quantity amounting to five coolly loads.

The quantity of silver coins has been variously described as “a great many in a pot”, “about 500 in an earthen pot”, “a find of 163 coins”, “some thousands enough to fill five or six Madras easures”. [citation needed] Coins of all the Roman emperors from Augustus (27 BC) to Alexander Severus (235 AD) have been discovered, covering a period of nearly three centuries. By far the greatest number of these Roman coins belong to the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. After 235 AD, for the next one hundred years, there are no coins that can be dated, suggesting a temporary abeyance of trade between Rome and South India. This could have been due to internal revolts and external attacks suffered by the Roman empire during that period. When order and good government were restored in Rome, trade with Tamilakam revived, as indicated by the finding of an increased number of coins from this period. Zeno’s coins have been traced to the end of the Roman empire.

Scholars believe there was a Roman settlement near Madurai and that little copper coins with the Roman Emperors’ heads on them might have been minted locally (18). Conclusion How wealth was assessed varied from one community to another. Farmers counted the number of plough shares owned and among the pastoral folk it was the number of cows.

Wealth was distributed unequally among the people, leading to distinct economic classes - the rich, the poor and the middle class. The nobility, state officers, export traders and court poets formed the wealthy class. Most agriculturists and inland merchants made up the middle class. The lowest class consisted of labourers and wandering minstrels. It was believed that this economic division of people was the result of a divine arrangement; the poor people were made to feel that their miserable condition was due to their past sins, *tivina*, and was inevitable. The extreme opulence of some people as well as the abject poverty of some others are clearly portrayed in the contemporary literature. Most of the rich spent a part of their wealth on charity, the king’s philanthropy setting an example. It was believed that one needed to accumulate wealth in order to give donations and perform righteous obligations. Sometimes, the men of the household undertook a long journey to the north of the Venkata Hill or the northern boundary of Tamilakam, to earn wealth. One possible region that they might have gone to is the Mysore region, where the gold mines were getting famous. F. R. Allchin, who has discussed the

antiquity of gold mining in the Deccan, says that the high period of mining in South India was the last centuries of the pre-Christian era and the first two centuries of the Christian era, which coincides with the Sangam period.

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