

CC-5: HISTORY OF INDIA (CE 750-1206)

IV. TRADE AND COMMERCE

(E). MERCHANT GUILDS OF SOUTH INDIA

Professor Vijaya Ramaswamy's sustained engagement with researches on textile production in south India have enriched our understanding of this craft. She has examined inscriptions for generating elaborate data on weaving and weavers. Weavers in early medieval south India prominently figure in inscriptions as saliyar and kaikkolar. What is striking is that these craftsmen combined weaving with professional soldiery. Like many other craftsmen, they too formed guild-like professional organizations, such as samaya-pattagara, saliya samayangal and seniya pattagara. While the term seni is probably the same as Sanskrit sreni (professional organization), samaya is a technical expression denoting a compact and agreement. The cohesiveness of the weavers' body, one of the key factors in the success of the organization, is written large in these terms. These weavers, obviously on account of their being resourceful, appear in several inscriptions as donors to temples making gifts of cash, livestock, and shares of clothes(produced by them).

Indian, particularly south Indian merchants had participated in international trade since ancient times. But sources of information about these ancient times are restricted to archaeological finds and occasional references in literary texts which tells little about the activities of the merchants.

The organisation of corporate enterprises became common in this period. Almost all arts and crafts were organised into guilds and work was done on a corporate basis. Records do not mention individual artists, sculptors and craftsmen.

Merchants organised themselves into powerful guilds that transcended political divisions, allowing their operations to be largely unaffected by wars and revolutions. Powerful south Indian merchant guilds included the Manigramam, the Nagarattar and the Anjuvannam. Local guilds were called Nagaram, while the Nanadesis were traders from the neighbouring kingdoms,

The wealthiest and most influential and celebrated of all south Indian guilds was the self-styled Ainnurruvar, also known as the 500 svamis of Ayyavolepur who conducted extensive land and sea trade and thereby contributed significantly to the total foreign trade of the empire.

It fiercely protected its trade obligations and its members often recorded their achievements in inscriptions. Rich traders contributed significantly to the royal treasury through paying import and export taxes.

Among the most powerful guilds-the Ayyavole, derived from the name of a former capital of the Chalukyas, Aihole, dominated the trade of the Deccan, whereas the Manigramam was based in Tamil Nadu. The international connections of the Ayyavole extended to West Asia, while the Manigramam concentrated on trade with South-East Asia. The inscription at Takuapa (on the Isthmas of Siam), belonging to the middle of the ninth century, mentions this guild (Manigramam) specifically.

The great guilds operating in several countries had emerged as an important power factor in south Indian polity as early as the Pallava period. They not only financed local development projects and the construction of temples, but also lend money the kings. Thus, the rulers did their best to accommodate the guilds because of the benefits which they derived from their trade. Due to their international connection, the troops they employed and the immunities they enjoyed, such guilds almost constituted a state within the state.

Corporate organisations of the merchants played a leading role in fixing customs duties on goods in port towns such as Pallavapattinam, Cuddalore, Tiruvendipuram etc. Quilon (Kollam) was an important port town on the western coast and there is inscriptional evidence of an agreement between the Manigramam guild, foreign traders and the king regarding various issues such as taxes, warehouses, and the protection of the merchants and their merchandise at this port.

The guilds were based on occupation and economic interest, and membership cut across lines of caste and religion. Most of the guild inscriptions have been found in South India, but some have also been found in Sri Lanka and East and Southeast Asia. An inscription mentioning the Ayyavole was found at Padaviya in Sri Lanka. This gives eulogy of the guild and lists its different component groups. A 1088 CE inscription of the same guild was found at Lobo Toewa in Sumatra. In China, Quanzhou in Fujian province yielded over 300 Hindu images and artefacts and a bilingual Tamil-Chinese inscription. This suggests the presence of a colony of Tamil merchants, perhaps members of a guild, in the 13/14th century.

As Chola waned in the 12th century, the merchant guilds of South India became increasingly independent and less dependent on royal support. Trading caravans moved around with armed protection. Merchant guilds jointly fixed toll and cesses, and made joint donations to the temples along with the Chittarameli and Pandinen Vishaya, which were associations of agriculturalists controlling the production and exchange of agricultural commodities.

REFERENCE

Chakravarti Ranabir, Exploring Early India upto Circa AD 1300

Singh Upinder, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India. Delhi, 2008