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MERCHANT GUILDS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL SOUTH INDIA: A STUDY

History

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Introduction:

In South India the merchant communities had been organized into corporate bodies or guilds from AD. 10th century onwards. The active functioning of trade and merchant guilds was an important feature of South Indian Economy in the ancient and medieval times. The merchant guilds were formed with the primary objective of carrying on trade, commerce, banking etc. They were not merely interested in amassing wealth and protecting the interest of the merchants but also in the general upliftment of the people. This paper mainly focuses on the functions of the merchant guilds of South India spread over Karnataka, Andhra and Tamilnadu. In Karnataka we get fairly good picture about the activities in the Chalukyas of Badami- Kalyan, Rastrakutas, Hoyasalas and Vijayanagar periods.

Meaning & Growth of Merchant Guilds



The term used for the guild is Nigmattor. It is an organization of artisans or traders. The guilds are divided according to their professions like the Citrmeli (Agricultural guild), Salevaru, Telikivevuru and Panchamaru and trade guilds like Ayyavole500, Nakara, Merchants of Pedinenimidi Bhumis, and Mummaridandas etc.¹

During the period these guilds namely the Virabananja Samaya, the Nakaram of Penugonda and the Telikas conducted internal as well as foreign trade. The activities of the Nakaram of penugonda and that of Telikis were restricted to Andhra area, while Virabananja Samya was spread over Andhra, Tamilnadu and Karnataka. The Virabananjas styled themselves as Ainnurruvar in Tamilnadu and as Five hundred Svamis of Ayyavole in Karnataka along with UbhayaNanadesi Pekkandru and Mummaridandas.

The early Tamil Brahmi inscriptions found in the vicinity of Madurai furnishes with some scanty information on this point. The inscriptions record that many merchants like salt merchant, the gold merchant, semi precious stone dealers were responsible for the donations made to the Jain ascetics undertaking penance on the hills around Madurai like Anaamalai and Tiruparakunram. An inscription at Mang near Madurai records the grant given by a member of a merchant guild of Vellore village. The term used for the guild is Nigmattor, the same word by which the merchant guilds are mentioned in the Satavahana inscriptions of more or less the same date.¹ this should clearly suggest the active functioning of trade guilds in Pandiyan country even at the beginning of the Christian era. Further amplification of the commercial activity, the flourishing market at Madurai is obtained from the literary works of the Sangam and later periods like the Maduraikanji and the silappadikaram.

The prevalence of the trade guilds can certainly be traced to the Sangam period, the large scale development of guild commerce in Pandyan country as in indeed for South India as a whole, can be traced only from 6th-7th centuries onwards, during the time of Pallavas, Chalukyas,

1. K.V.Raman, Brahmi Inscription of Tamilnadu, a historical assessment – Studies in Indian Epigraphy, Vol.1, pp. 104-118



Pandyas, Cheras and later Cholas. Inscriptions in Pandyan country from 9th-10th century onwards give us a fairly connected picture onwards give us fairly connected picture about the activities of the merchant guilds as well as individual activities of the members of the guild. Several facts concerning their free movement from one place to another, their settlements, names of the guilds their philanthropic activity both inside the Pandyan country and outside, are well attested by inscriptions. A record of the 10th century AD at Sirudavar in Chinglepet district has recorded a grant made by a merchant of the Pandyan country to the Vishnu temple of that village. Similarly, a record of the 14th century mentions that the merchants of Pandyamandalam met in Tondaimandalam and undertook several charities in the area. Especially coastal town like Mayilapur and Mamallapuram seems to have had close links with the merchant guilds.

Functions of the Merchants Guilds

We are all familiar with the several types of commercial guilds that were functioning all over South India such as manigramam, Nanadesi, thisaiyirattu, Ainurrwas, Nagarttar, anjuvannattar etc. Many of them had far flung trade connections both within and beyond the shores of India in the foreign countries like Srilanka, Malaya, and Sumatra etc. Among them of course, the Nanadesi- Tisai- ayirallu ainurwar had a long and cheuquered history. This guild seems to have been quite active in the area around Tirumayyam on the borders of the Pandya country even in the 9th century AD. It was responsible for a charity of excavating a tank and for its maintenance throughout the year which the guild instituted an endowment. The activity of the same guild in the Ambasamudram in Tirunelveli district, is attested by a record dated 1033 AD. The guild donated lands to the Siva temple at Ambasamudram.²

In an inscription from Belgaum dated AD.1184,³ they are said to be traders in horses, elephants, precious stones, spices and other articles. The records of the Tamil merchants of this

² 82 of 1907

³ Epigraphic Karnataka Vol. VII Sk 117



community hail from Sumatra⁴ and Burma.⁵ The vaisyas of Andhra formed into corporate body of the Nakam with their principal seat at Penugonda. The Telikis mentioned as Akhiladesala Telikivevuru were oil mongers, manufacturing and selling oil.

Every town appears to have had a mercantile association. Since they were local associations, the constitution and working must have differed from place to place and from time to time. However, every guild had a leader who exercised some control over the working of the organization and acted as its representative in these dealings with the government. The guilds were generally in a flourishing condition during the Vijayanagar period. Construction of the temples by the merchant guilds was seen during this time. An inscription from Bellary records that Abbaraja Timmappa, the agent of Pradhana Tirumalaraja, granted the Mulavisa of the villages for the offering of God Tiruvengalanatha with the consent of pattanasetti swamis of the villages and of the Mahanadu.

The important guilds which flourished during this period in Karnataka were Banajigas, Nanadesi, Ubhayananadesi, Nagarshetti, Guttas, Veeravanajigas, Ayyavole⁵⁰⁰, Manigramam and Mummaridandas. These were self governing local bodies. The leaders of the merchant guilds were also heads of towns. They were known by different names, such as Uboayananadesi, Pattanaswami, Mahavaddavyavahari, vadda-bhanadesi, Nagareshwara and Pattanadhishwara.⁶

A number of inscriptions refer to the establishment of fairs by merchant guilds. In 1362 AD all the farmers and subjects of Kayivaranadu, all the Nanadesis in Pekkundra and the 18 castes established a fair (santhe) at Kayivara and appointed Periya-Nayana as pattanswami.⁷ Another record of AD 1218 mentions that Five Hundred Swamis of Ayyavole, Mummaridandas of Uchchangi, Nanadesis of Uchchangi and other accepted the order to establish a fair and made

⁴ K.A.Nilakhanta sastry: South India and South East Asia, Mysore (1978) pp 237-247

⁵ Epigraphia Indica Vol. VII p. 197

⁶ For details see Venkata Ratnam A.V., Local Government in the Vijayanagara Empire, p 113.

⁷ E.C., X, Ct.95



grant of some dues to God Somanatha.⁸ Similarly an inscription of AD 1430 from Nenamangala village in Bowingpet (Bangarupete) records that the salumule of the 56 countires with all the cultivators and the Panchalas established a fair and in connection with it, as a many for the Pattanaswami of the fair Chiyi Bassi Setti granted land.⁹ The establishment of fairs at specific places not only helped the peoples to dispose of their agricultural produce but also to buy whatever they wanted at the nearest place. The establishment of new fairs resulted in the expansion of trade.

Inscriptions refer to the construction of tanks and channels by merchant guilds. As members of the Desi guilds, the Vaisyas constructed tanks. An inscription from Sikripur dated 1066 AD. Refers to a merchant (member of a Desi guild) belonging to Vaisyakula constructed a tank.¹⁰ The guilds of Nanadesi donated funds for the construction of irrigational works. An inscription of the time of Vira Bukkanna Odeyar (1357 AD) states that he permitted the great vadda-vyavahari, chief of both Nanadesi, Arjjuhattayya's son Mahadevanna to dig Lakshmpura channel, build stone sides, sluices and beginning form the fields to the north, to erect stones of both sides for bridges over the channel.¹¹ Another inscription refers to the repair of a tank. An inscription of the reign of Chalukya Somesvara IV dated 1184 AD., records that Mahapradhanasenadhipati, Dandanayaka Tejimayya and his subordinates Bokana-dandanayaka and Revarasa granted Pannaya tax for dredging and repairs in stone and wood to the sluice of the local tank called Gonnasmudra. The gift was entrusted to the sixteen settis of the village, who also made gifts of land to the same tank in conjunction with the Nakaharas.¹² Damodara Setti who has been praised as the senior merchant and benefactor of both sects of Nanadesi said to have build many tanks.¹³ Pattanaswami Nokkayya got five tanks constructed, one of them being

⁸ E.C., VI, Dg. 105

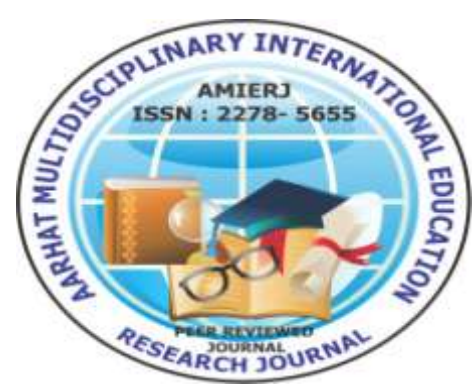
⁹ E.C. X, Bp. 72

¹⁰ E.C. VII Sikaripur 19.

¹¹ E.C. V. Arakalgud 58.

¹² S.I.I. XV, (BKI Vol.II) No.57.

¹³ M.A.R. 1911-p. 47, 1232 A.D.



named Pattanaswamykere.¹⁴ By providing irrigational facilities to the peasants the merchant guilds undoubtedly helped to improve agriculture. As a result, not only the condition of those peasants who drew water from these tanks improved but also resulted in the surplus produce, which flowed into the markets.

Merchant guilds came forward to establish watersheds on road sides for the benefit of travelers. These were sometimes attached to temples and satras. Boys were employed to supply water to the thirsty travelers. Setti guttas donated money for the purpose of establishment of watersheds.¹⁵ Mummaridandas liberally granted out of its income towards the establishment of watersheds. Desis and Nanadesis maintained watersheds on highways and donated money for the construction of the same.¹⁶ Thus it is clear that the construction of watersheds on the highways, particularly on trade routes was considered as an act of merit of those days.

In the similar way the inscriptions refer to the construction of status (feeding houses), Satras were rest houses for weary travelers. They were freely fed and accommodated with shelter for rest. The members of Five Hundred Swamis of Ayyavole constructed many feeding houses. An inscription from Telasang of Belgaum district, registers a gift of the incomes in kind and coin realized from several dealers made by Five Hundred Swami's, the Mahajanas of Telasang, the settis and the thirty six camps, Banajiga settis of the place and all the Nakharas, for the maintenance of satra of the place (Telasangava).¹⁷ Similarly the Mummardandas established feeding houses or satras for the benefit of travelers.¹⁸ The settguttas also established feeding houses.¹⁹ Thus from the above account it is clear that the establishment of feeding houses was also an important activity. The satras served as the meeting places for all kinds of people. It was a place where merchants in transition met and exchanged trade information.

¹⁴ E.C. VII,Nr,58 – 1062 A.D.

¹⁵ S.I.I. II, No. 23.

¹⁶ S.I.I. IX, Part-I, No. 223.

¹⁷ Karnataka Inscriptions, No. 21 of 1940-41 (Vol. II)

¹⁸ S.I.I. IX, Part-I, No. 296

¹⁹ E.C. VII, Sikaripur 19



Decline of Trade Guilds

The merchant guilds began to decline from 16th century onwards and almost disappeared from the scene by the 17th-18th centuries. The lessening of the guild donations to the temples as well as the absence of any reference to their activities in the Dutch and English records indicates their decline. During the days of Vijayanagar Empire, the Nayakas who were given authority over a particular area were required to pay half of the revenue to the king, besides offering military services. The taxation system of Golconda, which was very burdensome, appears to be another cause which affected the trade guilds. The general condition in South India in the second half of 16th century and 17th century was one of the disturbances and continuous warfare between the rulers of the country. The Portuguese imposed severe restrictions over Asiatic trade. They tried to take over the trade of the native merchant organizations by force. So all the traders who carried on great land commerce between Tinnevely and Kanyamkalam, stopped their commercial activity. The cropping pattern in the country also has changed so as to accommodate the production of goods for the market. The Dutch and English introduced an innovation in the country's economic structure namely advancing capital. This advancing of money to the artisan, while enabling them to get produces according to their requirements, brought down the position of the artisan to that of a paid labourer. The Indian merchants, who were not used to this practice, found it difficult to face the competition of the European Companies.

Conclusion

As looking to the history of merchant guilds in South India, it came in to existence during ancient times. These guilds found in practices up to 17th-18th century and declined gradually. Even today the recent trends in artisans and trading activities have been in practice as in the earlier way and have emerged again into the practice like carpenters, blacksmiths(kambar), goldsmiths(Pattar), cloth merchants(Nekaar), oil merchants (Ganigas), potmakers (Kumbar) etc. Not only these guilds were in existence in modern days but also, today we find various industrial



organizations, Labour Organisations, Trade Organisations as per their professions. It seems that the merchant guilds are still alive and functioning.

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