



A UNIQUE TRADE GUILD OF MEDIEVAL TAMIL COUNTRY – A STUDY

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Introduction

In medieval Tamil country the corporate trading communities were called Guilds. The term 'guild' itself conjures up the image of an association of professionals with a well-defined structure. The term 'guild' has been used to denote the association of merchants. This guild conception is based upon the well-recognized association of the right division with agriculture and related activities, including trade and some processing of agricultural commodities, as well as artisan-trader activities. Kautilya uses the word "Sreni" in the sense of a guild of workers. Encyclopedia Britannica gives the meaning payment or offerings. In Medieval Tamil Country the guilds were formed on the basis of caste and occupations. So the guilds comprised those who earned their livelihoods by the same kind of work though belonging to different castes or to the same caste. These guilds created a sense of collectiveness and co-operation. They acted as trustees of both the rulers and the ruled. They received endowments of money or land from the rulers. They built and maintained charity houses, temples and tanks for the welfare of the public. The functions of the

merchants' guild were not confined to economic matters alone. They also played a prominent role in matters concerning social, religious, administrative and judicial affairs of the territory

Early references and overseas interest of the manigramam:

Manigramam was a merchant guild. One of the earliest records of this guild appeared in the port of Quilon on the Kerala coast. This region has got inscriptions of Manigramam in the Sthanuu Ravi copper plates. There were many theories regarding the nature of the Manigramam association. According to one theory Manigramam could have been a group of Christians following the heresy of the School of Manes. Sthanu Ravi Plates suggested them as Christians. Another theory was that the Manigramam consisted of Christians who were reconverted to Hinduism by Manikkavasakar. The inscriptional record of this merchant group by name is of great value. It became the evidence of commerce between West Asia and the west coast of India in the ninth century. It also mentioned the trading stations and

commodities of trade, which were referred to in Arab sailing guides and topographies. In these trading activities the manigramam played a vital role.

There was a fragmentary ninth century Tamil inscription found in Takupa, Thailand give the impression that Manigramattar involved in overseas trade in ninth century. According to K.A.N.Sastri it belonged to reign of Pallava king Nandhivaram III (826 – 850) It referred to a tank protected by the Manigramam and to a group of armed warriors probably militia associated in medieval times with the protection of trade.

The sculptures in Takupa also resembles the Pallava style of architecture Both the statues and the inscription point to the existence of a Hindu colony at Takupa. The tamil traders who came to Takupa in Pallava times included some armed soldiers since the inscription speaks of protection extended to a tank . The colony might have been founded by manigramam guild. At the mouth of Takupa river ceramic and glass deposits and beads were found. Some of them would have come from West Asia and the rest from China and possibly some from India. These findings indicate that the Takupa area was used by the manigramam traders who dealt in merchandise from both ends of the maritime route in the ancient times. . . .

Manigramam under the Cholas and Pandyas:

Many inscriptions of Manigramam were found at various places of Tamil Country speak the glory of the guild. Some places in South East Asia, Srilanka also the bear the inscriptions of this guild. These attest the trading activities of the manigramam. In the coastal area of South East Asia was located the state of Tambralinga which was probably denote Madamahalingam of the Tanjore inscription of Rajendra Chola I The manigramam inscriptions were found at Ramantali in former Malabar district,

courtralam in Tirunelveli district, Srinivasa nallur in Tiruchirappalli district, Tiruvellarai in Trichirappalli district. Of these the Ramantali and Coiurtralam inscriptions belonged to the early tenth century. The others are of later period. These inscriptions attest to the religious endowment activities of the manigramam guilds.

At Talakkad in the Mukundapuram taluk a long inscription was found in which the manigramam was mentioned. The inscription consists of two sections, which would have been inscribed at different times. The first portion of the inscription could have belonged to the ninth or early tenth century on paleographic grounds but the content suggest an eleventh century date. Section one of the inscription describes the founding of a market. The urar or responsible citizens of the village defined the boundary of the market area.

The inscription also suggest the area in which the merchants were permitted

to put up shops. The urar also been the members of the assembly of the village levied tax in kind on the stalls but gave the merchants a free hand in running the market. The second half of the inscription was inscribed in the first half of the eleventh century. The second portion of the inscription mentions the two members of the manigramam who were given the right to set up shops in the market and were exempted from certain specific taxes. The taxes that were paid by all merchants included ulgu, the tax on goods coming in by sea. It was also stated in the inscription that local people were free to buy in the market. This inscription also attests to the existence of overseas trade contacts of the manigramam guild.

The Manigramam merchants enjoyed a special position as compared to the other merchants. Goods from outside came into the locality and there was a local demand for these goods. On the other hand the movement of trade is

indicated as well as the opening up of village communities to itinerant traders. There was buying capacity and a market in rural areas for goods other than those produced locally including overseas wares.

The manigramam merchants had regional base of operation is clearly stated in the Chola inscriptions. Manigramam of Uraiyur, manigramam of Kodumbalur were frequently mentioned in the Chola inscriptions. The Syrian Christian tradition about the Manigramam is that they were a group who had originally come from Chola Country manigramam of valikantapuram Thus they had regional base in Tamil Country and had overseas contacts.

Another eleventh century inscription in Sukhaveswara temple, Salem described a donation made to a temple by a merchant who belonged to manigramam of Kodumbalur. Kodumbalur is located in the Pudukottai tracts about equidistant between Madurai and Tanjore the Pandya and Chola capitals. Another inscription is found at Piranmalai on the borders of the present Pudukottai district was issued by the Ayyavole guild and the Citrameli association. This inscription also refers to the manigramam of kodumbalur This inscription shows that the merchants of manigramam of Kodumbalur as one of the many groups which met to discuss the taxes to be levied on the goods passing through this area. This inscription listed out the commodities of overseas trade.

Another inscription found in Tiruchirappali also referred the manigramam of Kodumbalur region. The frequent mentioning of this region in the inscriptions attested the commercial importance of the region. Irukkuvels of this region were the important feudatories of the Cholas and they supported the rulers in wars and battles. Since the Chola rulers encouraged the itinerant traders, they also encouraged the traders who passed through this region.

Moreover the location of this region also helped the traders to easily reach their destination point like Tondi and other ports in Pandimandalam. It is located in the equidistant between the capitals of Pandya and Chola. Thus the incoming foreign trade considerably had brought great prosperity to this region

A eleventh century inscription in Natham in Dindigul region also attests to the activities of the guild. A twelfth century inscription refers to Vaisyapalan

a trader enjoyed certain concessions in the hands of urar of Menaveli in Urtturkurram The name vaisyapalan indicates that the vaisyas continued their identity as traders. A 13th century inscription attested the activities of manigramattar in kovilpatti region Another inscription is found at Tanjore district. This inscription describes a donation to a temple near kombakonam Another inscription in Copper plates at kottayam Church is also belonged to thirteenth century. This inscription listed out the rights given to a manigramam merchant. From the port of Craganore the merchant traded cardamom, pepper, betel nuts and ginger to Arab countries. The inscription also describes the right of the manigramam guild. According to this, the manigramam had the right of levying tax on goods, which were arrived at the port. It had monopoly right on many commodities including musk, salt and sugar. Thus Manigramam guild was associated with the distribution of commodities of internal and overseas trade.

Sarkarpriyapalayam inscription also refers to this manigramama guild. This inscription refers to the joint action of the guilds. It also refers to the tax collected by the guild. Valikandapuram was a centre of the commercial activities of the manigramattar. Another inscription at Tittadanapuram in Ramnad district also mentioned about manigramam guild. In this inscription the manigramam members had

collaboration with Kaikolas, valanjiyar and Anjuvannam. The merchants of manigramam purchased the cotton fabric from Kaikolas and exported the same to the foreign countries. Since this place is very near to the port Tondi, the manigramam members might have involved in overseas trade from this port.

A thirteenth century inscription found at Melmangalam in Theni district refers to trader namely Kodumbalur manigramattuadalvalla chockan.

This inscription mentions the donation made by the trader to the temple.

A fourteenth century inscription found at Rajaraja Cholivaramudaiyar temple.

Another fourteenth century inscription attested the commercial activity of the manigramam in Kovilpatti region. This inscription also enumerates all the commodities of overseas trade, which passed through this little town. Thus kodumbalur was obviously a major centre of manigramam and overseas trade upto fourteenth century. Thus manigramam guild engaged in overseas trade from the 6th century to the fourteenth century.

Conclusion:

It was because of the activities of the merchant guilds, there was a marked increase in commercial activities of the guilds from the sixth century to the fourteenth century. They established their sway even in foreign countries. All these resulted in the increase of the overseas trade in Tamil Country. The guilds enjoyed their powers in Tamil Country and exercised their commercial supremacy in many trade and market centres in Tamil country. Besides trade, they also involved in multidimensional works like charity, Social

welfare, judicial, temple endowment etc. They contributed much for the development of economy in the medieval period Tamil Country. The commercial activities of the guild were also continued during the time of the Vijayanagar period also.

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