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RESEARCH ARTICLE

### FORMATION AND GROWTH OF MERCHANT GUILDS ASSOCIATION THROUGH THE AGES

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#### Abstract

Guild an association of merchants formed for mutual aid and protection and for the furtherance of their trade interests. Guilds flourished in ancient Tamil Country since the early Christian era and formed an important part of the economic and social fabric in that era. The ancient trade Guilds were functioned generally merchant Guilds. Merchant Guilds were associations of all or most of the merchants in a particular port town or city during the ancient period. These men might be local or long-distance traders, wholesale or retail sellers, and might deal in various categories of mercantile goods. Craft Guilds, on the other hand, were occupational associations that usually comprised all the artisans and craftsmen in a particular branch of industry or commerce. There were, for instance, Guilds of weavers, dyers, cotton trade and agricultural producers and so on.

**Keywords:** Merchandise, Guild, Traders, Dharma, Nagaram, Pattinam and Organization

#### Introduction

Guild an association of merchants formed for mutual aid and protection and for the furtherance of their trade interests. Guilds flourished in ancient Tamil Country since the early Christian era and formed an important part of the economic and social fabric in that era. The ancient trade Guilds were functioned generally merchant Guilds. Merchant Guilds were associations of all or most of the merchants in a particular port town or city during the ancient period. These men might be local or long-distance traders, wholesale or retail sellers, and might deal in various

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Before understanding the trade Guild it is interesting to know the definitions of trade Guild. The organised commercial business communities were called Trade Guilds. The term "Guild" itself evokes the merchants of a professional association with a well-defined structure. The expression "Guild" has been

used to denote an organised association of merchants. This conception of the Guild is based on the well-recognized association of a body of merchants, who purchased and sold agricultural products and sold activities, in the name of trade and material processing of agricultural products, as well as the products of artisans.<sup>1</sup> Kautilya uses the expression "Sreni", which means the workers union. Encyclopedia Britannica gives the meaning as payment or offerings.<sup>2</sup> In ancient days Guilds were formed on the basis of occupations. These Guilds created a sense of collectivity and cooperation even during the ancient Tamil Country. In due course of time medieval Tamil Country, the Guilds were formed on the basis of castes. So the Guilds of Tamils, which comprised those, who made their occupations from the same type of trade work, even though they belonged to different castes or the same caste.

It is worthwhile to understand the formation of trade Guilds. There were also references to makes mention various sections of Tamil society in trade Guilds that followed the profession of trading with other parts of India or with other countries. The merchants also joined in association for the protection of common trade interests. Therefore, the Guild generally consisted of people of various sectarian ethnic castes, when people of different castes practiced the same trade and the Guild would include everyone without reference to caste and communities.

During the ancient period the members of a trade Guild mainly belonged to the same professional occupation, belonged to different castes, and obeyed common rules of the land. Sometimes members of Guilds belonged to a different caste by birth and followed a traditional hereditary trade professional occupation. In due course of time the choice of one's trade profession was largely conditioned by a particular caste of the individual in medieval times. As the caste of a particular individual influenced his profession, the Guild in India including Tamil Country differed from the European Guild. At this juncture it is worthwhile to analyze the European trade Guild. The membership in European trade Guild was determined solely by a person's voluntary involvement to a particular trade profession. Whereas, the trade Guilds in India and in Tamil Country do not exactly match the European

Guilds. In very few occasions the Tamils of different castes practiced the same trade activities and their Guild generally includes all members of the same professionals of the trade during the medieval age.

Here it is highly useful to know how the formation of an organized Guild came into existence and what the reason behind it was. To answer the formation of trade Guild it is worthwhile to understand the conditions prevailed in the Country. During the medieval days, the rulers made several endowments like land to Brahmins and Non-Brahmins with right of possession. The Brahmins acted as land owners and employed lower caste people to work on the land. The lower caste people assisted in the cultivation of the land and acted as fundamental works of the Government. Naturally, to carry out these agricultural production and irrigation tasks, the landowners had to meet on certain occasions in every hamlets. It would be an informal meeting by the local assemblies. Thus the Local Self Governments discussed and made solutions to their common problems. As time went on, with the increasing complexity of the social and economic organization of the village, the village assemblies met frequently. Later on it became a formal meeting. It became a precedent for the formation of corporate entities. When merchants moved to trade through unsafe routes, which were infested with organized gangs of thieves, the merchants were forced to take steps to form an organization among themselves in the name of Trade Guilds.

Here it is interesting to note the identification of merchants and the factors responsible for the formation of Trade Guilds. In addition, the Guilds had to constantly move in search of wealth through inhospitable regions. This search of wealth also forced them to form an organization in the name of the Guild. To abolish the common danger, as well as to realize the *dharma*, the merchants should agree to a course of action. The highway robbery also forced merchants to form an organization known as Guild to protect common interests. Mutual understanding between the merchants was also an important element in bringing them to unite under a common organization. These contingencies resulted in the formation of merchant Guilds in Tamil Country. Thus, the main objective of

the Guilds was to ensure and maintain equal opportunities and to assure them a good subsistence base by restricting or excluding competition and therefore the merchant identified with the Guild. The Guild was identification for merchants and helped the middle-class in their economic struggle for recognition at the hands of both rulers and ruled. When Guilds developed, the patrons were advised not to oppose the growth of the economy of the Country, but to seek their advice and decide.

In this context it is quite useful to trace important factors led to Guild formation had been an important factor in the development of mercantile community. The well-organized merchants Guild maintained its merchandise emporiums both in the *Nagarams* and in the militia cantonment.<sup>3</sup> Ties of unity of the merchants also bound the merchants together in the name of Guilds.<sup>4</sup> Locality, trade of the same type of goods, and collective actions in the professional field and Social affairs were the bonds of unity that helped the merchants to form the Guilds.

The different types of Guilds existed in Indian society, namely the Farmers Guild, the Craftsmen Guild, the Caste Guild and Merchant Guild. Among these, the Merchant Guilds was also the best organized and materialistic organization. This Merchant Guilds played a vital role in trade and commerce. Besides, these Guilds also concentrated the multipurpose activities. They were also concerned with the administration of many local self-Governments and more particularly they were concerned with urban centers, which were very close to ports or coastal towns. Further the functions of the merchant Guilds were not only confining to materialistic matters but also played a prominent role in public matters related to the concern territory's socio-economic, administrative, judicial and religious affairs. Besides, the Merchant Guilds acted as treasury of both the rulers and the ruled. The Merchant Guilds received patronization from the rulers. The Merchant Guilds built and maintained charity houses while they transported their commodities. They endowed local temples, and maintain tanks for the welfare of the public. Thus these were organized materialistic organisations.

The union of merchants was formed in two categories one was on the basis of local link and another on the occupation. For the first category there were many references in the inscriptions. Kodumbalur, Manigram,<sup>5</sup> Uraiyur Manigram, Eripadainallur Nagarattar, Kulasekarapattinam Nagarattar,<sup>6</sup> Viranarayanapura Tamula Pattinam, Ainnurruvar from Vadakalavali Nadu, Ainnurruvar and Tirukottiyur Maniyambalam. These trade Guilds were formed on the basis of the local link.<sup>7</sup> For the second type, generally the Guild consisted of members, who followed the same occupation. For illustration Belgula Jewellery Merchants, Saliya Nagarattar<sup>8</sup> (cloth merchants) Sankarapadyar<sup>9</sup> (oil merchant) and the thousand betel leaf sellers. The Ainnurruvar were also mainly traders of various types of merchandise as they themselves claim in their inscriptions.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the bond of union was common on the basis of occupation.

There are several trading communities existed in Tamil Country. They are Ainnurruvar, Tisaiyirattu Ainnurruvar, Valanjiyar, Nagarattar, Manigramattar, Nanadesi, Padinenvishayattar and so on. In Tamil Country, the Pallavas extended their support to the merchants. Then the Guilds involved in the trade of distant lands. Trading communities such as Manigramattar, Nanadesi, Ainnurruvar of a later period may have originated during the period of the Pallavas.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, there must have been a flourishing internal and external trade during the period of the Pallavas. Overseas trade with Indochina, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and the Persian Gulf flourished during the Pallava period through these Guilds. It was evidenced by several inscriptions. These Guilds obtained special privileges from the state.<sup>12</sup> Among these Guilds this Ainnurruvar protected the Vira Banaju Dharma (that is, the law of the noble merchant). Apart from their functions as merchants, they seem to have held a supreme position among the great number of professional bodies in the city and act as its leaders.

Various groups of Ainnurruvar trade Guilds were mentioned in the inscriptions. The Tirumalai inscription refers to various groups of Ainnurruvar they are; Pandimandalam Peruniravi Tisaiyirattu Ainnurruvar, Devivallaperuniravi Tisaiyirattu Ainnurruvar, Vadakalavalikattu

Kalandangalintisaiyirattu Ainnurruvar, Tirukottiyur Maniyambalattu Tisaiyirattu Ainnurruvar, Vembarrur Tenamtisaiyiratta Ainnurruvar, Puduteruvaana Vadaipattanattutisaiyirata Ainnurruvar Varanavasi and Tisaiyiratainnurruvar Algaimangaram. They were the groups mentioned in the inscription.<sup>13</sup> The various names were involved in foreign trade activities in the Tamil Country until the 14th century.

The various names of trade Guild groups appear in the inscriptions of the Tamil Country. Ayyavole or Ainnurruvar, Nanadesis, Nagarattar, Tisaiyirattu Ainnurruvar, Manigramattar, Anjuvannam, Chettis, Chittramel Periyannattar and Valanjiyar were some of the merchant Guilds of Medieval Tamil Country.

The Ainnurruvar's organization and structure known through several inscriptions. The earliest references to the organization dated in 800 A.D. were discovered on the Lad Khan and Gaudara Gudi temples in Aihole, Karnataka. Both inscriptions are somewhat opaque because the donors' title, 'the Five Hundred,' designates a group of Brahmin priests, not merchant communities.<sup>14</sup> Connection with the merchant organization is undeniable, however, as later Ainnurruvar inscriptions frequently mention the group's origin in Aihole, referring to the merchants as the "Five Hundred *svamins* (priests) of Aihole"<sup>15</sup> and as the "sons of Durga, the Goddess of Ayyapolil (Ayyavole or Aihole)." The presence of Tisaiyirattu Ainnurruvar in Kanchipuram confirms the itinerant trade of the Pallavas. The most important trade centre's namely, Nantisaiyairratavar, Padinettupattinam Mupathirendu Velapuram, and Arupattunangukadigaitavalam prevailed in Mayilappur.

The Ainnurruvar expanded their trade influences in the wake of the Pallava conquests under Narasimha I Pallava and Rajasimha Pallava. The trade Guilds expanded their trade influences wherever the Cholas intervened as conquerors. These invasions were followed by an increased presence of merchants and, in particular, the activities of the Ainnurruvar Guild can be noted. Within this period of Pallava occupation,

Ainnurruvar merchants moved to Indochina and the Malay Peninsula. The Pallava naval raid targeted the ports and commercial centers in abroad. The naval raids of the Pallava rulers were designed simply to encourage trade and perhaps increase royal revenues from port duties. It also implies a long period of cordial relations with maritime Sri Lanka and South East Asian Countries. Pallavas routinely accommodated themselves to such diplomatic devotions, a test from Sri Lanka also suggests.

The above mentioned references attest to the foreign contacts of the Pallavas.<sup>16</sup> Ainnurruvar and Valanjiyar established their semi-permanent residential neighborhoods in Kanchipuram and Mamallapuram. During this period, the Pallava rulers strengthened their political and trade influence in Indonesia.<sup>17</sup> Mamallapuram and Mayilappur were two main ports towns from which, ships sailed to Southeast Asia.<sup>18</sup> Four Southern Indian character inscriptions were identified in Borneo. The Pallava Grantha script of Southern India was the mother of all scriptures (except Arabic and Roman) in force in Indonesia.<sup>19</sup> Four Sanskrit inscriptions were also found in West Java. They are all written in South Indian script dating from the 6th and 7th centuries A.D.<sup>20</sup> An 8th century Sanskrit inscription from Sri Lanka also refers to Indian merchants, who were experts in sea travel.<sup>21</sup> In addition to Pallava inscriptions the Pallava coins also strengthened the maritime trade activities of the Pallavas. The Pallavas coins bear the two-masted ships<sup>22</sup> other Pallava coins also bear a crab and a turtle.<sup>23</sup> These coins explain the maritime activities of the Pallavas.

During Cholas period, the Ainnurruvar was one of the most famous Guilds. Ainnurruvar conducted long-distance trade from the early Chola period.<sup>24</sup> This Guild was also known as Tisaiyirattu Ainnurruvar. This Guild had a long and remarkable record of achievement. Its importance can be taken to predate the emergence of the Imperial Chola from the Vijayalaya line. In the 11th century, Tamil Ainnurruvar traders traveled north, probably after the Chola conquests. The Ainnurruvar expanded their trade influences in the wake of the Chola conquests under Rajaraja I Chola and Rajendra I Chola. The trade Guilds expanded their

trade influences wherever the Cholas intervened as conquerors. The movement of Ainnurruvar merchants in Sri Lanka may be related to the Chola invasions. In the same period, the Chola also invaded the Karnataka region. These invasions were followed by an increased presence of merchants and, in particular, the activities of the Ainnurruvar Guild can be noted. Within this period of Chola occupation, Ainnurruvar merchants moved to Polonaruva.

Many Ainnurruvar inscriptions belonged to the Ramnad and Madurai districts in Pandya Mandalam. This also attests to the commercial interest of the Pandya rulers. Aruviyur near Sivapuri in Sivaganga district has six inscriptional sources. The Guild members moved to the place for its improvement, and thus the place of its settlement indicates how the small hamlet is slowly turning into a merchant city. Since it became a large commercial center, it was inhabited by members of the Guild from different parts of the Tamil Country, including Thanjavur. The Ainnurruvar expanded their trade influences in the wake of the Pandya conquests under Sadyavarman Sundarapandya and Kulasekara Pandya. The trade Guilds expanded their trade influences wherever the Pandyas intervened as conquerors. These invasions were followed by an increased presence of merchants and, in particular, the activities of the Ainnurruvar Guild can be noted. Within this period of Pandya occupation, Ainnurruvar merchants moved to China. The Pandya naval raid targeted the ports and commercial centers in abroad.

Development of Trade & Commerce wherever they moved Kolar's Tamil inscription<sup>25</sup> also refers to the activity of the Ainnurruvar trade Guild. This indicates the maritime interest of the Cholas. The modern Kollegal taluk has inscriptions in Tamil and testifies to the movements of the Tamil Ainnurruvar in Kolar region. Thus, the Ainnurruvar Guild engaged in commercial activities wherever they moved.

Here it is interesting to note the theories Connected to the Nature of the Manigram. There were many theories about the nature of the Manigram association. First theory states that, the Manigram 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 Manigram consisted of Christians, who were reconverted to Hinduism by Manikkavasakar. The first half of the 7th century A.D. was the beginning of Arab incursions into western India. The Arab conquest of Sassanid Persia, Egypt and Sindh gave them control of a long area of strategic coastline that included the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea and, through them, the accesses to the Mediterranean. In the second half of the 8th or early 9th century, the Christians may have arrived in India under the leadership of Bishop "Thomas of Cana." Later in the 9th century another similar group arrived, headed by two bishops Mar Sabrisho and Mar Peroz. It is the second immigrant group, mentioned on these copper plates.<sup>26</sup> These led some historians to think that the members of the Manigram were foreigners and Christians. But all the epigraphic evidence from the Manigram suggests that it was the Hindu merchants. The Syrian Christian tradition about the Manigram is that they were a group that had originally come from the Chola Country.

Nagarattar was another type of merchant Guild that existed in the Tamil Country. These Nagarattar participated in local commerce. This Guild was mainly engaged in local trade and also had business contacts with other countries. The hymns of Devaram, refer to four types of merchants, viz. Viyaparigal, Saliyar, Sankarapadiyar and Vaniyar. All four were included in Nagarattar<sup>27</sup> Nagarattar was a generic term for Tamil traders. The Chetti community today is known by this term. The Nagarattar were the full-fledged trading community. They were mostly from the Nattukottai region (modern Pudukottai and Ramnad districts). The residential neighborhoods of the Nagarattar were known as Nagaram.

Here it is useful to know the patronage of Pallavas on maritime trade. An inscription found at Takkolam refers to two categories of members of the Nagaram. The first group was defined as the Nagarattar of the Sankarapadi and the Viyapari Nagarattom, while the second was distinguished as the Saliya Nagarattom<sup>28</sup> Viyapari is a general term used for traders, who trade in many types of products rather than specific products. The Saliya Nagarattar was the cloth merchants. They were weavers, who sold their

own cloth. These Saliya Nagarattar settled mainly around the city Kanchipuram region and engaged in commercial activities. They exported their cotton fabrics to other countries. Under the Pallavas, the commercial city of Kanchipuram was confined to three main points: Kanchipuram, Mayilapur, and Mamallapuram. Among these, Kanchipuram was not a port city, whereas it gained importance due to its cotton textile industries and its products. The Kanchipuram textile trade was linked to the Nagaram network. The port towns Mayilapur and Mamallapuram were two important nearby port cities. The actual trade policy of the Pallavas was promoting trade by abolishing tolls and expanding commercial enterprises in every port towns in South India, Southeast Asia and China which resulted in a quantitative increase in commercial activities. The increasing production of basic products like cotton fabrics also improved the economic situation of the traders and nations as well.

Another view that they were members of the either Nagarattar or Nanadesi Guild. It is due to the fact that the Nanadesi had their business movements in eighteen Pattanams. The Padinen Bhumi Samasta Paradesigal were existed and traded commodities abroad and they were not part of the Ayyavole organization. Therefore this Guild would have been part of either Nagarattar or Nanadesi Guild. Many of them were traders of specific commodities such as pearls and horses.<sup>29</sup>

The Nanadesi Merchants Guild in Pandya's period had its original link to Ayyapolil in the north in the early 11th century. The Devipattinam alias Jayapolil Vikramangalam was an active trading base of Nanadesis in 1264.<sup>30</sup> An entire city Madurai was of the merchants and was named after those merchants as Perunderu as Madurodaya Perunderu<sup>31</sup> Nanadesi merchants lived in this perunderu.<sup>32</sup> An inscription found at Aruviyur in Sivagangai district refers to the merchants lived on a separate street called Nanadesi Perunderu.<sup>33</sup> Nanadesi was also an important merchant Guild. This trade Guild had a long and remarkable record of achievement. An inscription from Mysore.<sup>34</sup> provides important and interesting details of the myths related to the origin and organization of this Guild. Their merchandise items are also listed in this

inscription. The Mysore inscription refers to the following mercantile commodities of Nanadesi. They are elephants, horses of good breed, precious stones of all kinds, spices, perfumes and drugs.

Besides it is highly interesting the patronage of the Cholas on maritime trade. Chitrameliperiyanadu was also another Guild. This Guild was a farmers' Guild. The agrarian foundation of early Tamil commerce was clearly discerned from a series of headings that recorded the activities of Chitrameli periyannadu.<sup>35</sup> Since the society was predominantly agrarian, various commercial organizations were integrated into this Chitrameli assembly. The term Chitra Meliya Yanaiyaga is mentioned in the Mugundanur inscription.<sup>36</sup> Chitrameli means the beautiful plow, which was the emblem of the Guild. This trade union identified itself with the provincial agricultural organization. It was an organization of farmers. It included all caste members of various castes. Their common praise expressed in the inscriptions is primarily the agrarian context.

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