



Trade guilds –ruling the political economy of medieval south India

Dr. Vidya. H.N. Associate professor & HOD , Department of History, Government Arts college (Autonomous) Hassan

Abstract: Medieval south Indian history is replete with references to trading , tradesmen& associations of traders called as merchant guilds. The Medieval economy was subjected to the merchant guild system. These guilds were a powerful entrepreneurial enterprise of merchants who contributed not only to the economic blooming but also socio cultural life of the period. The guilds contributed to economy with business ethics managed the economy with morality supported society with philanthropic activities & wielded with political power houses. This paper examines the importance of merchant guilds in medieval south Indian economy & highlights the roles & responsibilities played by these guilds in socio economic sphere of the period & evaluates the reasons behind their societal involvement.

Key words: Medieval period guilds, economic activities, Socio cultural importance

Introduction: Medieval south Indian economy was pillared on the well mechanized merchant guild system. The expansion of trade & commerce had resulted in urban expansion & with the increase in trade relations there were increasing demand for commercial contacts. The urban expansion along with the expansion of trade necessitated an important policy making towards management of trade. The guilds reflected the best management principles.

The concept of a guild- A guild was a free & voluntary association of individual / individuals earning their livelihood by same means of & same kind of labor. The members of the guild belonged to same caste or sub caste. They followed same trade. Guilds & trade associations of such type was an urban affair because there are no indications of guilds in rural areas of this time. These guilds was more powerful because the increasing number of trading leading to establishment of towns & cities & this urban expansion resulted in urban expanse. Because of trade commerce ties inland trade

expanded due to coastal trade export trade expanded this led to cities & urban expands the guild became inevitable & this was the reason for . The guild enjoyed several privileges it had support from the royal court they had potential links with political masters they had links with the royal court.. The royal court always supported these guilds with donation charities lands & such other concessions. (Meera Abraham- A study of Mañigrāmam and Ayyāvoḷe, merchant guilds of south India, 9th-14th century , Manohar publications 1998)

Types of guilds: There were two types of guilds

- ✓ Craft Guilds
- ✓ Merchant Guilds

They had constitutional status as they enjoyed a share in their local administration besides they had links with sabha & nadu assemblies

The Characteristics of Craft Guilds- There were two types of craft guilds they were called as right wing left wing. they



represented various occupations & professions nearly 98 such professions have been mentioned. This showed the occupations followed in those times. They helped the local administration they helped the king's viceroys local management & public affairs. Abdul Razzaak says they had their shops close to each other.

Classification of the guilds : Nearly 18 sectarian divisions are mentioned in epigraphs about the guilds. accordingly these 18 guilds were important.

1. Vyvahaarika
2. Panchalas
3. Kumbhalika
4. Tanthuvani
5. Vastra Bhedhaka
6. Thilaghataaka
7. Kuranthaka
8. Vastra Rakshska
9. Devanga
10. Govu Rakshska
11. Kirata
12. Rajuka
13. Kshaoruka

Features of the guilds : Each caste guild had its own organization. Panachala guild was most organized. There is a mention of hanjamana & elame in coastal regions. Historians have mentioned that these guilds were Tamil version of anjuvannam meaning five castes or five trades. Historian T V Mahalingam says

- ✓ The guild has its own Constitutional right

- ✓ All important towns of Vijayanagara had guilds
- ✓ The guilds played an important role in commercial life of the empire
- ✓ The guilds helped the local administration
- ✓ The guilds were consulted in all policy making
- ✓ The guilds had influence in politics as they were involved in supervision of local administration.
- ✓ The guilds followed ethical principles of trading . The margin of profit was always held high with morality.
- ✓ The guilds followed a common code of conduct
- ✓ The guilds had their own rules & regulations
- ✓ They shared common rights shared common privileges

Rights of the guild members- The guilds protected the right of the member their privileges their trade rights & property rights & safeguarded their interests.

The benefits of merchant guilds -The merchant guild often promoted brotherhood as merchants traders met each other & acquainted with each other . This was easy to support each other & each community of traders. The ethics of ties of neighborhoods supported to each other traditional interpretations common interests were shared (Meera Abraham- A study of Manigrāmam and Ayyavōle, merchant guilds of south India, 9th-14th century , Manohar publications 1998).



Their role of the guilds in socio economic life : Guilds enjoyed both economic & monetary powers.

1. The guilds had political rights
2. The guilds social rights
3. The guilds economic rights
4. The guilds miscellaneous rights

Special privileges of guilds – The officers of the government often consulted guilds .

- ✓ The guilds had the right to remitting tax The guilds tax concessions
- ✓ The guilds making a gift . The members of the guild collectively acted as patrons to socio cultural life. The guilds helped with donating a land
- ✓ The guilds extending benefits through social charities & philanthropic activities such as donating to educational institutions , supporting educational institutions with grains , constructing tanks , constructing rest houses , constructing feeding houses , constructing religious places , constructing places of worship , constructing water houses ,

Some important guilds : there were several guild but some of these guild find frequent mention in contemporary period sources.

- ✓ Ayyavole
- ✓ Banajiga
- ✓ Gutta
- ✓ Manigramam
- ✓ Nagara
- ✓ Nagartha

- ✓ Nanadesi
- ✓ Setti
- ✓ Ubhaya Nanadesi
- ✓ Veera Banajiga
- ✓ Vyshya

Sources of income – The guilds received income from internal generation as well as outside channel. Important source of income generation was internal membership contribution . Each member of the guild was contributing to the guild in his own way even though contributions were not specified. Another source of income was profit from lending. This was more supportive & stable source of income. Yet another source of income was profit from trading. Lastly income from corporate property added to the sources of the guild.

Organization of the guilds :The guild was lead by a leader who was the representative of the organization he was unanimously selected as leader. He was named as pattana settee, pattana swamy . Several inscriptions define his roles in socio political life. He had several names

1. Pattana swamy ,
2. Vyaapari ,
3. Pruthvi pathi,
4. Pruthuvi Settee,
5. Pattana Swamy,
6. Pura Pathi,
7. Nagareshwara etc (Epigraphia carnatica vol VII Vol VIII).

Duties of the guilds - The guilds had a very role to play not only in economic life but also in socio –religious life as well . The guilds performed several duties



- ✓ The guilds often supported in meeting the expenses of the fares & festivals
- ✓ The guilds collecting customs & tolls
- ✓ The guilds could donate lands for specific purpose
- ✓ The guilds build temples
- ✓ The guilds acted as arbitrators
- ✓ The guilds decoded disputes
- ✓ The guilds granted land
- ✓ The guilds receives donations
- ✓ The guilds could penalize offenders
- ✓ The guilds could code of conduct

The Panchalas Merchant guild : There were five different sects in the guilds which constituted Panchalas

- ✓ Akkasale – gold smith
- ✓ Kammata – coin minter
- ✓ Kumbhara -potter
- ✓ Kelasiga - mason
- ✓ kammara -carpenter

Inscriptions define Panchalas as well read, proficient in Vedas, good in trading & as learned people. They traded with war elephants, made royal thrones, created temple jewellery, attended royal needs, made royal carts, royal pallanquins etc. (Sanjaya subramaniam – The political economy of south India 1500-1650 Cambridge University press 2001).

Conclusion- Thus trade guilds played an important role in economic life in medieval India. They managed the trade as well as managed the ethical balances with social values. They led the social & economic life with enthusiasm. The

parallel references to guild activity in contemporary sources very importance of these guilds is that they conceded their rights & duties along with the importance of ethical values. They could breathe a value into trading & they knew that the royal support was a welcome gesture.

References :

1. Nilakanta Sastri, K. A. (2000). A History of South India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
2. Nilakanta Sastri, K. A.; Srinivasachari (2000). Advanced History of India. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Ltd.
3. Sanjaya subramaniam – The political economy of south India 1500-1650 Cambridge University press 2001
4. Kenneth R. Hall- International Trade and Foreign Diplomacy in Early Medieval South India Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient Vol. 21, No. 1 (Jan., 1978),
5. Meera Abraham- A study of Mañigrāmam and Ayyāvōḷe, merchant guilds of south India, 9th-14th century, Manohar publications 1998
6. Subbarayalu. Y - trade guilds of south India up to 10th century. Cambridge university press 2001