

A RELOOK ON THE FLOURISHING HORSE TRADE AND CONSTANT IMPORTATIONS OF THE TAMILS

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Abstract

There is a Tamil adage ‘Thirai kadal odiyum thiraviam thedu’ which shows the importance to trade. It means seek your prosperity even by venturing overseas Tamil poet Avvaiyar. The Sangam literature is a rich repository of information on the ancient Tamils trade and living art. Tamil Sangam Literature vividly describes the lifestyle, social structure and significance of trade of the ancient Tamil Country, and particularly the *Purananuru* elicits the flourishing maritime trade activities of those times. This paper throws light on ships, ship building, sea routes, daring maritime voyages to the merchandise that were traded and the expertise of the Tamil seafarers, it talks in detail of the mighty ocean and the strong bond the people shared with it. Besides, the flourishing horse trade and constant importations of the Tamils are discussed in a detailed manner.

Key Words: *Nanadesi, Chetti, Sresti and Kuthirai*

Methodology

A descriptive study is essential to this research as validity and authenticity of the evidences and is not possible without rigorous examination of sources from all directions and that too, have to support through different dimensions. Hence methodology employed in this study is primarily descriptive and analytical.

There is a Tamil adage ‘Thirai kadal odiyum thiraviam thedu’ which shows the importance to trade. It means seek your prosperity even by venturing overseas Tamil poet Avvaiyar. The Sangam literature is a rich repository of information on the ancient Tamils trade and living art.¹ Tamil Sangam Literature vividly describe the lifestyle, social structure and significance of trade of the ancient Tamil Country, and particularly the *Purananuru* elicits the flourishing maritime trade activities of those times.² This paper throws light on ships, ship building, sea routes, daring maritime voyages to the merchandise that were traded and the expertise of the Tamil seafarers, it talks in detail of the mighty ocean and the strong bond the people shared with it. Besides, the flourishing horse trade and constant importations of the Tamils are described in a detailed manner.

The main exports of the Sangam age were cotton farics, spices like pepper, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon and turmeric , ivory products, pearls and precious stones Gold, horses and sweet the chief imports. The port was also a major centre for export of spices from south India. References to Kaveripoompattinam are found in Tamil literary works like ‘Pattinappalai’ and ‘Silapathikaram’ .³ Evidence about ship maintenance units and dock yards in many parts of the state throw light on ancient maritime trade with the rest of the world Tamil Country.⁴

Archaeological evidences also supplements and show that the ancient Tamil Sangam kingdoms involvement on trade contacts with South Asian and European countries.⁵

The popular handicrafts of the Sangam period like weaving, metal works and carpentry, ship building, making of ornaments using beads, stones and ivory were commodities of internal and external trade.⁶ Archeological sources also reveal that, there were colonies of the Europeans that existed in some of the important trading towns of the Tamil Country.⁷ Trading activities by Tamils through sea route can be traced to the Sangam period (3rd century BC —3rd century AD). The historical coastal town of Kaveripoompattinam (Poompuhar in Nagapattinam district) recorded import of horses from Arab countries and finished goods from Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Archaeologist's states that ancient Tamil literature and excavations provide evidence about the existence of such ports that played a major role in overseas trade in the past.⁸ Unlike modern-day ports that are developed as artificial facilities along the coastline, the ancient ports were situated on river mouths. The ancient ports were built near river mouths to facilitate easy entry of vessels into the mainland. Vessels in the past were not as big as they are today. River mouths were the right access points for safe docking.⁹ Another key navigation route in the south was through the west coast in the Arabian Sea. Romans sailed through the sea, disembarking at ' Musuri' port in Kerala, which existed in some of the important trading towns of the South India.

Thereafter, foreign traders travelled till Coimbatore and split to different directions of Tamil Nadu from there.¹⁰ This is why several Roman coins and artifacts were discovered in the ' Kongu' region of Tamil Country. Artifacts like huge pots, used by Romans to transport wine, were also unearthed during the excavations. However, the ports vanished after the civilisation perished.¹¹

The port city of Puhar became an emporium of foreign trade, as big ships entered this port with precious goods. Other ports of commercial activity include Tondi, Musiri, Korkai, Arikkamedu and Marakkanam. More than 2500 years ago Tamil kingdoms had carried out an extensive trade with the West. External trade had been revived during the period of Pallavas.¹² The foreign merchants were known as *Nanadesi*. Mamallapuram, Vasavasamudram and Mylapore were the important seaports of the Pallavas.

Rapid changes in the political situation of the rest of India occurred due to incursions of Muslim armies from the northwest and the decline of the three ancient dynasties during the 14th century, the Tamil country became part of the Vijayanagara Empire.¹³ The greatest of the Maratha rulers was Serfoji II (1798-1832). Serfoji devoted his life to the pursuit of culture and Thanjavur became renowned as a seat of learning. The administration of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu was fragmented with hundreds of Poligars or *Palayakkarars* governing a few villages each. Trade and industrial activities of south Indians welcomed by western countries before Industrial revolution.¹⁴

Interestingly, Enayam port is not the first of its kind in Tamil Country. The state, as early as the 3rd century BC, had more than 16 such ports between Chennai and Tirunelveli that helped it maintain direct maritime links with China, Egypt, parts of Europe and Southeast Asian countries.¹⁵

Chetti most influential commercial community, financier or banker existed in Tamil Country, the caste name *Chetti* particularly applied to the merchant group. It derived from the Sanskrit word *sresti*.¹⁶ In all probability *sresti* had little to do with *Chetti*. However the term ' *chetti*' occurs for the first time only in Manimegalai. It might have emerged from the Tamil word *chetti* meaning ' trade' .¹⁷ The *sresti* was actually a financier or banker or sometimes referred to as the head of the guild. Even a despotic King treated these *srestis* with due respect.¹⁸ *Chetti* is a most influential commercial community even now in Tamilnadu. The weavers, oil mongers, and others used it as title and many more take it on their names to denote that trade is their occupation. Strictly employed, it is nevertheless the name of a trade caste.¹⁹ The *Chetti* groups numerously distributed and their many sub-divisions differ greatly in their ways.

Chetti's (traders) correspond to the *Vaiyas* in the traditional four fold caste system. *Chettis* of the Pandya kingdom served as a pivot upon which the economy of the country revolved.²⁰ Though the ages the *Chetti* had been associated with commercial activities. Through the ages the *Chettis* had many sects such as *Nattukottai Chettis*, *Nagarathar Chettis*, *Kasukkara Chettis*, *Beri Chettis*, *Komatti Chettis* and *Kuthirai Chettis*.

An interesting trading group, flourished during the time of Imperial Cholas is that of the *Kuthirai Chettis*.²¹ Their name itself indicates that they were traders in horses. In the Pandyan kingdom *Kuthirai Chettis* were famous.

Since the Arabs started landing in the east coast, the *Kuthirai Chettis* of Malaimandalam visited the Pandya ports and became the local horse traders. They were engaged in horse trade between Arabia and South India.²² The *Kuthirai Chettis* were honoured with the titles *Eti* and *Vanigaradittan*.

Foreign travelers, who came to south India in the medieval period like Marco Polo and Wassaf speak of flourishing trade on horses between south India and foreign countries like Arabia and Burma.²³ How long the *Kuthirai Chettis* pursued their horse trade is not known.²⁴

Kayalpattinam, the flourishing centre of horse trade and famous port town for horse trade that existed in some of the important trading towns of the Tamil Country. ‘Kayal’ which means lagoon opening to the sea, was a celebrated port during the medieval period in the Tamrapani delta of Coromandel coast, belongs to modern Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu.²⁵ It is generally believed that, the port is identical with the famous ancient port and trading centre of Korkai which is mentioned by Ptolomy as Colchoi.²⁶ As a result of gradual sedimentary deposits the port silted up and coast line shifted outward, to the east and the new site Kayal came into prominence, which is about four kilometers to the northeast of Korkai.²⁷ Later, with the same cause Kayal came to be far from the sea and the new sites like *Punnaikayal* (New Kayal) and Kayalpatnam came to being.²⁸

Kayal was flourished as a centre of horse trade in the second half of the thirteenth century, and then continued brisk trade relation with Arabia. Regarding horse trade in medieval India, it is said that, horses were imported to south India mostly through oceanic routes where as north India depended to oceanic as well as inland routes.²⁹ Marco Polo described about the port that ‘It is at this city that all the ships touch that come from the west, as from Hormos, and from Kis and from Aden, and all Arabia laden with horses and with other things for sale’.³⁰ Since from the early centuries of Christian era, the war horses had a great demand in India in general and south India in particular. Although, these demands reached its peak on the seventh century, then the cavalry got prominent place in the army of Indian rulers. It might have been the major reason for the demand of war horses was bound with the mutual struggle between the south Indian powers, who ruled in different territories. Evidences said that under the Cholas, the horse trade assumed important role and cavalry played an important role while the armies of the other south Indian powers opposed them.³¹ These long struggles continued in the later periods as well even under the Pandyas of Madurai also. Wassaf, who came to Kayal after thirteen years of Marco Polo, presents the import of war horses from Persia to south India, particularly under the Pandyas.³²

Here it is interesting to note that how this unique concept; Horse Trade came into being in the southern peninsular part of India and what was the reason behind it. To know that there is no possibility of breeding horses. Why these war horses brought from Arabia? Marco Polo himself gives its answer, ‘another strange thing to be told is that there is no possibility of breeding horses in this country, as hath often been proved by trail. For even, when a great blood-mare here has been covered by a great blood-horse, the produce is nothing but a wretched wry-legged weed, not fit for ride’.³³ Corroborating this Nelson says that “the horse is a miserable, weedy and vicious pony; having but good quality, endurance. The breed is not Indigenous, but the result of constant importations and a very limited amount of breeding”. Undoubtedly we can say that, the horses available in India were not belongs to equal in quality and the good quality of horses were always available at Persian countries.

Marco Polo said that about the Pandya kingdom ‘here are no horses bred; and thus a great part of the wealth of the country is wasted in purchasing horses; I will tell you how. You must know that the merchants of Kis and Hormes, Dofar and Soer and Aden collect great number of destriers and other horses, and these they bring to the territories this King and of his four brothers, who were Kings likewise’. These horses imported from Persia for sale called as Bahri.³⁴ Thus, good quality of war horses which came from Arabia to Pandyan kingdom was the best quality available at that times and had a high demand among the Indian rulers. Marco Polo says that ‘Indeed the King wants to buy more than 2000 horses every year, and so do his four brothers who are King likewise’. Similar statement also given by Wassaf also, according to him as many as 10,000 horses imported into Maabar including Kayal and other ports of India.³⁵

The political condition prevailed in South India necessitated the huge demand of good quality of horses, besides the regular demand cope with, Polo says ‘The reason why they want so many horses every year is that by the end of the year there shall not be one hundred of them remaining, for they all die off, And

this arises from mismanagement, those people do not know in the least how to treat a horse; and besides they have no farriers. The horse-merchants not only never bring any farriers with them, but also prevent any farrier from going thither, lest that should in degree baulk the sale of horse, which brings them in every year such vast gains'.³⁶ Wassaf also presents interestingly about these demands and the treatment of horses, He says ' It is a strange thing that when those horses arrive there, instead of giving them raw barley they given them roasted barley and grain dress butter, and boiled cow' s milk to drink.³⁷ They bind them forty days in a stable with ropes and pegs, and in order that they may get fat; and afterwards without taking measures for training, and without stirrups and other appurtenances of riding, the Indian soldier ride upon them like demos.³⁸ They are equal to **Burak** in celerity, and are employed either in war or exercise.

In a short time the strongest, swift, fresh, and horses become weak, slow, useless, and stupid. In short, they all become wretched and good for nothing. In this climate these powerful horses, which fly swiftly without a whip (for whips are required for horses if they are to go to any distances), should they happen to cover, become exceedingly weak and altogether worn out and unfit for riding. There is there for, a constant necessity of getting new horses annually, and, consequently, the merchants of Muhammadan countries bring to Maabar'.³⁹ The various inscriptions found in these regions also express the employment of different skilled persons to look after these good quality horses imported from Arabia and they were termed as **kulichevakar** (horsemen),⁴⁰ and **kudirai amman** (horse trooper) and **kudirai andan**⁴¹ (stable man) in the inscriptions. However, it is clear from the account of wassaf these skilled persons are unable to look after the horses came from Arabia.⁴²The history of maritime trade of India and could change the hypothesis that it flourished right from the Roman era.

The concluding part reveal the fact that the southern Indian peninsula that was more exposed to maritime trade had a busy horse trade connection with the pre-Roman Egyptian country, Arabian peninsula and the western world.

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