



# Trade and Industrial status of Tamil Nadu from Sangam Age to Paligar rule

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## ABSTRACT

The present study narrates the history of political, social and economic history of Tamil Nadu from Sangam age to Paligar rule. Archaeological evidences shows that the ancient Tamil dynasties trade contacts with South Asian and European countries. The popular handicrafts of the Sangam period like weaving, metal works and carpentry, ship building and, making of ornaments using beads, stones and ivory were commodities of internal and external trade. 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, Arikamedu 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. 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. 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.

**Key words:** Tamil Kingdoms, trade, industry, contact with Rome and Greek, rapid changes , Vijayanagar, Marathas, Poligars.

## Polity of ancient Tamil Nadu

The region of Tamil Nadu or Tamilakam, in the southeast of modern India, shows evidence of having had continuous human habitation from 15,000 BCE to 10,000 BCE. Throughout its history, spanning the early Upper Paleolithic age to modern times, this region has coexisted with various external cultures.<sup>1</sup> The three ancient Tamil dynasties namely Chera, Chola, and Pandya<sup>2</sup> were of ancient origins. Together they ruled over this land with a unique culture and language, contributing to the growth of some of the oldest extant literature in the world. These three dynasties were in constant struggle with each other vying for hegemony over the land. Invasion by the Kalabhras during the 3rd century disturbed the traditional order of the land, displacing the three ruling kingdoms. These occupiers were overthrown by the resurgence of the Pandyas and the Pallavas, who restored the traditional kingdoms. The Cholas, who re-emerged from obscurity in the 9th century by defeating the Pallavas and the Pandyas, rose to become a great power and extended their empire over the entire southern peninsula<sup>3</sup>. At its height the Chola empire spanned almost 3,600,000 km<sup>2</sup> (1,389,968 sq. mi) straddling the Bay of Bengal. The Chola navy held sway over the Sri Vijaya kingdom in Southeast Asia.

## Economy of the Sangam Age

The chief occupation of the age was agriculture. Rice was the common crop of the day. Ragi, sugarcane, cotton, pepper, ginger, turmeric, cinnamon and a variety of fruits were the other crops. Jack fruit and pepper were famous in the Chera country. Paddy was the chief crop in the Chola and Pandya country. The following famous quote finds mention in Sangam literature, "*Chozha nadu sorudaitu, Chera nadu thandhamudaththu, Panndi nadu muththudaiththu*" Which means that Chola country has rice food, Chera country has elephant tusk and Pandya country has pearls.

The handicraft of the Sangam period were popular, and included weaving, metal works and carpentry, ship building and, making of ornaments using beads, stones and ivory. There was a great deal of demand for these products, as the internal and external trade was at its peak. During the Sangam period, Spinning and weaving of cotton and silk cloths attained a high quality, mark during this period. The poems mention that cotton clothes were as thin as a cloud of steam or a slough of a snake. There was a huge demand in the western world for the cotton

clothes woven at Uraiyur. Both internal as well as foreign trade were well organized and briskly carried on in the Sangam age, Sangam literature works. Greek and Roman accounts and archaeological evidences provide detailed information on this subject Merchants carried the goods on the carts and on animals back from place to place internal trade was mostly based on the barter system.<sup>4</sup>

External trade was carried on mainly between South India and the Greek Kingdoms. After the ascendancy of the Roman Empire, Trade with the Roman assumed importance. 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, Arikamedu and Marakkanam. The author of periplus, provides us with the most valuable information on foreign trade. Plenty of gold and silver coins issued by the Roman Emperors such as Augustus, Tiberius and Nero were found in all part of Tamil Nadu. They reveal the extent of the trade and the vast presence of the Roman traders in the Tamil country, 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.<sup>5</sup> Archeological sources also reveal that. There were colonies of the Europeans that Existed in some of the important trading towns of the Tami country.

### **Greek and Roman contacts**

More than 2500 years ago Tamil kingdoms had carried out an extensive trade with the West. The Greeks and Romans had trade relations with the Tamils around Third century B.C. It lasted from 300 B.C. to 300 A.D. various sources confirm the maritime activities during that period.<sup>6</sup>

### **Literary Sources**

The Greeks and Romans were called as Yavans. They were the foreign merchants. The Sangam literature describes the trading activities of Yavana merchants in the Tamil country. This literature also mentions the important seaports and also about the exports and imports. In the same way, the Greek and Roman writers have also mentioned the details of the commercial contacts with South India. For the most part, the writers such as Pliny,

Ptolemy, Plutarch and the author of the *Periplus* had mentioned the trade relations with South India in the First Century A.D. Foreign traders were assisted by interpreters who helped them in their commercial transactions.

## Archaeological Source

The archaeological confirmations have further complemented the literary Sources relating to the foreign trade, The Arikamedu excavations have depicted that the Greek and Roman had important trade relations in the Tamil country. It was an important centre of trade for Greeks and Romans, This place was referred as Poduke by Greek writers, Many objects such as coins, porcelain, jars and tubs for the purpose of dyeing clothes have also been found in Arikamedu. Most significant finds in Arikamedu are the numerous Indo-Pacific beads, red and black ware used for marking graves which were in plenty during Roman trade. In addition, Roman coins, pottery and articles have also been found in other parts of Tamil Nadu. Excavations have also been conducted at Puhar, Kanchipuram, Alagankulam, Madurai, Kodumanal and other places in Tamil Nadu.

## Coins

Large numbers of Roman coins have found all over Tamil Nadu, particularly in the coastal areas of Tamil Nadu. The Roman emperors such as Augustus Caesar, Tiberius and Nero had issued these coins and they lived in the First and Second century A.D., it may be said that the Sangam Tamils had trade relations with the Roman Empire.<sup>7</sup>

## Greeks

In the Third century B.C., the Greeks were the first to enter into trade contact with the Tamil kingdoms. The commodities those were available in the Tamil country. The Tamil word Arisi (rice) was mentioned as Oriza in the Greek language. They had established contact with the West coast. The port Musiri had been a significant trading centre. The Greeks provided an important link between Tamil country and the West, via Egypt.<sup>8</sup>

## Romans

The Romans began to arrive in the Tamil country, succeeded by the Greeks. The Pandyas were the first to get the profit of the Roman trade. Tamil merchants were hired to buy and sell goods from the local market. Roman colonies were set up in South India during this period in areas such as Karur, Perur and Karimpundi, etc. the

Romans served in the Pandyan army. After that period, there was a gradual decline in the overseas trade. The confusion in the Third century A.D. resulted in the end of the Greek and Roman trade with Tamil kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

## Exports and Imports

Sangam people exported a diversity of goods to Greece and Rome, The important of them were spices such as pepper, cardamom, cloves and ginger. Sandal paste, flowers, scents, and aromatic wood such as Ahil, ivory, pearls, corals, medicinal plants, banana and rice were exported in less quantity as compared with the earlier. Cottan was greatly demanded that was manufactured in Tamil country and the varieties were regaled in the Sangam literature. Apart from that the Romas were interested in the various varieties of beads, diamonds, sapphire, topaz, emerald, tortoise shells.<sup>10</sup> The pearls of the pandiyas and the cottan clothes of Uraiyur much impressed the Romans. The main imported goods were sweet wine, gold coins and ornaments, glass, copper and other articles. The horses were also imported.

## Sea- ports

The early kings, the Cholas, the Cheras and the pandyas developed the ports around their kingdoms to attract foreigners. The seaports on the coastal areas of the Tamil Nadu smoothed the active trade between the countries. The seaports on the eastern coast were Mamallapuram, Poduke, Puhar, Poraiyaru, Korkai and Kumari. These ports developed into the focal points of prosperity in the country. The pattinappalai describes the details of the Puhar harbor and its activities. The Pandyan port-town Korkai was famous for its pearls. Musiri and tondi were the two important seaports on the west. Warehouses for storing the goods and the chief ports had their lighthouses, which were called in the Tamil literature as Kalangarai Ilangu Sudar. Facilities were also made in the seaports for repairing the ships. The facilities were provided for the foreign traders to stay.<sup>11</sup>

## Economic Life: Agriculture

Pallava kings had distributed gold and plough to modernize and promote agriculture. The major share of economy was based on villages and agriculture. Each and every village had remained self-sufficient. There were two types of land cultivable and arid. Arid lands were placed under cultivation. Paddy and cotton were extensively cultivated. Rice was exported to China and East Indies. The Brahmadeya villages had started during this period. The Brahmins began to settle in villages and they were exempted from paying taxes. Devadana was the land offered to temples. The villages increased during the Pallava rule. Several irrigation tanks were created and promoted by the Pallavas. Mahendraman I created the Mamandur tanks at Mahendranadi and it was called Chitra Mega Tadakam.

## Crafts

The crafts of the period comprise weaving, stone cutting, pottery, carpentry, ivory works, etc. Fine and good variety of cotton clothes were exported to China, Babylon and Egypt. Kanchipuram was the main centre for silk weaving.<sup>12</sup>

## Internal Trade

The increase in production and the expanding economy led to the growth of trade and commerce. This resulted in the growth of internal trade. This further fostered the growth of regular markets and gradually become urban centres. High ways were laid to facilitate the transportation of goods from one place to another. Kanchipuram remained an important trading centre. The merchants had to obtain license and pay taxes for the trading activities. The barter system of trade was generally prevalent. The kings had issued gold and silver coins, which facilitated the expansion of trade and commerce. Manigramam were the merchant's organizations.

## Foreign Trade

External trade had been revived during the period of Pallavas. Spices, cotton textiles, precious stones, and medicinal plants were exported to the countries such as Java, Sumatra, Kadaram, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, China and Burma. The foreign merchants were known as Nanadesi. Mamallapuram, Vasavasamudram and Mylapore were the important seaports of the Pallavas.

## Weights and Measures

Uzhavu, Nivarthanam or Pattiga were land measurement units. The term Hala also refers to a unit of land. Plough was used for measuring the land. Chudunazhhi was the measurement unit for paddy and rice. The other units such as Videla, Vidugu and Uzhakku were also used for measurement.<sup>13</sup> Pidi was the smallest units. The units such as Aazhkkku, Uzhakku, Uri and Nazhi were used to measure items such as milk, ghee and oil. The units called Kazhanju and Manjadi measured gold.

## Social Condition

In general, the economy was prosperous due to the vibrant inland and foreign trade. People from all cultures and languages lived together happily. Caste system was prevalent. Royal family members and nobles led a luxurious life but the common people led a humble life. Women were highly respected in the society. Some woman even participated in public life like in both civil and military departments. Horse riding, hunting, chess, boating, kolattam and kummy were the entertainment games prevalent in the society. The Telugu, Kannada people migrated to Tamil Nadu. Gujaratis who came and settled Tamil Nadu supplied Clothes to the royal house and nobles.

## Social Divisions

Vijayanagar society was divided in to various classes and caste. Among them in the Brahmins and Vellalas were leading groups. The Portuguese, French, Dutch, English, and the Arb Muslims were settled on the coast of Tamil Nadu. Goldsmiths, blackmths, carpenters and weavers formed a substantial group in the society. Fishermen who lived on the east coast were converted into Christianity. Valangai and Idangai conflicts continued but they cooperated on certain issues.<sup>14</sup>

## Industrial Heritage

They were conservative and followed the rigid caste system, the communicable diseases such as cholera and smallpox attacked the people. The systems of slavery, bonded labourers existed due to poverty; The Dutch merchants established slave markets and started enslaving people. The governments supported the Telugu people



so that they could migrate to Tamil Nadu. Land grants were given to them and they became the new land holding class. The agriculture largely depended on monsoon. Oil crushing, palm sugar and jaggery making, pottery, salt making were some of prominent domestic industries in Tamil Nadu, Kancheepuram, Coimbatore and Madurai were the centers of textile industry. Rice, millets, vegetables, salt, species and cloth were sold in the local market. Rice, powdered sugar, millets, spices, cotton and silk clothes were items of export. The items of import were gold, tin, silver, lead, copper, brass and luxury items.<sup>15</sup>

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. Under this empire, the Kannada speaking Nayak governors ruled before the European trading companies appeared during the 17th century eventually assuming greater sway over the indigenous rulers of the land. The Madras Presidency, comprising most of southern India, was created in the 18th century and was ruled directly by the British. After the independence of India, after the Telugu and Malayalam parts of Madras state were separated from tamilakam state in 1956, it was renamed as Tamil Nadu in 1969 by the state government.

### **Maratha Influence**

Shivaji Bhonsle, the great Maratha ruler, invaded the south, as did Chikka Deva Raya of Mysore and other Muslim Rulers, resulting in chaos and instability. Rani Mangammal, the Nayak ruler of Madurai, resisted these invasions showing great courage.<sup>16</sup> Shivaji had conquered important forts like Gingee and Vellore by 1678. On the other hand, Ekoji, half brother of Shivaji had established his own rule in Thanjavur. Gingee served as the Maratha capital for nine years during the 27-year Mughal-Maratha war. The Mughals captured Gingee in 1698.<sup>17</sup>

### **Rule of Poligars, Nizams and Nawabs**

European settlements began to appear in the Tamil country during the Vijayanagara Empire. In 1605, the Dutch established trading posts in the Coromandel Coast near Gingee and in Pulicat. The British East India Company built a 'factory' (warehouse) at Armagaon (Durgarazpatnam), a village around 35 miles (56 km) North of Pulicat, as the site in 1626. In 1639, Francis Day, one of the officers of the company, secured the rights over a three-mile (5



km) long strip of land a fishing village called Madraspatnam from the DamarlaVenkatadriNayakudu, the Nayak of Vandavasi.<sup>18</sup> The East India Company built Fort St George and castle on an approximate five square kilometre sand strip. This was the start of the town of Madras. The Coromandel Coast was ruled by the Vijayanagara King (Aravidu Dynasty), PedaVenkata Raya, based in Chandragiri and Vellore Fort. With his approval the English began to exercise sovereign rights over their strip of land.<sup>19</sup>

## Consequences of Time Place and People

During the Maratha rule of Thanjavur After Ekoji, his three sons namely Shaji, Serfoji I, Thukkoji alias Thulaja I ruled Thanjavur. 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. Serfoji's patronised art and literature and built the Saraswati Mahal Library at his palace. The incursion of the Muslim armies from the north forced a southward migration of Hindus from the central Deccan and the Andhra countries to seek shelter under the Nayak and the Maratha kings. The famous Carnatic music composer Tyagaraja (1767–1847), along with the Trinity of Carnatic music flourished in the Thanjavur district during this time.<sup>20</sup>

With the demise of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, his empire dissolved amidst numerous succession wars and the vassals of the empire began to assert their independence. The administration of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu was fragmented with hundreds of Poligars or *Palayakkarars* governing a few villages each. These local chieftains often fought amongst each other over territory. This turned the political situation in the Tamil country and in South India in general into confusion and chaos. The European traders found themselves in a situation where they could exploit the prevailing confusion to their own advantage. More than 2500 years ago Tamil and kingdoms had carried out an extensive trade with the West. In the history of Tamil Nadu from Sangam age to Paligar rule rapid changes created western influence as colonial rule and it roots to gradually decline the Indian industry and trade.

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