



“Seek Wealth Even by Crossing the Seas” – Trade Management in Sangam Literature

*¹A Punitha

¹Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Commerce, Indus Arts & Science International College, Perundurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

The Tamil proverb "Thirai-kadal Oodiyum Thiraviyam Thedu" means "Seek wealth even by crossing the seas." Tamil proverbs are not merely ancient sayings; they are expressions of human experience. Life is built upon experiences. It is these experiences that give life meaning and purpose. The moment we think of "wealth" or "meaning," a famous saying comes to mind: "We need wealth to live, and our lives themselves must have meaning." Indeed, life is centered around wealth and meaningful living. In the early tribal society, people exchanged the goods they possessed for the goods they needed. This gradually evolved into the barter system, which later developed into a monetary system of trade. It is in pursuit of such trade that people even crossed the seas. Agriculture and commerce are considered the two greatest occupations of a nation. A country prospers only when both flourish. The prosperity of these occupations is one of the reasons why the Sangam Age is celebrated as the Golden Age in Sangam literature. These classical works contain remarkable insights into trade and commercial management.

Keywords: Sangam Literature, Trade Management, Ancient Tamil Commerce, Maritime Trade, Overseas Trade, Barter System.

Introduction

Barter Trade System

During the Sangam period, most local trade was conducted through the barter system. This is illustrated in a poem from the Purananuru: A hunter from the forest brings venison in a bowl, accompanied by his fierce hunting dog. A shepherd girl brings curd in a pot. In return, the farming women fill both the bowl and the pot with paddy until they overflow. Everyone leaves happily, satisfied with the exchange.

This poem shows that during the Sangam period, meat and curd were exchanged for paddy, reflecting the practice of barter.

Trade with Foreign Countries

The Pattinappalai, one of the Ten Idylls (Pattuppāṭṭu), clearly describes the relationship between the Tamils and foreign nations.

The poem portrays Kaveripoompattinam (Puhar) as a cosmopolitan city where people speaking many different languages lived together peacefully. Merchants from various countries settled there and mingled harmoniously with the local population.

Tamil words such as rice, ginger, and peacock feather found their way into Hebrew and other foreign languages. Ancient writers like Pliny and the author of the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea mention the immense wealth earned by Tamil merchants through the pepper trade and describe the commercial links between Tamilakam and Rome.

Foreigners who lived in Tamil Nadu were referred to in Sangam literature as Yavanas (Greeks/Romans) and Mlechchas (foreigners).

Trade Administration in Pattinappalai

The Tamils used wooden ships to conduct overseas trade. Their close relationship with the sea is reflected in the rich vocabulary used for the ocean and ships.

Various words for the sea include Paravai, Aazhi, Punari, Arkali, and Munnir, while ships were known by names such as Odam, Kalam, Marakkalam, Thoni, Mithavai, Kappal, Naavai, Maram, Thimil, and Ambi.

Smaller boats were used for coastal travel, while larger sea-going vessels carried goods to foreign lands.

Customs Duties

Goods entering the city from outside were subject to customs duty. The ancient Tamil word "Ulgu" meant tax, which later came to be known as Sungam (customs).

Government officials honestly collected customs duties. According to "Pattinappalai", even while sleeping on the sandbanks of the Kaveri River at night, they remained alert to their responsibilities.

They carefully guarded the king's warehouses so that no goods could be stolen. Like the horses pulling the Sun God's chariot, they tirelessly patrolled and collected taxes without negligence.

Warehouses and Export Management

The poet also describes the efficient organization of trade. Imported goods from foreign countries arrived by ships and were unloaded at Kaveripoompattinam, while export goods were carefully stored before shipment.

Packages intended for export were stamped with the “Chola tiger emblem”. Only goods bearing this official seal were allowed to leave the country, demonstrating an organized system of trade administration.

The terms “Aavanam” and “Angadi” referred to marketplaces, while “Pandakasalai” referred to warehouses where goods were safely stored.

Large merchants lived in upper-storey houses directly above their shops, reflecting their dedication and efficient management of business.

A Great Commercial City

The streets of Kaveripoompattinam overflowed with wealth. The city's prosperity was so great that the sun's rays scarcely reached the streets.

The city received:

- Horses imported by sea
- Black pepper transported by carts
- Sandalwood and agarwood from northern mountains
- Pearls from the southern seas
- Coral from the eastern seas
- Gold and precious gems
- Goods from the Ganges region
- Agricultural products from the Kaveri basin
- Food from Sri Lanka
- Luxury goods from Burma (Kazhagam)
- Merchandise from China, Greece, and many other countries

Thus, Kaveripoompattinam stood as one of the greatest international trading centers of its time.

The Character of Merchants

The poet “Kadiyalur Uruthirankannanar” praises the integrity of merchants.

He says they were:

- Honest and fair in their dealings.
- Impartial like the central peg of a weighing balance.
- Truthful because they feared dishonor.
- Treating their own goods and others' goods equally.
- Never charging buyers more than the proper price.
- Never giving less than the promised quantity.
- Trading a wide variety of goods with complete fairness.

This illustrates the high ethical standards followed by Sangam-age merchants.

Poets and Trade

Some Sangam poets were themselves merchants, as indicated by their names.

For example:

- “Koola Vanigan Seethalai Saathanar” – grain merchant.
- “Aruvai Vanigan Ilavettanar” – cloth merchant.
- “Madurai Panda Vanigan Ilanathanar” – general goods merchant.
- “Madurai Perungollanar” – metal merchant.
- “Uraiyur Ilampon Vanigan Saathankotranar” – gold merchant.

These individuals excelled both as successful traders and celebrated poets.

Day Market and Night Market

Trade flourished both within the country and with foreign nations. Port cities were divided into “Maruvurpakkam” and “Pattinappakkam”.

Markets were classified as:

- “Naalangadi” – markets operating during the daytime.
- “Allangadi” – markets operating at night.

This shows that commerce continued almost around the clock.

Salt Trade

The salt trade was one of the important industries of the Sangam period.

Salt merchants were called “Umanars”.

Even today, the salt trade serves as a reminder of the old barter system.

A poem from “Purananuru” describes bullock carts carrying salt from salt pans where it was heaped like mountains. The loud voices of salt merchants announcing prices echoed throughout the villages.

Conclusion

Sangam literature reveals that ancient Tamil society possessed a highly developed system of commerce and trade management. The people practiced local barter trade, maintained extensive overseas trade networks, collected customs duties efficiently, managed warehouses systematically, regulated exports through official seals, upheld strict business ethics, and operated organized marketplaces. The thriving port city of “Kaveripoompattinam” stands as a testament to the advanced commercial knowledge and global outlook of the ancient Tamils. The proverb “Seek wealth even by crossing the seas” “perfectly captures the entrepreneurial spirit of Sangam-age Tamil society.

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