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## 16. Trade and Commerce in the Sangam Period: An Economic Perspective of Ancient Tamilakam

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### **Abstract**

Sangam forms one of the most important periods in South Indian history, perhaps embedded with quite a lot of literature and dynamic socio-economic activities. This research paper attempts to explain details pertaining to trade and commerce in ancient Tamilakam during the Sangam period. The research emphasizes how advanced the trade networks were, the principal commodities that commanded a leading position in trade, and the impact on society exerted by the economy. It is against this backdrop that the comprehensive view had the paper presented in which, based on sources ranging from Sangam literature to archaeological and historical records, identifies how trade must have prospered within and outside the borders of Tamilakam, contributing to its general prosperity. This paper is an attempt at detailed examination of the ports, merchant guilds, foreign trade underlining their impact on cultural and economic scenes.

**Keywords:** Ancient Tamilakam, Trade and Commerce, Foreign Trade, Guilds

### **Introduction**

The Sangam Period approximately covers from 300 BCE to 300 CE, which is the golden period in the history of Tamilakam—time of prime excellence—when literature, culture, and economy achieved crescendo in their performance. This prosperous economy had trade and commerce playing an important role, and it was well supplemented by the inland and maritime routes connecting Tamilakam to distant lands like Rome, South-East Asia, and the Middle East.

Much information relating to the conduct of trade, range of products traded, and significance of ports and urban centers find very good reflections in the Sangam literature such as *Tolkappiyam* and *Pattuppaṭṭu*. Excavations at Arikamedu and Puhar prove that there was extensive external trade and foreign settlements within Tamilakam. This paper seeks to probe into trade and commerce dynamics during the Sangam period with regard to internal and external

trade networks, principal commodities, market control, and the socio-economic impact in the region.

**Trade Networks and Routes**

Trade during the Sangam period was quite organized and self-contained; it consisted of different routes through which merchandise moved. Overland trade had well-marked routes that connected parts of Tamilakam for the exchange of agricultural produce, textiles, and other handicrafts. The villages and towns played the role of centers where the traders and merchants bartered their produce or sold it for cash.

**Table: Sangam Kingdoms**

Kingdom	Ruling region	Capital	Emblem	First ruler	Important Sea Ports
Chera	Modern Kerala	Vanji	Bow	Udayancheral	Tondi and Musiri
Chola	From modern Tiruchi district to southern Andhra Pradesh. (between Pennar and Vellar rivers)	Uraiyyur (later shifted to Puhar by Karikala)	Tiger	Elara	Poompuhar (Kaveripattanam)
Pandya	Present day south Tamil Nadu	Madurai (On the banks of River Vaigai)	Fish (carp)	Mudukudumi	Korkai

**Map: Sangam Age**



**Source: Google Maps**

The greatest importance was given to maritime trade, as Tamilakam was located along the land's coast and therefore was accessible to international trade networks. This brought up

ports such as Puhar, Muziris, and Arikamedu as great centers of commerce, linking Tamilakam with the Roman Empire, Southeast Asian countries, and the Middle East. For example, these ports never experienced a silent moment due to the fact that ships from distant lands were constantly arriving, carrying luxury items like Roman wine, glassware, and gold coins, which they would use to barter for the exports of Tamil country like pepper, pearls, ivory, and textiles.

Noteworthy was the trade of such magnitude with Rome itself, whose records speak of the popular need for Tamil articles of trade. An extant Greek travelogue of the mid-1st century, known as the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, describes the routes of trade and the nature of the commodities themselves. It was only one of the intercontinental movements that Tamil merchants undertook.

### **Key Commodities and Trade Goods**

Tamilakam was well endowed with natural resources, and this contributed to the variety of traded goods during the Sangam period. Major items exported from this region included spices, amongst which pepper was the chief item of demand in Roman markets. Pearls, gathered from the Gulf of Mannar, were very fine and brilliant; they were yet another chief export item.

Major industries in practice in Tamilakam were textiles, in which good quantities of fine cotton and silk fabrics used to be produced and traded. The quality of these textiles comes out very highly praised in the Sangam literature, and their products were received not only in markets within the region but also were exported to foreign markets. Another relevant issue is that of ivory trade, much as Tamilakam's ivory carvers created beautifully carved pieces that were greatly valued all over the ancient world. These were the people known as skilled artisans .

Other local goods traded within the region included agricultural produce like rice, millet, and sugarcane. Crafts among other commodities were exchanged between villages and towns to sustain economic independence between different parts of Tamilakam.

The trade in precious stones, such as diamonds and rubies, was also significant, and Tamilakam formed one of the sources where these stones were exported to the rest of the world. It was this wealth that accrued from these commodities that made the Sangam period prosperous with the rise of wealthy merchant classes and the patronage of art and literature.

### **Role of Ports and Urban Centers**

Indeed, prosperity in trade at that time went hand in hand with the port cities and urban centers based on the practice of leveraging commerce. Some of the important ports during the

commercial scenario of the Sangam period were Puhar, Muziris, and Korkai. They acted as doorways to the outside world for receiving imports and exports. They were not only centers of trade but also cultural melting pots as foreign traders of Rome, Greece, and Arabia used to mix with locals.

According to the Pattinappalai, Puhar was the chief of all the port towns and the capital of the Chola Empire. Warehousing, markets, and docks were facilitated within the city itself. It justified its being a great centre of trade. Another important port area was Muziris, situated on the Malabar Coast, especially known for its trade with the Roman Empire. Archaeological evidence supporting these wide trading connections includes Roman coins and amphorae.

Other significant urban centers of trade and commerce included the large towns. Examples included Madurai, which was the capital city of the Pandya empire. Its big markets would see traders from all over buying and selling. This was further augmented by well-organized roads and trade routes that provided for the efficient long-distance transfer of goods to happen.

These ports of settlement act as proof of the very cosmopolitan nature of trade during the Sangam period. There were quarters for Roman and Greek traders who used to dabble in these towns amidst their trade and cross-cultural exchange that would strike a balance between Tamilakam and the outside world.

### **Market Regulation and Merchant Guilds**

The two dominant institutions responsible for regulating the trade and commerce of the Sangam period were state policy and merchant guilds. The state supervised trade practices by collecting taxes and had its own apparatus to this effect in order to keep the markets functioning meticulously. There is mention in the inscriptions of different varieties of taxation imposed on goods and in Sangam literature itself.

These organizations of guilds of merchants were great organizations representing the interests of traders and merchants. They were called Nigama. It was also an integral part of a control mechanism in place for trade practices, settlement of disputes, and maintenance of quality. They used to help their members out by providing loans to them, taking security responsibility for their goods, and representing them in courts of law.

The guilds had a major role of keeping the status of trade intact and overseeing the adherence of traders to practices of integrity. In addition, they assured a good trade by

establishing networks over different regions where one could be assured to do his/her business. It only proves that during the Sangam period, trade was also very much organized and really advance.

### **Future Scope of Study**

The current study focused on the option of understanding the history and culture of the Sangam period through the study of trade and commerce. Moreover, it flagged off the need to further study the effect of this trade on social structures and cultural development and its impact on the interaction between Tamilakam and the world at large.

### **Conclusion**

Commerce and trade were important constituent features of economic and cultural life during the Sangam Age. The inland and maritime trade network, which extended for long and connected Tamilakam with other parts of the world, thereby brought money and prosperity. Exchange, in terms of various goods like spices, pearls, textiles, ivory, etc., helped a lot in contributing to the economic development of the Tamils and brought in cultural exchanges that further enriched life.

Not to forget is the role played by ports and urban centers in facilitating trade, as they acted to a great extent as centers of economic activities and cultural interchange. Foreign traders were not hard to find, and other traders were organized into guilds, a further evidence that trade at this time was quite complex.

What the Sangam period trade really bequeathed, then, was the lasting pre-eminence in the popular imagination of maritime commerce throughout the following centuries. Economic practices formulated during this period presented the framework for Tamilakam's lasting supremacy of the Indian Ocean Trade Network.

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