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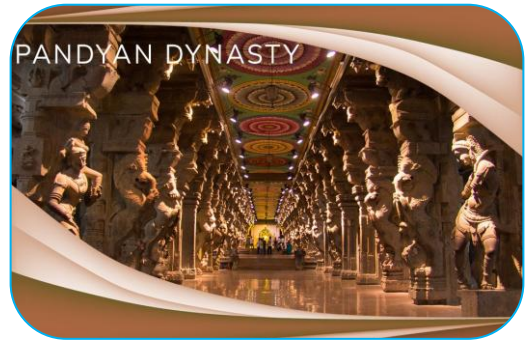


## MANIGRAMAM : OVERSEAS MERCHANT GUILDS IN THE SECOND PANDYAN EMPIRE

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### ABSTRACT

*In the medieval Tamil country, the corporate trading communities were called 'guilds'. There were different kinds of guilds. Among them the 'Manigramam, Ayyavole, Nanadesi, Padinervisayatar, Chitrameli Periyannattar, Valanjiyar and Anjuvarattar were itinerant trade guilds. They played a vital role in the multipurpose activities of trade and commerce. They also played a prominent role in matters concerning social, religious, administrative and judicial affairs of the country. They acted as trustees of both the rulers and ruled. They received endowments of money from the rulers. They built and maintained charity houses, temples and tanks for the welfare of the people.*



**KEYWORDS:** Anjuvanam, Guild, Maritime, Urar.

### INTRODUCTION

The geographical factors, the economic resources and adventurous spirit of the Indians made this country a great trading and maritime power of the world. The maritime plain of India lies below the Vindhya Mountains between the Ghats and the seashore. The Western coastal plains run along the Arabian Sea from the mouth of Narmada and Tapti in the north to Kanyakumari at the southernmost tip. The Eastern coastal plain is much wider than the Western and extends from the Ganges in the north to the Cape.<sup>1</sup> With the growth of agriculture the rural economy of the people gradually changed its character because of surplus production. It gave rise to the development of towns on land and sea-routes and the centres of pilgrimage, commercial relationship, and development of guilds and the introduction of metallic currency. Trade and commerce became a civilizing force in the world. The diversity of natural resources and differences in human wants automatically lead to the surplus production. For the distribution of the produce among the world population, trade appears as a guiding force to bring economic change in the world. Thus surplus agricultural production and human wants led to the origin of the overseas trade. From the earliest days, India has been a trading country. Indian merchants carried an extensive trade with the foreign countries. Because India was endowed with abundance of raw materials and its natural products found appreciated markets in the Middle East, Far East and South East Asia. There were classes of people belonging to certain castes such as *Paris, Veta, Sambar* and *Vaisyas* who were mainly concerned with commerce.<sup>2</sup> They were mighty and intelligent people who accumulated fabulous wealth through extensive maritime trade and made India a great exporting centre. India's natural wealth and extensive seaboard distinguished it from other Asiatic

lands. In contrast with the Arabian peninsula on the West, with the Malayan peninsula on the East or with the equally fertile empire of China, India has always maintained an active trade with foreign countries in spices, medicinal herbs, dyes, woods etc. Fabrics of silk and cotton, jewels and gems were the temptations, which attracted the foreign traders to India. Pliny calls India as 'Mother of Gems'. The Romans loved precious stones and India was the only country at that time which could export all varieties of gems.<sup>3</sup>

With the growth of commercial enterprise, trade began to assume certain fixed forms and passed through many stages of development. In this process production was earmarked for some definite markets. Markets arose as the centres of commerce and industry. In markets trade became a permanent feature. Trade plays a significant and permanent role in economic history. In the second process trade with distant places was usually conducted by itinerant merchants<sup>4</sup>. They met periodically at markets and fairs to dispose of their commodities, which gradually gave birth to merchant guilds. In this process, some traders collected commodities from the place of production and sold them to the local merchants for regular sale among the common masses. Moreover the traders of Tamil country had both the knowledge of navigation and land routes. They maintained close commercial contacts with the outside countries like Egypt, Rome, Middle East, Far East and South East Asia.<sup>5</sup> Favorable overseas trade was still an important source of country's wealth. The overseas commerce which flourished under the Cholas was continued by the Pandyas. The foreign accounts of a galaxy of travellers had given an excellent peep into the commercial activities of the age.<sup>6</sup> In economic history. In the second process trade with distant places was usually conducted by itinerant merchants. They met periodically at markets and fairs to dispose of their commodities, which gradually gave birth to merchant guilds. In this process, some traders collected commodities from the place of production and sold them to the local merchants for regular sale among the common masses.

One of the earliest inscriptional notices of the *Manigramam* guild traders appeared in the ninth or early tenth century at the port of Quilon on the Kerala coast.<sup>7</sup> The contents of this inscription as well as many others referred to indicate that the *Manigramam* association was undoubtedly a merchant guild. The evidence that this corporation of merchants was functioning at this port, at that time needs to be viewed in its wider context as part of the larger pattern of overland and maritime commercial activity which included areas bordering Arabian peninsula, part of the North-West India, the East and West coasts of India, and many areas of North East Asia and China.<sup>8</sup> This wide ranging trade was particularly important in medieval times.

But for a long time, there were several interpretations of the term *Manigramam*. Gundert first believed it was a Christian principality.<sup>9</sup> It was held also that the *Manigramam* could have been a group of manicheans, that is a group of Christians following the heresy of the 'school of manes'. Richard Collins took it to be a village of students.<sup>10</sup> It was also suggested that it was a title conferred upon a donee.<sup>11</sup> In an old Malayalam song called *Panyannur Pattola* which describes these groups and which when translated read: "strong guards ... are few required (to) take the children of *Govatala chetti* of *Manigramam* and *Anjuvanam* people, who together with ourselves, are the four (classes of) colonists in the port town"<sup>12</sup> Another theory was that the *Manigramam* consisted of Christians who were reconverted to Hinduism by *Manikkavasakar*. *Naccinarkiniyar* takes it to be the name of a community (*Kuluvipeyar*). His mention of the *Vanigramam*, a variant of the *Manigramam* gives the possible explanation to the word.<sup>13</sup> The Sthanu Ravi plates undoubtedly indicate a close connection between *Manigramam* and the Christian community.

All other epigraphic evidence, discovered in other parts of the peninsula referred to it as an association of Hindu traders. According to the Syrian Christian tradition about the *Manigramattars* is that they were a group who had originally come from the cola country. The *Manigramattar* were most probably Hindu traders.<sup>14</sup>

Membership of a guild seems to have been open to all merchants irrespective of their religion, on the west coast. Where trade was in the hands of the Christian merchants for a long time, it might have been possible that the *Manigramam* organization had Christian merchants also in its rolls along with many other Hindu merchants. Elsewhere it is possible that it consisted only of Hindus. The donors

to the temples at Tirunelveli, Salem and Kutralam were Hindus and not Christians. Its activities seemed to have covered period from 9th to the middle of 14th century A.D. It also functioned in foreign countries as may be seen from an inscription at Takuapa in Siam.<sup>15</sup>

At Talakkad in the Mukundapuram taluk of the former Cochin state (present-day Kerala) a long inscription was found in which *Manigramam* was mentioned.<sup>16</sup> Inscription consists of two sections which may have been inscribed at different times. Among them, one section of the inscription describes the founding of a market. The urar or responsible citizens of the village defined the boundary of market area. "West of the boundary of Sirupalli, to the North of the big banyan tree, to the East of Kalapalli, and to the South of the lands belonging to the Devar of Kilattirukoyil". Within this area the merchants were permitted to put up shops. The Urar who might also have been members of the assembly of the village levied tax in kind on the stalls, but gave the merchants a free hand in running the market. The second portion of the inscription mentions two members of the *Manigramam*, who were given the right to set up shops in the market and were exempted from certain specific taxes. The taxes which irrespective all the merchants had to pay include *Uigu*, the tax on goods coming in by sea. It was also stated in the inscriptions that local people were free to buy in the market. Some conclusions of interest may be drawn from this inscription. The *Manigramam* merchants enjoyed a special position as compared to the other merchants. Goods from outside came into the locality and there was local demand for these goods. There was no hint here of self-sufficient isolated village communities and of a subsistence economy. On the other hand the movement of trade is indicated as well as the opening up of village communities to itinerant traders. They had the buying capacity and a market in rural areas for goods other than those produced locally including overseas wares flourished. The Talakkad inscription provides a useful insight into the relationship established between a village community and local and itinerant merchants on the West Coast of South India.<sup>17</sup>

We may consider the well-known copper plate inscription in the possession of the Syrian Christian church at Kottayam. The Kottayam plate of Vira Rahava belonged to the thirteenth century.<sup>18</sup> This inscription listed out the rights given to a *Manigramam* merchant. From the port of Cranganore the merchants traded cardamom, pepper, betel nuts and ginger to Arab countries. This inscription which may be interpreted as signalling the grant of certain export rights to *Manigramam*. Monopoly rights were granted as well as a commission on many commodities including musk, salt and sugar was allowed. The *Manigramam* was also given the right to levy customs duty on goods which arrived at the mouth of the river and were then transported to the interior. All the inscriptions referred to goods coming by sea, and the right to handle foreign trade was formally granted by the king. At Talakkad, the arrangements were worked out between the king and the *Manigramam* traders. At both Quilon and Kodungallur the incoming foreign trade was considered to have brought great prosperity to the city.

In the Tamil country, in the thirteenth century and the first decade of the fourteenth century, the *Manigramam* was associated with the distribution of commodities of internal and overseas trade. Their base, judging by the content of the inscriptions in which they are mentioned, was at Kodumbalur in the present District of Pudukkottai.<sup>19</sup> Dated in the early thirteenth century an inscription found in the Rajaraja Colisvaramudaiyar temple at Koilpatti, Kullitalai taluk, Tiruchchirappalli district mentioned the *Manigramam* of Kodumbalur.<sup>20</sup> A major inscription of the thirteenth century found at Piranmalai was issued by the Ayyavole guild and the Citrameli Periyannattar and in this also the *Manigramam* of Kodumbalur was mentioned.<sup>21</sup> The Piranmalai inscription shows the merchants of the *Manigramam* of Kodumbalur as one of the many groups in *Manigramam* which met to discuss the taxes to be levied on the goods passing through the area, for the benefit of temples.<sup>22</sup>

Another important inscription of the thirteenth century A.D. 1269 was found at Tittandatanapuram, Tiruvadana Taluk of former Ramanathapuram district. Here the members of the *Manigramam* were found in collaboration with the Kaikolas who in the thirteenth century had much to do with cotton weaving and were in contact with the Valanjiyar of Southern Srilanka, and the Anjuvanam.<sup>23</sup> It is possible that one of the commodities they exported from this town was cotton fabric. The text of the inscription indicates this possibility. Tittandatanapuram was not far from the port of Tondi. Finally one notes the early fourteenth century inscription found in Rajaraja Colisvaramudaiyar

temple, Koilpatti.<sup>24</sup> Here again the Manigramam of Kodumbalur is mentioned with Ayyavole and the Citrameli. This inscription enumerates all the commodities of overseas trade which passed through this little town and on which taxes were levied for the benefit of the temple. Kodumbalur was obviously a major centre of the *Manigramam* guild and overseas trade upto the Fourteenth century.

## CONCLUSION

In medieval times, *Ayyavole* or *Ainnurruvar*, *Nanadesis*, *Nagarattar*, *Disai Ayirattainnurruvar*, *Manigramattar*, *Anjuvanam*, *Chitrameli Periyannattar* and *Valanjiyar* were some of the merchant guilds. These guilds involved in overseas trade from sixth to fourteenth century A.D. Three famous overseas inscriptions of the ninth, eleventh and thirteenth centuries found in foreign countries suggests that the guilds sent their agents far abroad and established trading stations. These inscriptions are Takuapa, Manigramam inscription, the Ayyavole Barus inscription and the Nanadesi inscription of Pagan. Besides, many Tamil inscriptions were also found in South East Asia, Srilanka and China. These inscriptions attest to the overseas contacts of these guilds. The merchants guilds were very powerful organizations in medieval times in Pandya region and elsewhere in other parts of India. They were supported not only by the local administration but also by the rulers. They were much respected and sought after people both by the rulers and the people with whom they traded. Though many of the traders confined their ventures in promoting the inland trade, some of the enterprising traders were in the Pandyan region went abroad with their business. The traders were also influential in the society. They were the most privileged with the rulers and the local governments because of their paying a number of taxes to them. A number of philanthropic and temple related activities were also undertaken by them. Sometimes they had a way in the local and provincial governance of the state. The establishment of market was yet another privilege which the guild collectively bargained for. The Ainnurruvar literally means 'the five hundred members' which was the most prominent among all. Kamudi in Ramanathapuram has the earliest inscription that first mentions about the Ainnurruvar. It comprises of groups or communities namely the chetti, chettipuram and kavara. It had 500 characters (virasasana). This point is supported by the Samudirapatti (Madurai district) inscription. The members in the association were merchants, who were composed of various communities and were also included in these association. The *Manigramam* merchants enjoyed a special position as compared to the other merchants. Goods from outside came into the locality and there was a local demand for these goods. The local people had the capacity of buying foreign goods. Markets in rural areas were available for goods other than those produced locally including overseas wares.

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