

## TWO MEDIEVAL MERCHANT GUILDS OF SOUTH INDIA

BY

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In the opinion of an eminent scholar, S. D. Gotein, 'The India trade was the backbone of the international economy in the Middle Ages in general and inside the Islamic world in particular'. It 'furthered the rise of a flourishing merchant class and created close and fruitful links between the countries of Islam and the Far East on the one hand and Europe on the other'. Yet the knowledge about India's contribution and participation in international commerce in the Middle Ages has remained vague and fragmentary until recently and the information pertaining to this subject has remained scattered in the texts of inscriptions recorded in different languages and in the literary notices of diverse origins.

Meera's monograph supplies a long felt need and fills a major gap in the economic and social history of South India. It is the result of many long years of patient, painstaking and exhaustive study of published and unpublished materials by the author one of whose main contributions is to have collected and analysed with imaginative understanding almost the entire range of available information pertaining to the trade and commerce of South India in general and the two merchant guilds in particular. In her monograph written with professional academic skill the author has co-ordinated and harmonized the findings of modern scholarship with those of her own and many issues relating to trade and urban development of medieval South India have been clarified for the first time. In academic quality and the level of scholarship it surpasses all other volumes on Medieval South India produced by Indian authors during the past two decades.

In many respects, this volume is complementary to Kenneth Hall's excellent treatise, *Trade and Statecraft in the Age of the Colas* (New Delhi, 1988) which is comparatively restricted in scope, being confined to the Tamil country. Meera Abraham's study covers a much wider area of Peninsular India. Many localities now included in the states of Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh also figure prominently in her work which concerns the *Manigramam* and the *Ayyavole* who were the most wealthy, influential and powerful among the merchant guilds of South India.

The book consists of five chapters of which the first one is devoted to an examination of the activities of the *Manigramam* in the wider context of India's foreign trade. The origins of the *Manigramam* are obscure and some scholars believe that it is identical with the *Vanikgrama*, referred to in a tenth century Sinhalese inscription in Sri Lanka and mentioned in some early Indian texts. The trading activities of the *Manigramam* association of merchants covered a range of coastal towns and localities which are now included in Kerala and Tamil nadu. They were closely interacting with Christian and Muslim mercantile interests and with other merchant guilds. They were participants in internal and foreign trade and played a significant role in the development of urban centres. In the port town of Quilon they functioned in a subordinate capacity to the Syrian Christians but in Cranganore they secured a virtual monopoly as the commercial sector of the town was under their control. At Talakkad they had secured a privileged position among the merchants and had established a market with the support of the local village community in the eleventh century. In the Tamil country where Kodumbalur was their principal base of operations, the merchants of the *Manigramam* were associated with the distribution of commodities of internal and overseas trade during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

The History of the *Ayyavole* association of merchants, whose activities were spread over a large part of Peninsular India, is examined in considerable detail in Chapters II—IV which constitute a major portion of the monograph. The origins of this influential and powerful merchant guild, often described in inscriptions as the five hundred svamis of *Ayyavole* is attributed by the author, on the basis of an intelligent understanding of epigraphic notices, to the efforts made by the *Mahajanas* of the *Mahagrahara* of Aihole to institutionalise control of existing commerce in that region.

Thy *Ayyavole* branched out into two linguistic groups, Kannada and Tamil, most probably during the ninth century and in the Tamil country the *Ayyavole* were generally referred to as *Tisai ayirattu ainnurruvar*. On the basis of evidence from the Munisandal inscription, which is probably the oldest inscription recording their activities in Tamil nadu, the author concludes that 'a corporate association with very close links with the Kannada groups of the five hundred svamis of the *Ayyavole* had moved into Padukottai and remained active in the two present day taluks of Tirumayyam and Kulattur right through almost till the end of the tenth century'. As pointed out by her the members of the Tamil speaking group identified themselves with the five hundred svamis of the *Ayyavole* in the use of the same numerical formula in their title, in the use of their *prasasti* or inscriptional preamble and in their adherence to the deities of the *Ayyavole*

although 'the social groups who sponsored the founding of the guild in Aihole, and those who belonged to the guild in the Tamil speaking areas were different. The activities of the Kannada group of Ayyāvole were confined to Karnataka and some parts of Andhra Pradesh while those of the Tamil group were spread over most of Peninsular India. The active participation of the *Tisai āyirattu ānnūruvar* in the overseas trade is indicated by the inscriptions they had set up in Sri Lanka and Sumatra.

The *Ayyāvole* associations were composite groups of merchants interacting closely with the *Nānādesis*, (*Vīra*) *Valanjiyar*, the *Manigramam* and other such merchant guilds in commercial enterprises and cultural activities and had links with the dynasties exercising political power in Peninsular India. They had close links with commodity producers and peasant farmers and had in their service groups of armed retainers for the protection of their markets, ware houses and caravans. They played a significant role in the development of urban centres and the townships they established developed as self-governing institutions under a dignitary styled *Pattanasvamin* in Karnataka and under corporate management in the Tamil country.

In the last chapter of the monograph the author has collected and analysed almost all available information on the overseas trade of South India and the section on commodities of trade is of special interest as providing a clear indication of the nature of India's role in Asian Commerce in the Middle Ages.

Some of the important conclusions of author may now be briefly formulated here. By the eleventh century the South Indian village communities were no longer isolated and self-sufficient with a subsistence economy. They were penetrated by itinerant merchants and had markets where goods other than those produced locally including overseas wares were sold. A considerable economic expansion in the latter half of the twelfth century accompanied by a marked increase in overseas trade and the development of urban settlements is indicated by the *Ayyāvole* inscriptions. Since the late twelfth century there is clear evidence of increasing foreign trade in luxury goods and a thriving, local internal trade in basic necessities including grain and pulses. Iron, cotton goods, arecanuts, brass vessels, dyes and pepper were some of the principal items exported from India while horses, elephants, camphor, aloes, sandalwood and aromatics figured prominently among the items that were imported into South India. The *Ayyāvole* and the *Manigrāmam* were engaged in local and long distance trade. In the late tenth and eleventh centuries the Cholas and Tamil merchants were actively engaged in foreign maritime trade. A close connexion between Chola military expeditions

and the activities of the Tamil branch of the *Ayyāvole* merchants in Karnataka, Sri Lanka and South-east Asia is suggested by circumstantial evidence. Since the eleventh century luxuries became less important and basic necessities such as dyes, yarn, textiles, processed iron, pepper and horses figured prominently in the *Ayyāvole* inscriptions. That the distribution of these commodities within South India and the resale and onward despatch of such items was largely in the hands of the *Ayyāvole* is indicated by inscriptions. The merchants associated with the *Ayyāvole* also most probably handled the carriage of textiles, iron and steel, spices, dyes, areca and some Indian aromatics and perfumes for purposes of trade.

The history of the *Nānādesis* and the (Vira) *Valāñjiyar*, two other South Indian merchant guilds, who played an important role in South Indian commerce and with whom the *Ayyāvole* were interacting very closely remains to be investigated. The precise nature of the relationship between the *Nānādesis* and *Ayyāvole* is still not clear although the *Nānādesis* are often referred to in the inscriptions of the *Ayyāvole*. The military power of the merchant guilds and their connections with religious and cultural institutions require a more detailed examination than has been attempted in the monograph under consideration.

Meera Abraham's treatise on the merchant guilds represents a major contribution to Indian studies in general and South Indian history in particular.

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