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Logistics and Risk Practices in Merchant Guilds (Sāththus) of Ancient Tamil Literature

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Abstract

The present article focuses on the institution of Vaniga Saathu (merchant caravan/guild) in the literature of Sangam as an important institution that highlights the economic practice, environmental risk and literary expression of an ancient Tamil society. The study examines merchant caravans as a network of collective trading and their ability to conduct long-distance trade in dangerous terrain like Palai, based on primary sources like Akanānūru, Perumpānātruppadaḱ and Silappathikaram. Previous works have concentrated on trade routes and trade prosperity, but this study emphasises the organisation of trade and management of risks within literary depictions of trade. The article suggests that from a perspective of economic anthropology and risk theory, Vaniga Saathu functioned as an adaptive institution, by coordinating movements, establishing leadership hierarchies, and providing collective protection to deal with the environmental and social uncertainties. In addition, it notes how this economic fact has been incorporated into akam poetry, which uses the female perspective of the heroine's friend (thozhi) to point out the risks of traveling and entice the hero to accept the socially acceptable, marriage. The caravan is in this sense a concrete reference and a symbol of risk, mobility and emotional strain. This article shows how this analysis is possible not only as a literary analysis of the Sangam texts, but also as an interpretation of them in the context of socio-economic considerations, revealing a complex understanding of trade, risk and collective organisation. The representation of Vaniga Saathu, therefore, is an early example of the risk-enlightened economic practice, and also adds to the emotional and narrative richness of Tamil poetry.

Keywords

Merchant Guilds (Sāththus), Saathu, Saathar, Sangam Literature, Ancient Tamil Economy, Trade Logistics, Risk Management, Caravan

Introduction

The importance of trade and commerce in the socio-economic life of the Tamils of ancient times has been well acknowledged. The movement of goods, organisation of merchants, and the terrains in which trade was carried out are well revealed in literary sources like Akanānūru, Perumpānātruppadaḱ, and Silappathikaram. Of these, the Vaniga Saathu or merchant caravan/guild is important as an institutional structure that facilitated long-distance trade in the face of ecological and social complexity. Although trade, sea-trade, and port towns have been the main

fields of study in scholarship on the subject, there has been relatively little work on the logistical organization and risk-management systems around literary depictions of trade. In this study I fill this gap by looking at the ways in which systems of collective movement, protection and economic coordination among Tamil merchants are encoded in Tamil texts. This article interprets the Saathu not only as a descriptive literary motif, but rather as a model and a functional model of organized commerce, based on an economic anthropological and a risk theoretical approach. It claims that the merchant guilds were adaptive institutions that reduced uncertainty through collective action, dealt with political boundaries, and helped to buffer the environment and environmental risks. This study concentrates on logistics and risk and helps to deepen our understanding of the early organization of economy in Tamil society, and to show the sophistication of pre-modern trade systems.

As a merchant, a poet carries the responsibility of conveying one's emotions through the written word.

The sangam poets were not just professionals; sangam poets were all manner of people who were socially diverse and included in all respects in the ancient Tamil society. In addition to kings, farmers and artisans, people who were also practicing merchants (Vanigar) and seafaring traders were many and celebrated poets. They themselves experienced the trade routes, and it became a theme and the perspective in ancient Tamil literature. Commerce and maritime trade had been the main pillars of the economy and Tamil Nadu merchant-poets had a distinct role in observing and recording the social life, geography and interactions with foreign cultures. They are rich in knowledge and understanding of economic activity, port towns and cross-cultural exchanges. In Madurai, the author of the epic Manimekalai, Madurai Koolavanigan Sittalai Sattanar, was a grain merchant who gave detailed information on trade with the outside world, as well as the transmission of Buddhist philosophy to the port cities of the ancient world. A few verses from Kaveripoompattinattu Ponvaniganar, a specialised gold merchant (Pon-vaniganar) of the port city of Kaveripattinam (Puhar) show the prodigious wealth and cosmopolitanism of the times. Likewise, Uraiyur Ilampon Vaniganar, a prominent poet of the merchant community was well known for his dual identity as a merchant and a poet. Another well-known Sangam poet, who definitely belonged to the merchant class, is Illavettanar. These examples show how the merchant-poets contributed to the Sangam literature, their experiences of trading, travelling and economic life enriching the Tamil literary traditions with knowledge and world-views.

The term Merchant Guild, Vaniga Saathu means "Guild of Merchants" or "Merchant Association" in Gujarati.

Saathu means collection, assembly or group. The term was used specifically for a group of traders who accompanied one another when on trade journeys, to protect the merchandise from harm in long-distance trade in ancient Tamil times. These merchants formed "sathars" (collective groups) for protection and their goods were also called Saathu. The head of a large caravan was known as a Maasaathuvan, who had economic and social prestige. There were some special groups within this system, for example, those who transported salt in their trade were called Umanach Saathukkal. Trade was carried out through pack animals like donkeys and oxen that helped traders move their goods through the different and sometimes rough terrains. The practices eventually developed into a well structured commercial network -- also well documented in literature. Maduraikkanchi, like many other texts, emphasizes the importance of trade as one of the main activities of the ancient Tamils, other than farming.

The long travel distances were not quite safe, though, and bandits often raided merchant caravans, especially in the Palai deserts. To reduce such hazards, traders used collective travel methods, and they typically travelled with armed bow-warriors to protect them. This practice is a precursor to today's organized trading risks. In addition, banditry was not restricted to the Tamil region, but it was common across the Indian subcontinent and therefore, these were necessary for defence. On this basis, the idea of Saathu not only conveys the idea of collective movement, but also illuminates the logistical organization, economic specialization and risk

management of ancient Tamil commerce.

Representation of merchant guilds in literature.

In the Sangam literature there are examples of these forest bandits raiding merchant caravans.

The traders in the big forest cried out

fearing the fire, and turned away, he ran away from the path,

A disorganized herd of elephant cows and a confusing herd of elephants were afraid of an

arrogant tiger ran together and joined them. (Akanānūru 39)

In this verse from Akanānūru 39, the heroine asks the hero if he had remembered her on his quest for Wealth. The hero, in turn, says that he always missed her, even when he was traversing dangerous forests where wild-fires burned, and merchants caravans (Saathu) ran in fear as elephants do when they see a tiger. Her memory is all he has got that keeps him going.

wasteland bandits with dark strong colours

You have tight bows on your shoulders, and eat fat meat,

and chop the heads of strong merchants who

are warriors with perfect swords as they follow

Their lines of donkeys loaded with loads,

When there's flesh stink in the battlefield,

victorious bandits, who are eager for

carries on the battle, beats drums, shares their

precious jewel loot in their forts with bows? (Akanānūru 89,10-15)

Akanānūru 89 (10-15) is a graphic and graphic-violent description of the dangers of trade caravans in the Palai landscape.

The poem is about bandits with bows who would hunt animals, roast their meat and attack traders on donkeys causing them to be killed and plundered of their trade. They beat their thudi drums in the clearing, smelling of death; and they share the loot according to their size and rank. The foster mother mourns that her special daughter can journey this dangerous journey with her lover. In summary, the passage emphasizes the dangers, violence, and lawlessness that merchants faced in long-distance trade, underscoring the importance of protection and group travel in ancient Tamil trade.

The plunderers of the highways, who used to carry bows are also referred to by “Kadiyalur Uruthirangannanar”.

who were afraid of rough men with bows curved

Marauding band of savages called fierce arrows, assassins of merchants on the wasteland road.

and eat with their loot (Akanānūru 167,7-9)

The words in Akanānūru 167 (7–9) are a fear or emotional reaction, but also an emphasis on the dangers of the Palai (wasteland) route. The violent bandits are men who have curved bows and have lethal arrows with which they attack and kill merchants on pathways in the wasteland. They steal the goods but eat the loot, the overall message of the verse is psychological fear of travellers as well as the real threat of banditry, revealing the dangers of trade routes in ancient Tamil society.

....on the forked paths that are abandoned by

Those who act as traders of their valuables,

and on a path on that tall summit, (Akanānūru 291)

In Akanānūru 291, we read of a fierce bandit wearing leaves on his head to conceal his identity, and shooting fast arrows that resemble the buzz of bees. The merchants are too frightened to venture along the forked mountain paths, and these men armed with weapons rule the ways. They take the valuable goods which traders were transporting and this makes these routes unfit for use and deserted.

The Akanānūru poems (39, 89, 167, 291) as a group present the Vaniga Saathu as an important theme in literature, one that represents the concepts of danger, movement, and emotional tension in the Palai landscape. The verses bring to the fore the image of merchant caravans traversing risky areas with wildfires, bandits and deserted trade routes. In Akanānūru 39, when there are forest fires, the merchants run away in panic as a herd of elephants runs away on seeing a tiger; this imagery is used to show the ferocity of the journey undertaken by the hero and how he is always reminded of the heroine. Likewise, Akanānūru 89 and 167 depict scenes of banditry, with armed people attacking merchants and killing them, creating a very frightening, violent and disorderly environment. The trade routes in Akanānūru 291 are depicted as empty, signifying an annulment of safe passage.

In the akam model, this representation is not just a depiction of economic activity, but a part of the emotional journey of love and separation. The route the hero takes to gain wealth is similar to the dangerous journeys of merchant caravans and the fear these journeys instil adds to what the reader feels when separated from the main character. The journey is seen through the eyes of the heroine, her friend and the foster mother, all of whom see danger in the journey and use the suffering of Vaniga Saathu as a point of reference to express anxiety and urgency. Therefore the Vaniga Saathu is a realistic portrayal of the ancient Tamil trade practices, and also a symbolic device to enliven the themes of risk, longing, and eventual union that are found in akam poetry.

Other literary sources such as those of Kadiyalur Uruthirankannanar refer to organised merchant caravans moving merchandise such as black pepper in sacks, which seem to be jack-fruit sacks and are carried by donkeys. The caravans, which were accompanied by armed bowmen. Toll stations were set up on the routes where royal officers would take tolls, thus showing state control of trade. All of these accounts point to dangers faced by traders going by bands of robbers and to the organized systems of protection and taxing of trading established in the ancient Tamil society. The merchant caravans (Saathars) used to use pack oxen (Pothiyeruthugal) to carry their trade wares. They slowly began to bring in, and tame, animals like donkeys, horses, camels and mules, some of which were brought from Western Asia. Of these, donkeys and horses were used more and more for long-distance trade. In perumpānātruppadaī (73-82) merchants are described vividly in the process of travelling through forest routes. They traded in exotic goods from across the continent, mountains and oceans, reflecting the breadth of trade networks. They wore daggers on their clothing for protection and had armed bowmen who were able to fend off attacks from highway bandits. The poem also refers to the caravans travelling down wide toll roads with donkeys carrying carefully balanced loads of pepper sacks, and with their ears lifted up. These are figuratively likened to big jackfruits hanging from thick and curved tree trunks. This mention of toll roads also suggests state-controlled trade routes and taxation.

The merchant caravans that were engaged in foreign trade had to experience a lot of hardships in the past. They were constantly exposed to risk to lives and property. But they continued the trade relentlessly and survived, so much so that they overcame and avoided such dangers. The head of a caravan of merchants was called a Maasaathuvan. The most prominent Maasaathuvans were Kovalan's father, who was also called Maasaathuvan. Kovalan is introduced into the epic Silappathikaram which shows the tremendous wealth, generosity and social status of his father, Mangala Vazhthu. This grand depiction puts Kovalan in the role of a “prince of commerce”, setting up a strong dramatic contrast with the miseries and misfortunes that he and

Kannagi experience later in the story. Likewise, Kannagi's father too is called Maanayakan, and his real name is Perunjaathan – a testament to the wealth or mercantile status of both the families. On Kovalan's way to Madurai, the story mentions a female Goddess named Vanasaariyai. She tries to trick him by telling him that she was travelling with a merchant caravan (Saathu) but she had lost it on the forest road. This episode (Silappathikaram 11:190) shows the fragility of caravan roads and the culture of travels, dangers and deception in ancient Tamil cultures.

Conclusion:

The Sangam and epic references, amassed in particular from Akanānūru, Perumpānāruppādai, and Silappathikaram, provide a colorful picture of ancient Tamil merchant life, one that is complex and at times multi-layered. On one level these texts serve as literature about landscape (thinai), and emotion, and on another, they contain valuable socio-economic information about trade and movement and risk. Collective strategies, leadership and logistical organization were developed by merchant caravans (Vaniga Saathu) to negotiate hazardous spaces and there was some indication of partial regulation of trade through taxation. Meanwhile, literature portrays merchants as economically powerful and vulnerable; influential, but vulnerable to environmental hazards, violence and uncertainty. This duality brings to light that trade during the Sangam age was not only an economic phenomenon, but a multifaceted social institution with risk, resilience, and culture.

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