

TRADING ACTIVITIES OF *CHETTIS* MERCHANT CASTE IN MEDIEVAL TAMIL SOCIETY – A STUDY

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Trade and commerce was the traditional profession of the ancient Tamils. It played an essential role in the daily activities of human life. The economic condition of Tamil country was greatly shaped by its trading fervour. The prevalent of peaceful political scenario coupled with a stable socio-economic order favoured the emergence of several trading communities in the Tamil country. Trading activities were carried out by different caste groups like *Chettis*, *Reddis*, *Nagarattan*, *Nattukkottai Chettis* and the foreign merchants in the medieval Tamil country. In the Medieval Tamil Society a number of caste groups mingled with each other and they did wonderful trading activities. The merchants who sold the articles were classified according to their articles of merchandise such as, *aruvai vanigan* (cloth merchant) *kulavanigan* (grain merchant) *umanar* (salt merchant) *kudiraichetti* (horse merchant) *sekkar* (oil merchants) and *ilaivanigan* (betel leaf merchant). The Alagarmalai Brahmi inscription also reveals the terms such as *uppuvanigar* (salt merchant) *Koluvanigan* (iron merchant) *Panitha Vanigan*, (sugar merchant), *Ponkavalan* (gold merchant) and *Aruvaivanigan* (cloth merchant). The traders of the period under study sold numerous articles. Even though, many merchants were involved in various trading activities in Tamilnadu. *Chettis* played a vital role in the Tamil society.

Different Names of Merchant Castes

There was no hereditary occupation and the people were undivided during the early period. But in the later Vedic age, this system was more developed. Among the four divisions of the society, the *Vaishyas* played a vital role in the state and society. The word *Vaishya* is derived from a Sanskrit word *Vaishya* which means to live. This caste was originally focused on farming agriculture, cattle rearing and trade. The *Vaishyas* along with the *Kshatriyas* claim to be the twice born (*divija*) castes of the classical theory.¹

The synonyms of the *Vaishyas* are *Ayenuruvil-Vandore* (those who emanated from the belly of Brahma) *Muttolilore* (those who have three duties to perform) *Ilangkokal* (juniors of the king) and *Ettyer* (Ipper merchants). The *Vaishyas* were included in the nobility and enjoyed a lot. The *Vaishyar* caste has different subdivision, according to their being called by different names as *Talli Kamakshiamma*, *Visalakshimma*, *Acchutali* and *Toppa-talli*. They were *savites*. They had their own priests who were called *Panditars*.²

Origin of Chettis Caste

The caste name '*Chetti*' particularly applied to the merchant group. It derived from the Sanskrit word *Sresthi*. In all probability *Sresthi* had little to do with *Chetti*. However the

term 'Chetti' occurs for the first time only in *Manimegalai*. It might have emerged from the Tamil word *Chetti* meaning 'trade'. The *Srestis* was actually a financier or banker or sometimes referred to the head of trade guild. Even a despotic king treated these *Srestis* with due respect. *Chettis* were the most influential commercial community. The weavers, oil mongers and others used 'Chetti' as a suffix to their names. The *Chetti* groups were numerous and widely distributed. There were many sub-divisions among them. "Chettiyum Chetti Vira Puththirarkalum" is mentioned in Sarkar Periyapalayam inscriptions.³ The word sometimes spelt as *Chetti*, *Shetty*, *Chetty*, and *Saitti*. The ancestors of the *Chettis* evidently constitute caste belonging to *Vaishya* caste of the ancient Indian society and their activities mainly related to trade and banking business of the country. The members of the communities also often described themselves by the terms *Nagarattar*, *Virakodiyar*, *Perunagarathar*, *Vaishya*, *Vaniya Nagratar*, *Chettis* and the *Nattu Nagarathar*. The *Chettis* claim various titles to protect the poor and helpless and adorned with the three jewels *Samyak Jnana*, *Samyak darsana* and *Samyak Carita*.⁴ Hence, through the ages *Chettis* had been associated with commercial activities.

Different Sections of *Chettis*

Pudukkottai State Manual mentions the different sections among the *Chettis*. It also describes that, the *Chettis* were divided into 12 sub-divisions. They were: *Nattukkottai Chettis*, *Ariyur Chettis*, *Sundaram Chettis*, *Vallam, Chettis*, *Vallanad Chettis*, *Vandakottai Chettis*, *Vellan Chettis*, *Kasakkara Chettis*, *Viralur Chettis*, *Narayanapuram Chettis* *Seniyans* and *Senaittalaivans*. The places where they lived were called *Nagarans* and the *Chettis* themselves were called as *Nagarattars*. The members of the *Nagara* were generally known as *Nagarattar*, *Nagara-Karanattar* and the *Nagara Madhyasta*.⁵ *Nattukkottai Chettis* among the *Chettis*, the *Nattukkottai Chettis* occupied an important place in trading activities. A remarkable enterprising community people of Tamil Country were the *Nattukkottai Chettis*. The *Nattukkottai Chettis* are said to have come from Kaveripattanam. They were patronised by the Chola kings and enjoyed the privilege of placing the crown on the king's head at the time of the coronation. Edger Thurston opines that a Pandiya king, named Sundara Pandiya asked the Chola King to send some of the *Chettis* in his land to settle down in the Pandiya Country. The Pandiya king allowed them to settle in the North of the river Vaigai, east of the Piranmalai and South of the Vellar. There are many legends regarding the origin of the *Nattukkottai Chettis*. The Chettiar left the Chola land in a group and settled to the south of the Vellar, the southern boundary of the kingdom. They would never allow their women to cross the Vellar into Chola country. However many *Chettis* believe that they belonged to the *Vaishya* Caste, though they did not wear the sacred thread. Hence their original home was Kaverippattinam, from where they migrated to other parts of Tamil Country. They were pious and charitable by nature. The famous temples at Chidambaram, Madurai and Thiruvannamalai have received considerable endowments and embellishments from rich *Nattukkottai Chettiars*.⁶

Sub-division of Nattukottai Chettis

Ariyur Chettis was a sub-division of *Nattukkottai Chetti* Caste. They were settled in the places of Ponnamaravathi, Sembuti, Kallampatti, Alavayal, Pudur, Varpet and Amman Kuricchi. They had two endogamous sections among them. The right divisions were vegetarian and the left divisions were non-vegetarians.⁷ Sundaram Chettis were another sub-division of *Nattukottai Chettiyars*. They settled in Sundaram or Sundarappattanam near Ponnamaravati. *Vallanadu Chettis* were another sub-division of *Nattukottai Chettis*. They lived in Kottamangalam, Mangadu, Mannavelanpatti and Vallam. They migrated from *Vallam*, to other places of Tamil Country, in order to carry on their profession as money-lenders. The *Vandakkottai chettis* are yet another group among the *chettis*. They were also called as *Gadiakkara Chettis* from *Gadiyam*, a herd of Pack-bullocks. They used to carry the articles on the lack of bullocks, for the requirement of the palace at Pudukkottai. *Viralur Chettis* belonged to different sub-division and they settled in Viralur, Rajalipatti and Ramakkavandapatti, Another group of *Viralur chettis* settled in Viralimalai and Ratnagiri in Trichirappalli.⁸ They worshiped God Subramania of Viralimalai, Mariamman of Viralu and Niliamman of Unaiyur in the Marungaperi Zamindari. Narayanapuram Chettis settled near Palani hills and Kodumbalur. Probably, the *Nagarattar* would be known as *Nattukkottai Chetti* from this time. They colonized Pandya country in few places like Rajanarayanapuram. They lived in *Irunuruvaperunderu* in Erraikudi and purchased land at Marudanyudi for founding the new colony called Rajanarayanapuram. They called themselves as *Nattu chettikal* while making gifts to the temples.⁹

Furthermore they retained their nostalgic affinity with their original home of Cholamandalam by calling themselves as *Thiru Chonottu chettigal*. As a well organized guild of merchants they maintained their emporiums of merchandise in the cities as well as in the military cantonments. The intermediaries like brokers were equal in status to the merchants. They were generally called *Pathinenvishayattar* and *Nattuchettis*.¹⁰

Beri Chettis

Beri Chettis belonged to another enterprising trading group. They had migrated from Kaveripattanam near Kumbakonam when the Chola King wanted to marry a girl belonging to this group; but the *Beri Chetti* refused to give his daughter to the Chola king. So, the Chola king persecuted them and drove them out of his Domain.¹¹ The *Beri Chettis* had come into existence as a separate group and also claimed themselves to be *Vaishyas*. They collected textiles from weavers and engaged in selling many varieties of textiles to foreign countries in return for gold. They were grouped under the left hand caste faction. There was a rivalry between the *Beri* and *Komatti Chettis* each claimed the superiority over the other. Among the *Beri-chettis* there were both vegetarian and non-vegetarian.¹²

Kudirai Chettis

Another interesting trading group, flourished during the time of the Imperial Chola was *Kudirai Chettis*. Their name itself indicates that they were traders in horses. In the

Pandiyan kingdom *Kudirai Chettis* were famous. Since the Arabs started landing in the east coast, the *Kudirai Chettis* of Malaimandalam visited the Pandiya ports and became the local horse traders. They were engaged in horse trade between Arabia and South India. There are frequent references about *Kudirai Chettis* in inscriptions; mostly they belonged to Malainadu.¹³ They were the dealers of horses and imported horses from abroad particularly from Arabia and Peru and distributed them among the princes and nobles in the land. The Arab horse trade was at its peak during the Chola period Sekkilar, the contemporary of Kulotunga II stated the importance of horses in the sea-trade in his celebrated work *Periapuranam*.¹⁴ A Chola painting, portraying Arab merchants with their horses standing in front of king Raja Raja I, is found on the back side wall of the *Garbhagriha* in the circumambulatory passage of the Tanjore temple.¹⁵ The *Kudirai Chettis* were honoured with the title of *Etti* and *Vanigaradittan*. An inscription stated that the *ulvari* was issued by the King for the tax-free village Kumaran-ambinallur which was granted to the temple by Navayanm Kondanambi of Kulamukku a *Kudiraichetti* (horse dealer) of Maliamandalam for worship and offerings.¹⁶

Komatti Chettis

The *Komatti Chettis* were another group of the merchant communities, who were engaged in trading activities. The activities of *Komatias* of South India, as traders and money lenders were traced from the tenth century onwards. Their original home was Northern circars around the Krishna and Godavari rivers. A series of commercial opportunities created by various conquests and political changes of the various empires had helped them settle down far and wide in the Tamil country. They started their commercial operation down to the east coast of Madras city, westward through Hyderabad and far south to the big cities of Salem, Coimbatore and Madurai. During the fourteenth century, the *Komattis* were joined with the right hand and left hand factions. The right hand groups were specialized in trading on the food articles like fruits and vegetables and the left hand group involved in trading in pulses and grains. The *Komatti Chettis* of the Masulipatnam in Guntur region grew richer due to their trade affected in the Northern circars from the Vijayanagar period.¹⁷ They attained a heightened ritual status.

Thus the *chettis*, the principal merchant communities had influenced the society by their economic activities. They not only involved themselves in economic pursuits but also in many charitable works. They donated money, cattle and grains to the local temples. They formed guilds of their own and involved in itinerant trade. It reached its zenith during the imperial Cholas. The foreign traders also traded with these merchant classes. They even had matrimonial alliances with them and settled here. During the time of the Pandyas they took part in the administrative activities also. Hence the trading class of medieval Tamil country played a multi-dimensional role in the society.

End Notes

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4. K.R.Venkatarama Ayyar, *Pudukkottai State Manual*, Madras, 1944, p.548.
5. *S.I.I.*, Vol. III, p.104.
6. K.K. Pillai, *The Social History of the Tamils*, Madras, 1969, p. 49.
7. K.R.Venkatarama Ayyar, *op.cit.*, p. 590.
8. *A.R.E.*, 1936, Part-II, Para 52.
9. *Ibid.*, 150 of 1935-36
10. *Ibid.*, 421.
11. Edgar Thurston, *op.cit.*, Vol.1, p.214.
12. *A.R.E.*, 77 of 1976 - 1977.
13. *A.R.E.*, 556 of 1904.
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15. P.Jeyakumar, "The Merchants of the West Coast and their Status in Chola Country", in *Studies in India's Maritime Trade Through the Ages*, Calcutta, 1999, p.28.
16. *A.R.E.*, 322 of 1958-59.
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