

CULTURAL DIFFUSION AND TAMIL MERCHANTS



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Abstract:

Commodity Exchange is one of the ancient trade mechanisms through which Cultural Diffusion blossomed up amongst various civilizations. Tamil Merchants played a very important role in the diffusion of cultures across many countries of the World. From local trade to global trade, from land faring to sea faring, from simple tolls to excise, the journey of Tamil Trade is very vast and deep.

Activities of the Merchant Guilds have taken the Tamil Culture to distant lands and brought in new discoveries to the Tamil land. Philanthropy of the Tamil merchants are recorded in various inscriptions. History of the merchant guilds can be traced from Literature. Roman coins and foreign currency form a treasure trove in several parts of the Tamil country. Day markets (nāḷaṅgāḍi) and night markets (allaṅgāḍi) were a common sight in the Tamil land. Volumes of historical information on Maritime trade, Global and Local Ports, Geographies, Goods exchanged, Voyages and Royal restriction of vessel movements are found in the above-mentioned sources. This paper traces that historical path of trade and cultural exchange, from various sources in Tamil Literature & Tamil Archaeology.

Essay:

Merchants played an important role in the diffusion of cultures across countries though their prime function was to manage the exchange of commodities. They always provided the necessary links between producers on the one side and consumers on the other side. They are the people who carry goods of various kinds and travel long distances to sell products and satisfy the needs of common people. Some merchant groups cross the seas and oceans with difficulty in search of commercial and luxury goods and even established merchant settlements in some regions. Their activities were mostly dependent on several production centers from where they transported commodities to different regions. In some regions they established their control and ruled as territorial chiefs. Their activities were distributed in all regions. In general, they acted as messengers in the spread of cultural materials across regions and also oversee the development of regional economy.

In south India also activities of merchants could be seen from the earliest times. By its very location, the south Indian Peninsula, served as an exchange centre for goods from various countries situated on the eastern sea

board as well as on the west. Though we have no clear evidence about the activities of merchants of the pre historic and proto historic periods, the existence of trade in south India and the Tamil country could be surmised. However, we may presume that the trade during the pre-megalithic period involved exchange of surplus of agricultural products and some goods of commercial value. A quick survey of artefacts of the Megalithic period could indicate the prevalence of long-distance trade. It seems that semi-precious stones like carnelian, quartz and glass beads manufactured in some centers in Tamil country were also accepted as commercial goods. Similarly, some of these goods produced in different parts of the country and transported over long distances were also marketed by trades in Tamil country. In these commercial transactions, we may notice the involvement of merchants from north India, mariners and traders from overseas countries. The numerous artefacts discovered from archaeological excavations in ancient sites in India and overseas countries clearly speak of the involvement of merchants from south India and more particularly Tamil country.

Evidence of local trade is available in the ancient Tamil literature, commonly known as Sangam anthology. They are composed by several poets during 3 B.C. to A.D.3 centuries. The anthology provides some interesting information about the activities of native merchants and their trade activities. Several poets who composed poems in the works like *Puṛaṇāṅṁūru* and *Akaṇāṅṁūru* were merchants. They were usually referred to in Tamil language as *vaṇikar/vāṇikar* (merchants). Among the several merchants, one gold merchant from *Uṛaiyūr*, (*Uṛaiyūr Iḷam poṅ vāṇikaṅār*) has composed one verse in *Puṛaṇāṅṁūru*.¹ *Uṛaiyūr* was the ancient capital city of the Sangam Chola dynasty. Another merchant, *Sītṭalaich Chāṭṭaṅār*, was a dealer in grains (Maduraik

kūla vāṇikaṅ Sītṭalaich Chāṭṭaṅār) who has marketed his goods in Madurai, the capital of Pandya rulers. He has composed about one verse in *Puṛaṇāṅṁūru* and five verses in *Akaṇāṅṁūru*.² *Iḷavēṭṭaṅār*, was a cloth trader from Madurai, (*Madurai aṟuvai vāṇikaṅ Iḷavēṭṭaṅār*) who has composed one poem in *Puṛaṇāṅṁūru* and six poems in *Akaṇāṅṁūru*.³ *Iḷandēvaṅār* was another merchant, who was a dealer of different commodities (*paṇḍa*) and his business was centered at Madurai (*Maduraip paṇḍa vāṇikaṅ Iḷandēvaṅār*). He has composed 3 verses in *Akaṇāṅṁūru*.⁴ *Kāvithi* was a title conferred on merchants during the Sangam period and one merchant namely *Chādēvaṅār*, from *Āvūr*, has composed one poem in *Akaṇāṅṁūru* (*Āvūr kāvithikaḷ Chādēvaṅār*).⁵ *Chāṭṭaṅ*, was a common name usually taken by merchants in the Sangam period and many merchants with the name *Chāṭṭaṅ* were endowed with several poems in the Sangam anthology.⁶

The earliest inscriptions in the Tamil country are datable between 2 B.C. and A.D. 3 century and provide some information about merchant activities. They are mostly found on ancient caverns and also engraved on numerous potsherds excavated from old settlements in the Tamil country. They are usually named as Tamil Brahmi inscriptions and they contain many names of merchants who have made some grants and also provided some facilities to members of some religious community on several occasions. From the names of donors found in these short inscriptions one can easily identify native merchants of the Tamil country and their activities. One inscription from *Aḷagarmalai* (2 B.C.) mentions a merchant, *Ataṅ Ataṅ*, who figures as a donor. He was a gold merchant (*poṅ kolvāṅ*) from *Mathirai* (Madurai), the capital of the Pandya rulers.⁷ Merchants dealing with some local products are known from two inscriptions. Among the two one was known as *Viyakaṅ*, who was a

salt merchant (upu *vāṇikan*),⁸ and the other one was Neḍumalan, a merchant dealing with the palm gur or jaggery (*paṇita vāṇikan*).⁹ Two more merchants figure in these inscriptions. One of them was Eḷa Chandaṇ, who was a dealer in iron goods like plough shares (*koḷu vāṇikan*)¹⁰ and the other one was Eḷa Ataṇ, a cloth merchant (*aṇuvai vāṇikan*) from a place called Veṇpaḷi.¹¹ In a 3 A.D. inscription from Pugaḷūr, one Naththi, was mentioned as a gold merchant (*poṇvāṇikan*) from Karūr, who endowed a bed (*adiṭṭāṇam*).¹² Another merchant, Veni Ātaṇ, an oil dealer (*eṇṇai vā(ṇ)ṇigan*), also donated a bed.¹³ Some of these merchants were given royal title, *kāviti* in recognition of their services. These merchants with the title *kāviti* are known from several inscriptions. In *Māṅguḷam* inscription we know that Anthai Asuthaṇ, a *kāviti* belonged to a mercantile guild from *Veḷ Aṇrai*. Inscriptions from *Sittaṇṇavāsai* and *Tirumalai* mention persons with the title *kāviti*.¹⁴ Though merchants with different professions are known, details regarding their spheres of activities and other functions are not available in these short inscriptions.

The merchants during this period seem to have functioned as a group or organized themselves into a corporate body called *nigama*. The person Anthai Asuthaṇ, referred to above as a *kāviti* in the *Māṅguḷam* inscription seem to be a member of a merchant guild from a place called *Veḷ Aṇrai* (*veḷ aṇrai nikamadu kāviti*). He may be a chief or an important person in the guild, but unfortunately we could not understand either the functions of the guild or the involvement of the merchant in the guild.¹⁵ Another member of the same guild was mentioned in another inscription from *Māṅguḷam*.¹⁶ The name of a mercantile guild, *nikama* was found engraved on a piece of potsherd from *Koḍumaṇal*. This could indicate the activities of the guild in the *Kongu* region during the first century A.D.¹⁷

Trade relations with north India existed and cultural materials were found in different parts of Tamil country. The Northern black polished ware, a typical ceramic manufactured in northern cities, was found in the several excavations in the Tamil country. The silver punch marked coins were found in hoards as well as from several excavations. More than 4000 punch marked coins were discovered from about 25 sites in Tamil country. These coin hoards and stray finds contain coins minted during the Magadha-Maurya period (from 493 B.C. onwards). Subbarayalu, who examined the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions on ceramic pieces collected from excavations in Tamil country has suggested that many names are in Prakrit language and are mostly related to merchants from regions outside the Tamil country. Merchants from north India and Sri Lanka also figure in these inscriptions.¹⁸ Therefore it is clear that merchants from north Indian locations were present and conducted trade transactions in the early historical period.

Local markets were known to have functioned in cities like *Pukār* and *Madurai* and merchants have established shops for selling various goods. *Paṭṭiṇappālai* gives a list of various goods imported from different regions and sold in the port city of *Pukār* also known as *Paṭṭiṇam* (*Kāviriippūm paṭṭiṇam*). Among the various commodities precious objects from *Kāḷagam* (*Kaḍāram*, the northern part (Kedha Province) of Malaysia in the Malaysian Peninsula), food materials from *Srilanka* were imported. Horses were another important commodity imported in ships across the seas. Products of Indian origin were brought from different regions. Gemstones and gold were brought from northern mountains, sandalwood and eaglewood (*akil*) from the western hills, grains from *Ganges* region, coral from the eastern seas and pearls from the southern seas. Pepper was brought through canals,

and grains came from Kaveri region and sold in the market at Pukār.¹⁹The movement of goods from various regions necessitated settlement of people from different countries in Kāviriippūm paṭṭiṇam.

The Maduraik kāñchi gives a graphic description of a market²⁰in Madurai with shops selling various commodities. The city had two markets: one was the day market (nāḷaṅgāḍi) and the other was night market (allaṅgāḍi). There are shops in which merchants sold cloth, flowers, incense, and gold, pearl, and other precious stones as well as copper and probably copper products like vessels. Merchants also sold many commodities²¹ like paddy, salt, fish,meat and toddy,and ornaments like banglesand pearls.

Merchants travelled distant places and market centres to sell their products. Bullock carts were used to move their products and in some places, donkeys were employed to carry their goods. They organized themselves into small groups as chāttu and to protect their goods from highway robbers their convoy included armed warriors also. The salt merchants travelled in their bullock carts laden with salt along with their family.²²

The nature of merchants and their activities are described in Paṭṭiṇappālai. These merchants in Pukār were said to be judicious and straight forward in their dealings and always sold their goods quoting correct prices which are not high or low. They always speak the truth.²³Another Sangam work, Perumbāṇāruppaḍai further mentions their brave and martial qualities. They were hard working, and were not afraid of highway robbers. They carry daggers on their waists and are brave warriors who will attack the robbers with spears.²⁴

Maritime trade was an important element in the economy of early historical south India, since the region contained all the necessary geographical features. Its location

as a peninsula, situated in the midst of two important seas, namely Arabian Sea on the west and Bay of Bengal on the east, has provided the natural setting for establishing maritime contacts with countries across the seas. In spite of difficulties that existed in the development of natural ports in this region, several ports and berthing harbors were developed on account of prosperous maritime trade that existed for centuries continuously. To support and maintain a brisk maritime trade, south India produced agrarian products and goods of commercial value like beads of semi-precious stones and other products. There were several production centers, distributed all over the south India and these centers were well connected by roads. By its very location, the south Indian Peninsula, served as an exchange centre for goods from various countries on the east as well as west. Though, trade conditions were well documented from the first century B.C., a quick reading through the evidence could suggest that maritime commercial contacts existed at least a few centuries earlier.

There is some evidence on the maritime trade with the eastern countries also especially with Kaḍāram in southeast Asia. The evidence on trade with Srilanka is also well known and is attested by several artefacts like coins, pottery and inscriptions. Literary and archaeological materials provide the necessary support to study aspects of maritime trade with foreign countries. These materials were studied and interpreted by many scholars in the past few decades. The well-known Roman travel literature composed by various authorities provided sufficient information with regard to goods exported and ports frequented by Roman mariners. Artefacts in the form of pottery, coins, found in the excavations and as stray finds and also treasure trove discoveries from different localities in south India suggest undoubtedly the presence of Roman traders

and/or their agents. Coins of the Roman Emperors from the imperial issues (1 B.C.) to the later Roman issues (4 A.D.) discovered from various places in the states of Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh support the prosperous maritime trade that existed as early as the 1st century B.C.

In the commercial transactions with the Tamil country, Roman coins were exchanged with local merchants. These coins were found as treasure trove in several parts of the Tamil country. More than 3500 coins were discovered in about 25 places. The earliest of these coin finds were issues of Roman Republican period (79 B.C.). Gold aureus and silver denarius of the Roman kings were found. They were issued by Augustus (31 B.C.- AD 14), Tiberius (A.D. 14-37), Claudius (A.D. 41-54) and Hadrian (AD, 117-138). Though not found in stratified locations, coins collected from the Amaravathi river bed at Karur, in Tamil Nadu, narrate the movement of foreign traders from different countries situated around the Mediterranean Sea board, namely Greece, Thrace, Seleucid, Create, Rhodes, Thessaly and Phoenicia to the Tamil country on condition of trade from the early centuries of the Christian era till the end of the 4th century A.D.

The contemporary Tamil Sangam anthology also provides some information on maritime trade. The presence of foreign traders and the arrival of Roman ships for taking pepper as cargo are described in these poems. One of the important precious commodities exported to the Roman cities was beryl, the light green precious stone quarried in the Kongu region. There are a few references to the use of Roman lamps and the consumption of Roman wine by the Tamil natives. It is also known that settlements of foreign traders existed in some of the port cities in the Tamil country. It is evident that

mariners and merchants from the Tamil country participated in the maritime trade during the early historical period. Though there is no direct evidence from these traders about their itineraries some activities of Tamil traders are reflected in the artefacts left by them in those distant lands.

The role played by native traders in the maritime trade, could not be undermined. Studies on maritime trade in the past emphasized mostly participation of foreign traders, deriving the necessary inputs from the travel literature of the Romans. The role of native merchants in the maritime trade is indispensable to a foreign trader, to identify production centres and markets. This aspect of study has received some consideration among the scholars in the recent decades due to the identification of new archaeological materials obtained from the Mediterranean, Red Sea and Southeast Asian countries. They provide tangible evidence to the active participation of Indian, especially Tamil merchants in the maritime trade.

The evidence for identifying the native traders of the Tamil country in the maritime trade is very scanty. Though, very little direct evidence could be traced, the literary evidence from the Tamil country, namely the Sangam anthology, could be rightly interpreted to suggest activities of native traders. In this regard, we may present the evidence of native ship building activity, which was developed out of dire necessity to venture in to the deep seas as an important act of native merchants. Native ships suitable for oceanic travel were known and ship masters and voyages were referred to in the local literature. In one significant reference, the Chola king, Karikāl Va/ava, is referred to as "a grand successor of a king who was well versed with the winds for sailing ships in the deep seas".²⁵ This is obviously a reference to navigating ships by an assessment of

monsoon winds (*vaḷi thoḷil*). It is interesting that the passage very clearly mentions an ocean (*muṇṇīr*) going vessel, namely *nāvāy* and its navigation in the high seas. Though, we have no further evidence to identify the ancestor of the Chola king, *Karikāla*, who understood the technique of navigation through monsoon winds, we may presume from the passage that sailing voyages utilizing the monsoon winds was a common practice among the Tamil mariners during the early first century B.C. The use of monsoons could have been known by the native traders to move with their goods to other regions on the eastern and western seas. This could clearly establish the participation of native traders.

There are other references in the Tamil anthology which speak about the navy and battles fought on the high seas. One of the Chera kings had a vast army, which can drove enemies into deep seas.²⁶ In another reference, the Chera king, *Chēralāta* was said to have possessed big navy and defeated his adversary in the sea. In another place the Chera king was said to have stopped the movement of foreign ships in his region.²⁷ The above references clearly suggest that the Tamils in the Sangam period had enough naval power to protect the country. Though, the primary function of the navy was coastal safety, its maintenance could be interpreted as a support to native maritime trade with a safe voyage to their ships and commodities in the high seas as well as coastal trading.

Some archaeological materials excavated from the ancient ports of the Red sea confirm the presence of Tamil merchants in those countries as early as the beginning centuries of Christian era. In this connection the papyrus document in the Vienna Museum²⁸ could throw some significant light on the involvement of south Indian

native merchants in the maritime trade. The document was written in Greek and dated to the mid second century A.D. It records the bill of lading contract between a merchant at Muziris, an important ancient port situated on the west coast of Kerala, and his counterpart at Alexandria. The business contract covers the period of shipment from Muziris until the arrival of the cargo at Alexandria. It mentions the specific type of cargo as Gangetic nard, ivory and bales of cloth form Muciri. The document further specifies the quantity, the value of cargo, and as well as the 25 percent tax levied by Roman customs officials. Since some parts of the document are damaged, some important aspects of the trade dealings could not be understood. Though the nativity of the persons involved in the trade transaction could not be clearly made out, it is reasonably surmised that none of them were a native of south India, as their names as understood by the editors of the document reflect no south Indian content. However, it is well understood that the merchant from Muciri was a merchant or an agent of a trader resident at Muciri. Though this document is not useful to understand the relationship of the native merchants, it is still useful that a foreign resident probably functioned at Muciri as a trade agent who probably looked after the procurement and shipping of the goods. These goods especially, the ivory and textiles were products of local merchandise, purchased and shipped to Alexandria for further transportation to other places. Though there is some difficulty to identify Muziris, the famous port city, also mentioned in the Roman literature, recent excavations on the Kerala coast have provided ample evidence to its identification with a place, *Paṭṭaṇam*, situated near *Koḍuṅgallūr* on the west coast of Kerala.

Unlike the above evidence, the several potsherds²⁹ discovered from the excavation of ancient ports on the Red Sea, certainly

provide tangible evidence for the presence of native Indian traders, especially from the Tamil country, in the first century A.D. Excavations at Quseir el Qadim (1997), an ancient port situated on the Red Sea coast of Egypt brought to light broken potsherds with Tamil Brahmi inscriptions. They could be dated to 1st century A.D. One of the inscriptions on the potsherd (Fig. 1) has been read as 'cātan' and the other (Fig. 2) was read as 'kaṇaṇ'.³⁰ These two inscriptions refer to the names of two individuals and the name 'cātan' was an ancient name of a merchant. These names are also found on the several pieces of pottery with Tamil Brahmi inscriptions belonging to the 1st century A.D. Therefore, these names could be rightly considered as the names of Tamil traders who visited the port during the first century A.D.

In another potsherd (Fig. 3) from the same site, the inscription has been rendered by Iravatham Mahadevan³¹ as paṇai ori and suggested that it was a pot suspended in a rope net. The same inscription has been written twice on the piece of pottery and dated to the first century B.C. According to him, the Tamil word *uri* which means a rope net used for suspending pots has been rendered as ori in the inscription. Roberta Tomber, who studied the artefact has identified the vessel as a storage jar made in India. Though the meaning is somewhat convincing, still, one would expect that the inscription refers to a name of an individual or a merchant, keeping in line with the other pot sherd inscriptions noted above. The inscription could refer to a name of a trader whose full name was Paṇai Ori, since Paṇaiyōṇ and Ōri are considered as personal names in the Sangam period.

Bernike is another ancient port on the Red Sea coast of Egypt, where a fragment of pottery of an amphora was found with Tamil

Brahmi inscription. The piece of pottery is dated to A.D.60-70. The inscription (Fig. 4) on it has been read as koṛapūmāṇ by Iravatham Mahadevan.³² He has explained it as a personal name of Koṛraṇ(ṇ), a chieftain. His reading and interpretation to the name has evoked some sharp comments among the scholars. Even if one disagrees with the reading of the name, it could be rightly considered that the name could refer to a merchant who had personally visited the Egyptian port. Koṛapūmāṇ (or with other renderings of the name), could be considered as a full name of a Tamil trader. The personal names found on these pieces of pottery, clearly speak about the presence of Tamil merchants in the Red Sea ports. From these names one could not satisfactorily locate their place of origin except that they all belong to the Tamil region.

The pieces of pottery presented above were undoubtedly the products of Tamil country and produced during the first century B.C. and the beginning century of the Christian era. The fact that these artefacts were unearthed from clear stratified levels in scientific excavations, undoubtedly suggests the movement of Tamil traders and also mariners to these distant places. The personal names found on these pieces of pottery, clearly speak about the presence of Tamil traders in the Red Sea ports. From these names one could not satisfactorily locate their place of origin except that they all belong to the Tamil region. It is very difficult to trace aspects of cultural diffusion from the meager evidence. However future studies may bring more information on this aspect.

The presence of traders of Tamil origin in Southeast Asian countries could be noticed at least from the early centuries of the Christian era. Though, sufficient information is not forthcoming from the Tamil Sangam

anthology, the recent discoveries from the last two decades could suggest the activities of native merchants. *Pattinappalai*, one of the works of the Sangam anthology and datable to the early centuries of the Christian era, mentions that goods from a country called *Kālagam* (*kālagattākkam*) were traded in the Tamil country.³³ The country mentioned as 'Kālagam', is generally identified with Kedha in Malaysia. From the terminology used in the literature one has some difficulty in ascertaining the nature of merchandize brought from that country. Further, the sources are not clear enough to explain the nature of trade existed between the two countries and traders involved in the mercantile transactions, but some inference regarding the participation of native Indian merchants could be made out.

More than a decade earlier, scholars who worked on the trade relations with southeast Asia in the early centuries of the Christian era, have some difficulty in understanding the participation of Indian traders in Southeast Asia. This situation has changed a little with the archaeological finds collected mainly from the excavations and explorations done by the government and private agencies. The earliest archaeological evidence to the presence of Tamil traders in southeast Asia comes from Khuan Luk Pat, an ancient port of Thailand. The port, situated about 5 kms., interior on the banks of a small stream called Klong Thom, which flows into the Andaman Sea on the west yielded ample materials made from south India, especially from the Tamil country. These artefacts were discovered from a small mound, locally known as bead mound and displayed in the local museum. The earliest of the artefacts was dated satisfactorily to the first century B.C. The mound also yielded south Indian artefacts belonging to a broad time frame spreading up to the 6th century A.D.

Among the important artefacts collected from the site was a small piece of touchstone, (Fig. 5) with two lines of inscription on it. It was engraved in Tamil Brahmi script which has been read as follows: perum pataṇ kal. The small touchstone, measuring about 8 x 4 cms. and used for testing the quality of gold, was also a product of the Tamil country. Considering the paleography of the inscription, the touch stone could be assigned to the early centuries of the Christian era (1st century A.D.). The first part of the short inscription namely, perum pataṇ could refer to a person who was a prosperous gold merchant from the Tamil country.³⁴ The second part of the personal name, namely pataṇ, could also suggest some association with goldsmith's family. The gold workers and jewelers are generally called by the name pattar/pattaṇ. Pataṇ could be considered as the short form of pattaṇ.³⁵ In that case the name Perumpataṇ could mean 'the great pataṇ' (=the great goldsmith). Such small stones for testing the fineness of gold can be seen in Tamil Nadu among the gold smiths and merchants. Therefore, without hesitation we may suggest that the person, Perumpataṇ was a gold merchant or a smith who was most probably the owner of the touchstone. There is no doubt with regard to its Tamil origin as the characters resemble the Tamil-Brahmi characters of the early inscriptions found on the caverns in the Tamil country as well as inscriptions on pottery. Therefore, it can be easily suggested that the stone was a product of the Tamil country.

Few more Tamil Brahmi inscriptions on potsherds were discovered in recent years. One of the sherds with Tamil Brahmi inscription (fig.6) was discovered by a team of Thai and French archaeologists, at a place called Phu Khao Thong.³⁶ The pottery

and the inscription has been dated to the 2nd century A.D. The pottery was broken on both the ends and therefore the full name of the merchant could not be ascertained. The remaining portion of the broken piece of pottery has three letters, which has been read as "tuṛavō". The letter "ṛa" is in the Tamil Brahmi form. Iravatham Mahadevan has suggested that the name could refer to a monk. Though the reading and interpretation of the inscription are disputed by some scholars, the name "tuṛavō" could possibly refer to a merchant or trader, who must be a native of the Tamil country.

Among the other artefacts of Tamil origin of the early centuries of the Christian era was a square copper coin (fig.7) measuring about less than 2 cms.³⁷ The obverse of the coin has an image of a standing tiger, facing left, whose front right leg is lifted up and the tail upraised and twisted in an 'S' like curve. The reverse devices are not well preserved, but could be recognized as the figure of a horse drawn chariot to the left with an elephant following it. The coin has no legend on it. Without much difficulty we can attribute the coin to the Sangam Chola dynasty on the basis of the tiger emblem found on the reverse. The Chola royal crest, i.e., the tiger, is very similar to the one found on other Sangam Chola coins found in the Tamil country.³⁸

The above artefacts from Thailand clearly inform us the establishment of trade contacts by the Tamil merchants as early as the beginning centuries of the Christian era. From the discovery of the touchstone with the Tamil Brahmi inscription we may presume that gold merchants from the Tamil country were present in Thailand to trade in gold. The Sangam anthology as well as inscriptions of the early Christian era provided sufficient evidence with regard to gold merchants

and jewelers. Gold jewellery³⁹ and vessels as well as gold coins were used by the Sangam people. Gold was also a medium of exchange in the trade transactions during the Sangam age. The Tamil Brahmi inscription from Pugalur mentions the grant of an adhistanam by a gold merchant (ponvanigan) from Karuvur⁴⁰ (Tiruchirappalli district). In Madurai, the famous capital city of the Pandyas, the gold jewelers and gold testers (ponṇurai kāṇmar)⁴¹ have functioned in the market place. Therefore, we may suggest that gold working was an important profession during the Sangam period and most probably they had transactions with the countries of southeast Asia. These merchants, probably for purposes of trade and exchange could have carried some coins of the Tamil country. Therefore, the touchstone and the coin found at Khuan Luk Pat in Thailand were personal possessions of native Tamil merchants. From the above we may suggest that native traders from the Tamil country were present in Thailand as well as in other areas in Southeast Asia as early as the early centuries (1-3rd cent. A.D.) of Christian era.

The geographical location of Srilanka has provided the necessary means to establish trade and cultural ties with south India, more particularly Tamil country even before the dawn of early historical period. Cultural linkages and inter coastal trade with Srilanka could be traced in the Megalithic phase. During the early historical phase, the trading activities with Tamil country was very prosperous and we notice sufficient materials to understand the maritime trade relations.

The presence of merchants from the Tamil country in Srilanka could be traced to the pre-Christian era with reference to a few early inscriptions and numerous coins of Tamil kingdoms. The Tamil Brahmi inscriptions,

particularly coming from Anuradhapura suggest the movement Tamil traders to Srilanka during the early centuries of the Christian era. Two inscriptions from Periya Puḷiyaṅguḷam and one inscription from Kuḍuvil mention grants made by merchants from Damēda.⁴² The name Damēda has been understood as Prakrit rendering of Tamil and therefore the merchants could be identified with Tamil country.

Another set of evidence in support of the presence of Tamil merchants is the numerous coins of the Tamil country discovered in the island. These coins were mostly uninscribed and bore no names of kings or issuer. Discoveries of coins of Sangam Pandya kings were reported and studied by several scholars in Srilanka and also in India.⁴³ P.E.Pieris and K.N.V.Seyon have reported the discoveries of coins of Sangam kings.⁴⁴ In recent years, Iravatham Mahadevan, Pushparatnam, and Osmand Boppearachi reported some new discoveries.⁴⁵ In some coins the punch marked symbols like the three-arched hill, tree in railing and tank and fishes are found. In some of the Elephant type coins, the auspicious symbols are found above the animal. On the reverse of these coins were found the stylized fish symbol. A few coins have the devices of elephant and three arched hills, below which is depicted the unique symbol of a temple with pillars, which is identified as a chaitya. Similar coins were reported from the British Museum, London and also from Madurai in Tamil nadu.⁴⁶ The Audumbaras also used the temple like structure in their coins.⁴⁷ The temple like structure is represented in one of the inscriptions dated to 3-4 B.C., from Sohgaura (Gorakhpur District, Uttar Pradesh).⁴⁸ However, these coins bear the stylish fish symbol, the insignia of the Sangam Pandya rulers, and on this count it

could be suggested that they were minted in the Tamil country by the Pandya rulers and circulated in Srilanka in trade transactions. Among these symbols the symbol described as a temple with pillars (chaitya) has been found in other coins found in Srilanka and also in the Tamil country.⁴⁹

R.Krishnamurthy and Senarath Wickramasinghe reported details of Sangam coins deposited in the Colombo Museum, Srilanka in 2005.⁵⁰ About forty-one copper coins of the Pandyas were discovered from Jaffna, Kantarōḍai, Vaḷḷipuram, Māntai and Anuradhapura in Srilanka (fig.8). They bore on the obverse the symbol of a horse or elephant or bull with the Tamil Brahmi legend peruvaḷuti. In some coins the punch marked symbols like the three-arched hill, tree in railing and tank and fishes are found. Some of the elephant type coins has auspicious symbols depicted above the animal. On the reverse of these coins were found the stylized fish symbol suggesting that it was an issue of the Sangam Pandya rulers. All these could suggest that the coins were minted in the Tamil country and was used in Srilanka especially for trade. Similar coins with the same devices are found in Tamil country and attributed as the issues of the Tamil kings. Since numerous coins were reported from several sites in Srilanka, they could have been used among the merchants for purchase of commodities.

In recent years some more coins belonging to the Tamil region were reported.⁵¹ They were lead coins mostly discovered from Akurugoda in southeastern Srilanka and were dated to the 2nd century B.C. Though, these coins were first believed to be of Srilanka in origin, later it was identified as issued by the Tamil merchant community. Four such coins with Tamil Brahmi legends were identified subsequently by Iravatham

Mahadevan⁵² (figs.9-12). The legends on these four coins read names, *utiraṅ*, *māla chata*, *kapati kaṭalaṅ*, and *tissa piṭṭaṅ*. They undoubtedly represent names of Tamil population, particularly names of Tamil merchants. Among these names, the name *Cātaṅ* is significant since it could be attributed as a personal name of Tamil merchant community of the early centuries of the Christian era and appear frequently in the early Tamil inscriptions and Tamil Sangam literature. The name also acquires significance, since it is also attributed to a mercantile caravan (*cāttu*) in the early historical period. The other significant name is *Kaṭalaṅ*, which is a title usually associated with the Pandya kings. However, the name could also be taken by a personal name of a naval merchant. Therefore, these names could refer to Tamil merchant community and these coins could have been products of the Tamil country.

Due to trade contacts and interaction with the local population some aspects of cultural diffusion happened. These aspects were well reflected in the local language in Srilanka. Many words of Tamil origin were rendered in to Prakrit in early inscriptions in Srilanka.. Terms like *nāvika*, *thōḍa*, and *paṭake*, are considered as Prakrit forms of Tamil names for sea going vessels, *nāvāy*, *thōṇi*, and *paṭaku* respectively. Further, the names and titles of Tamil people like *parumakaṅ*, *vēlaṅ* were rendered in Prakrit as *parumaka* and *vēla*.⁵³ These examples could suggest the presence of Tamil traders and mariners, during the 2-1 B.C. in Srilanka and probably induced cultural diffusion.

The cultural diffusion could be seen in other forms in the Tamil country also. Buddhism seems to have played an important role in the establishment of cultural

ties with south India and the Tamil country was visited by several Buddhist monks of Sri Lankan origin. This is supported by several inscriptions on pottery discovered from ancient sites like Arikamedu, Kanchipuram, and Alagankulam, in Tamil Nadu. Many Sri Lankan forms of Brahmi were introduced in the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions in the Tamil country.⁵⁴

Trading activities are visible during the post Sangam period. Among the works assigned to this period, two compositions namely *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai* provide some interesting information about merchants and their activities. The story of *Cilappatikāram* was narrated by *Chāttāṅ*, a merchant who was a dealer of grains (*kūla vāṇikaṅ*)⁵⁵ to *Ilaṅgō Aḍigaḷ*, who agreed to compose the work. This *Chāttāṅ* was the composer of *Maṇimēkalai*, another work related to *Silappatikāram*.⁵⁶ It is well known that *Kōvalaṅ*, the main character of *Cilappatikāram* was a famous merchant from *Pukār*, identified with the celebrated port city of *Kāvērippūmpaṭṭiṅgam* on the eastern shores of the Chola country.⁵⁷ While narrating the events of the previous birth of *Kōvalaṅ*, the city goddess narrated the story of one *Saṅgamaṅ*, who was a merchant from *Siṅgapuram*. According to the narration this merchant was wrongly identified as a spy and was killed by the king. *Arattāṅ Chetti* was another merchant mentioned in the work. In the same work, the several market places consisting of several shops doing their business in grains and cloth were mentioned elaborately.

Maṇimēkalai, also provides some information about the activities of merchants. It has been suggested that *Chāthuvaṅ*, a merchant after spending his wealth on women (*kaṇikai*), sailed by ocean going

vessel like *vaṅgam* to gain wealth. However, his ship was destroyed by waves in the sea and was later rescued by another merchant, Chandirātittaṅ.⁵⁸ Kambaḷach Cheṭṭi was another merchant mentioned in the literature, to whom Pīlivaḷai, the princess of Nāganāḍu entrusted her son to be handed over to the Chola king Veṅvērkiḷi. In the city of Vañji, several merchants professed their work by setting up shops and sold their goods. There were merchants selling meat, fish, salt, toddy, food items like piṭṭu and appam. Merchants dealing with semi-precious stones and jewelers had their own shops in the city. Other merchants engaged in the city sold aromatic substances, pottery, copper and bronze objects and gold ornaments and other articles.

The above materials, namely Tamil Brahmi inscriptions, coins, touchstone, and other material could suggest the presence of Tamil traders in the local as well as maritime trade. As said earlier the Tamil merchants must have carried ceramics for their personal use and in their commercial transactions they probably used coins minted by Sangam dynasties. However, the use of Tamil coins as a legal tender and its exchange value in those regions needs further supporting study. In the case of the touchstone, it is quite clear to attest the presence of goldsmith(s) and trading in gold objects in southeast Asia as early as the 1 century A.D. The most interesting aspect of this study is that traders and mariners from the Tamil country have travelled and performed trade with the countries both on the eastern and western sea boards and created space for cultural diffusion. Further studies on these aspects could throw some more light.

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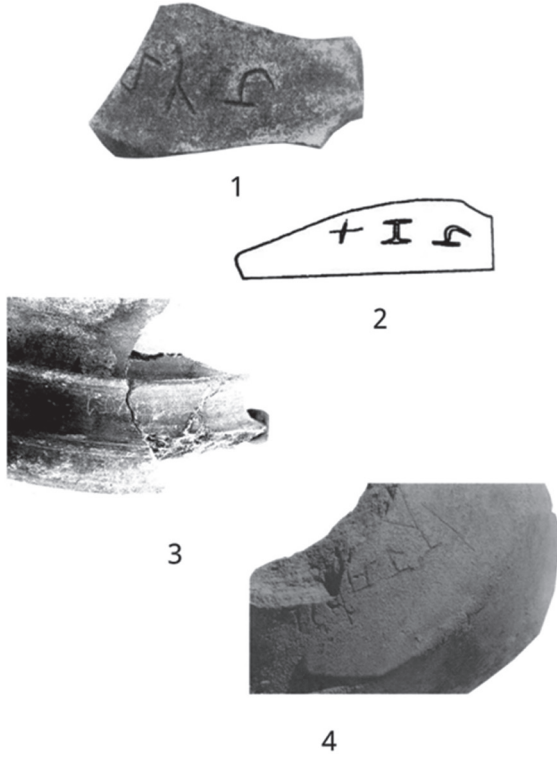
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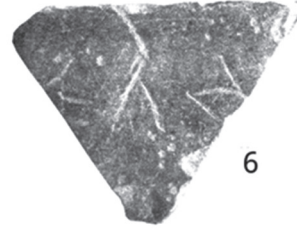
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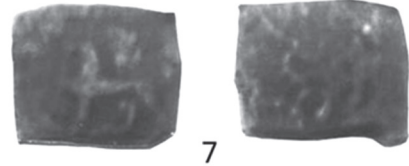
Pottery inscriptions from Red Sea ports : 1-3.
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Artefacts from the Tamil country found in southeast Asia

5.Touch stone from Khuan Luk Pat,
6.Pottery inscription from Phu Khao Thong,
7.Sangam Chola coin from Khuan Luk Pat (Thailand)

Coins from Sri Lanka :

8.Pandya Peruvuluti coin, 9.coin of Uthirar,
10.coin of Mala Catan, 11.coin of Kapati Katalan,
12.coin of Tisa Pittan

