

ABSTRACT OF PAPER ON

Sangam Literature as a source of evidence on India's trade with the Western World: Problems of methodology and interpretation.

(R.Champakalakshmi, Jawaharlal Nehru University)

One of the major categories of sources for the study of early historic Tamil society and economy is the corpus of Tamil literature known as the "Sangam" literature. It may even be claimed, with justification, that this remarkable corpus of poems is the only known literary source of evidence for early South Indian trade with the West Asian and Mediterranean regions and the Southeast Asian countries.

"Sangam" literature is not the product of a particular social or religious group nor was it sponsored as a court literature by a ruling elite. It was also not intended to be a record of the activities of any one group. Composed at various points of time over a long span of about 600 years and authored by people of various levels-princes, chieftains, peasants, merchants, potters, smiths, carpenters and brahmanas, Jains and Buddhists, the poems deal with disparate social groups. Yet, they admittedly provide a better insight into the life of the early Tamils than any other literature of the later periods of pre-modern India.

To use this corpus as a source of historical evidence, however, it is important to evolve clearer perspectives on the nature of its poetry, for it represents oral poetry of a heroic age. Being bardic literature in praise of heroes and patrons, its concern with various aspects of society and economy was incidental. Given to conventional, stylized and symbolic language, its pre-occupation with stock-phrases and stereo-typed expressions makes historical interpretation a hazardous exercise. The need for the use of Semiotics to interpret the signs and symbols of this heroic poetry has also been stressed in recent writings on early Tamil society and economy.

This apart, it defies all attempts at an acceptable chronology, only relative chronologies based on internal evidence being possible within the 600 years – 300 B.C. to A.D.300 – for which it serves as the source material. Furthermore, the systematic collection of these poems into anthologies, with invocatory verses and colophons, took place several centuries after their composition with the express object of attributing them to a Tamil Sangam of great antiquity and to provide them a legitimacy from the world view of the Puranic religions.

The limitations of such a corpus become all the more evident when serious attempts are made to analyse the data from the point of view of the developmental process of trade, its mechanism and organization and the emergence of trade networks in such early societies, especially as a result of contact and interaction. Pioneering works used the disparate references to trade, both internal and external, centres of exchange, items of trade and trading groups, as direct and collective evidence of a single period and structure. To them, trade was an isolated phenomenon, not necessarily to be discussed as a part of the socioeconomic processes. Much of their interpretation of the 'Sangam' poems was heavily dependent on the medieval commentaries themselves a product of a different social milieu.

The new approaches have adopted a more sophisticated methodology derived from anthropological and ethnographic studies for reconstructing what is generally understood to be a "tribal" society in the process of transformation. Yet, what needs to be emphasised is the fact that the evidence from the 'Sangam' works on trade is often impressionistic – and is quantitatively less significant than on other aspects of society and economy. Hence it has been found necessary to situate the references in specific contexts, geographic and ecological and seek corroborative evidence from other sources like classical accounts, epigraphic records, albeit limited and archaeological evidence, which for the Tamil region is not as illuminating as in the Deccan, to arrive at a more meaningful method of synthesizing the data on trade and its impact.

The major concern in this paper would hence be the problems of methodology and interpretation. The main focus will be on the following:

1. Internal chronology of the "Sangam" works for the study of trade and urbanism.
2. Geography and ecology – The Tinai (eco-zone) concept of the poems – for contextualising the data on internal exchange i.e. intertinai exchange and its links with long distance trade. The products of different eco-zones to be identified and their importance for inter-regional trade to be discussed. Exchange points, consumption points, ports of try and hinterlands, wherever possible to be identified.
3. Aspects and areas of trade for which direct evidence exists in the literature.
4. Areas for which much depends on other sources and the need for correlation of different categories of evidence.
5. With no direct and indisputable reference to the Romans and Roman trade, the term Yavana is taken as referring to Greeks, Romans and West Asians. Discussion will, therefore, be on Yavana, their settlements, their role as palace and city guards in the early chief doms.
6. Evidence on items of trade-identification of terminal and transit trade, luxury trade and its importance to early chiefdoms.
7. Evidence on trade routes-corroboration from numismatic, epigraphic and archaeological evidence.

R. Champakalakshmi