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Euro-Centric approach in understanding Indian History sans the evolution of Indian civilization, if not, Indian nation is not complete. Again the latter, is a European identity which began with the emergence of the rise of nation-states in Europe. Italian and German nationalism as well as countries which aspired for nationhood in Europe, later the process of decolonization has created this necessity of understanding newly emerged states under nation-state concept. However, oldest living civilizations defy this Euro-centric concept. Nevertheless, it is all the more essential to understand the parameters that constituted a composite cultural geographical division to function as a nation-state in the European sense of the term. Though it is not that simple to make any rapid conclusions, through historic process one can choose certain parameters which made this pan Indian identity a reality. Undoubtedly, even before the idea of nation or modern nation state emerged in India cross cultural assimilation and understanding of the geography, resources, markets and the polity took place in a silent but sure manner to create a cultural ethos which provided the foundation for the modern state in India breaking the physical and cultural barriers.

Breaking Barriers

South India was divided into certain well-marked territorial divisions, e.g. Kuntala. Andhra, Tondaimandalam, Chola, Pandya and Chera. The people of each division inclined to develop and cherish separate traditions and habits of their own. These local identity did not by any means prove

an obstacle to the formation of larger political units, as happened under the Chalukyas of Badami and Kalyani, the Rashtrakutas, the Cholas and Vijayanagar; and they played a great part in mitigating the evils which resulted from the break-up of the larger units. However, in the process of the formation of a pan Indian ideology stemmed largely out of trade contacts between north and the south. The progress of such interactions between north and the south is reflected in literature and legend. Until about 600 B.C. works composed in the North exhibit little knowledge of India south of Vindhyas, but acquaintance increased with the progress of the centuries.²

First, there is the mention of Cheras in the *Aitareya Aranyaka*. Similarly, The *Sutta Nipata* of the Buddhist canon records that a teacher Bavari left Kosala and settled in a village on the Godavari in Dakshanapatha.³

Katyayana, the grammarian of the 4th century B.C. who was probably a southerner and who supplemented the aphorisms of Panani to bring his grammatical system up to date, makes mention of the countries of the extreme south, Pandya, Chola and Chera. Similarly, Baudhayana, one of the earliest law givers, noted in his *Dharmasutra* five customs peculiar to the people of the south.

Thus, it is evident that starting somewhere about 500 B.C. the movement of the people of north India into the South proceeded more or less steadily and peacefully. Even the slightest

² Mahavir Singh, (2005) *Home Away from Home: Inland Movement of People in India*, Anamika Pub & Distributors, New Delhi, p. 102.

³ Nilakanta Sastri, K.A. (1955), *A History of South India*, Oxford University Press, Chennai, p. 62.

consideration shows that it is this large movement of the people of north into south that provides the historical basis for the Agastya legends which figure prominently in the epics and the *Puranas* as well as in Tamil literature.

However, there is no mention of Agastya either in the *Tolkappiyam* or in the preface to it by Panambaranar. The earliest reference to the *Agattiyam* occurs only in the 8th century A.D. The renowned Sanskrit epics the *Raamayana* and the *Mahaabhaarata* also speak about the Tamil country and in particular the importance of Madurai as the capital of the Pandya kings. Megasthenes, who came to India during the period of Chandragupta Maurya, refers to the Pandya country and its polity. The edicts of the famous Indian Emperor Asoka also mention that during his rule the Tamil kings in the far south of India enjoyed political independence.⁴ This has been further substantiated by the Hatigumpha Inscription of the 1st century AD, where there is reference to 118 years old triumvirate of Tamil Kings [Chera, Chola and Pandya]. Sangam Tamil kings had titles such as Immayavaramban [one who had boundary up to the Himalayas]⁵, Aryapadaikadantha Nedunchelian [who crossed barrier of the Aryan army]⁶

In the historic past, Sanskrit played the role of a communication language among the scholars, who lived in different parts of the Indian sub-continent. It is equally true in the case of Tamil scholars to think that theories and ideas found in Sanskrit were alien to Tamil.⁷

Commerce and Pan India Identity

There are concrete evidences in literary and inscriptional evidences that constant migration had taken place from north to south from the time of Mauryas. We know from the Asokan inscriptions of the third century B.C. that the great rival kingdoms of the Pandyas, Cheras and Cholas were already in existence in the South. It has been speculated that with the rise of the Chera and Chola kingdoms, the Pandyas, who had

previously been oriented primarily towards maritime trade, shifted their administrative headquarters inland to protect their territory.⁸

There is no means of forming a reliable estimate of the population at any time during this long period we are now reviewing; even the Cholas, although they kept a minute record of property in land, never thought of taking a census of the population. In the ports on the seaboard, and in the capitals of kingdoms, particularly in Vijayanagar, there were undoubtedly considerable numbers of foreigners, including Arabs, Jews, Persians, Chinese, people from Malaya and the eastern archipelago; and later the Portuguese and other Europeans. The presence of Parsis were also noticed around fourteenth Century by Friar Jordanus. Necessarily and obviously, however, the bulk of the population was always and everywhere Hindus organized in castes. There was some connection between caste and occupation, but this was by no means unalterable, and the pressure of new factors and situations was always bringing about changes, in spite of protests from conservatives and even occasional attempts on the part of the political authority to stop them.

There are considerable evidence in Sangam Literature for the earliest inland and overseas trade and commerce. It is also very interesting to note how the Tamils were aware of the north's geography and resources. The enormous wealth accumulated by the Nandas was well known to the ancient Tamils, and became proverbial. Mamulanar, one of the poets of the Sangam Age, puts these words into the mouth of a lovelorn lady: "What is it that has attracted my lover more than my charms and kept him away from me so long? Can it be the treasure accumulated in prosperous Pataliputra and hidden in waters of the Ganges by the great Nandas victorious in War?"⁹

The *Arthasastra* of Kautilya gives some information of value about the trade between the north and south in the age of the early Mauryan empire. Expressing views contrary to his teacher

⁴ Dikshitar, V.R.R., (1957), *Pre- Historic South India*, Madras, p.218.

⁵ Srinivasa Iyengar, P.T., (1929), *History of the Tamils from Earliest Times to A.D 100*, Madras, pp. 33-43.

⁷ Ekambaranathan, A. 'Jainism under the Early Pandyas', 14th SIHC Proceedings, p. 111.

⁸ Ibid

⁶ Nilakanta Sastri, op.cit., p. 76.

⁹ Nilakanta Sastri, K.A. (1998) *Age of the Nandas and Mauryas*, Motilal Banarsidass Publisher, New Delhi. p.253.i

(acharya) Kautilya says that “the Dakshinapatha abounds in conch-shells, diamonds, precious stones of other kinds, pearls, and articles of gold. Moreover, the southern trade route across Dakshinapatha traverses a territory rich in mines and valuable merchandise, is frequented by many [traders] and easy to travel by.”¹⁰ This passage almost brings before our eyes the large-scale opening –up of trade with the south which the foundations of Nanda and Mauryan empires brought about. Similarly, Megasthenes’s *Indica* refers to the pearls from Pandiya country and the social life in the Tamil country which could have been possible only through the information given by the traders.¹¹

Corporate Trading Communities

One of the more important but less understood areas of economic activity in Medieval South India is that of the corporate trading communities often called ‘guilds’. The term ‘guild’ immediately conjures up the image of an association of professionals with a well-defined structure, a carefully framed code of conduct or rules and membership governed by certain regulations and qualifications. It is hard to get indisputable evidence of such an organization from the South Indian records, although the term *Bananju dharma* is the nearest to a code of rules that existed and was adhered to by the itinerant merchant bodies. Hence, it is rather a matter of convenience that the term guild has been used to denote these merchant bodies; for there is hardly and similarly between them and the European merchant guilds or the *Hang* of China in Sung and Yuan times or the *Karimi* of Egypt.¹²

Merchants were generally organized in powerful guilds and corporations which often transcended political divisions and were therefore not much affected by the wars and revolutions going on about them. The most celebrated guilds from fairly early times were the *Manigramam* and the *Nanadesis* or *Ainnurruvar*.¹³ The records of the merchants of Kakatyas speak of the merchants of

the home country (*svedesabeharulu*) merchants of another country (*paradesabeharulu*), and merchants from different countries (*nanadesis*). The first were the local merchants organized into local guilds (*nagamams*). The second were like the first, but that they came from another country—perhaps combining pleasure with business while on a visit to their neighbours, or possibly acquiring religious merit by attending folk rituals and festivals in famous shrines. The last were the powerful guilds already mentioned which included merchants from all countries, with branches spread across different countries and perhaps playing a prominent part in the foreign trade.¹⁴

The name Manigramam is generally explained as a corruption of Vanik-gramam, ‘an association of merchants’, and this may well be correct. They are mentioned in many early South Indian inscriptions and in a Tamil inscription at *Takupa* (Siam) of the reign of Nandivarman III, Pallava. The fact that this merchant guild had established itself on the opposite coast of the Bay of Bengal with sufficient permanence for it to be put in charge of a Vishnu temple and a tank gives a clue to the existence of the organizational structure and functions of ancient south Indian trade and commerce.

The Ainnurruvar, often styled the Five Hundred *Svamis* of Ayyavolepura (Aihole), were the most celebrated of the medieval South Indian merchant guilds. Like the royalty of the age, they had a *prasasti* of their own which recounted their traditions and achievements. They were the protectors of the *vira-Bananjudharma*. e. the law of the noble merchants. *Bananju* being obviously derived from Sanskrit *Vanija*, merchant. This dharma was embodied in 500 *vira-sasanas*, edicts of heroes. They had the picture of a bull on their flag and were noted ‘throughout the world’ for their daring and enterprise. They claimed their descent from the lines of Vasudeva, Khandali and Mulabhada, and were followers of the creeds of Vishnu, Mahesvara and Jina. Among the countries

¹⁰ Kautilya, (2000), *The Arthashastra*, UK, Penguin.

¹¹ Chaudhuri, K. N. (1979), *Economy and Society: Essays in Indian Economic and Social History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1979 p. 326.

¹² M. Abraham, *A Medieval Merchant Guild of South India*, *Studies in History*, IV, no 1, 1982, p.1.

¹³ Kanakalatha Mukund, (1999), *The Trading World of the Tamil Merchant: Evolution of Merchant Capitalism in the Coromandel*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, p.76

¹⁴ Nilakandasastri, K.A., (2013), *A History of South India from Prehistoric Times to fall of Vijaynagar*, Fourth Edition, Oxford University Press, Chennai, p.300

they visited were Chera, Chola, Pandya, Maleya, Magadha, Kausala, Saurashtra, Dhanushtra, Kurumba, Kambhoja, Gaulla, Lata, Itarvvara, Parasa (Persia), and Nepala.¹⁵ They traversed land-routes and water-routes, penetrating all the countries of the six continents. They traded in elephants, bloodstock, sapphires, moonstones, pearls, rubies, diamonds, lapis lazuli, onyx, topaz, carbuncles, emeralds and other precious articles; cardamoms, cloves, bdellium, sandal, camphor, musk, saffron, malegaja and other spices and perfumes. They either sold either wholesale or hawked them about on their shoulders; they paid the *sunka* regularly and filled the royal treasury with gold and jewels, and strengthened the king's armoury; they bestowed gifts on pandits and sages versed in the four *samayas* and six *darsanas*. There were among them sixteen *settis* and of the eight *nads*, who used asses and buffalos as carriers and many classes of merchants and soldiers, viz : *gaveras, gatrigas, settis, settiguttas, ankakaras, biras, biravanijas, gandigas, gavundas and gavundavamis*. A fragmentary Tamil inscription from Sumatra (1088) and a temple of Vishnu which they erected at Pagan and which was still flourishing in the thirteenth century attest the truth of their claim to trade with foreign countries beyond the seas. In the Chola country they had their own settlements called *vira-pattanas* where, with the sanction of the local powers and the central government, they enjoyed special privileges in matters of trade. Historians have generally tended to ignore the effect of trade on the outlook of the people of those comparatively remote times. There is no doubt, for instance, that the continuous meeting and intermingling of people of diverse social backgrounds tended to create a liberal and cosmopolitan, as opposed to an insular, attitude to life.

The maritime trade of South India in the early centuries of the Christian era had been very active. In the Chinese annals of the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, all the products of Ceylon and India are mentioned along with those of Arabia, Africa, and Persia. The direct sea-route between India

and China, however, is known to have come into common use by the fifth century; Fa Hien travelled from Ceylon in a merchant ship which carried no fewer than two hundred Indian and Ceylonese merchants; and I-tsing mentions the names of thirty-seven of his contemporaries who took this route to India at different times. There were Brahmin temples and merchants in Canton in A.D. 750. It was only through such overseas trade that ultimately the Europeans arrived and the English East India Company, the French and the Portuguese changed the political and socio-economic equations of Southern India as well as India as a whole.

Early trade and commerce brought cultural unity in India, the modern European trade led to colonization and sowed the seeds of the rise of modern nation-state in India.

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