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Maritime Trade in Ancient Tamilakam: A Historical Study Based on Sangam Literature and Archaeological Evidence

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Abstract:

Maritime trade played a crucial role in shaping the economic, social, and cultural landscape of ancient Tamilakam. Located along the Coromandel and Malabar coasts, the Tamil region possessed natural harbours and access to major sea routes of the Indian Ocean, enabling sustained maritime interactions with distant regions. This paper examines the nature and extent of maritime trade in ancient Tamilakam by analysing literary evidence from Sangam literature alongside archaeological findings from coastal and inland trade centres. Sangam poems such as Pattinappalai, Akananuru, and Perumpanarrupadai provide vivid descriptions of bustling ports, merchant communities, commodities, and overseas contacts, reflecting a thriving maritime economy. These literary accounts are corroborated by archaeological discoveries at sites such as Arikamedu, Kaveripattinam, and Korkai, where Roman coins, amphorae, beads, and structural remains have been unearthed. The work explores the geographical advantages of Tamilakam, the organisation of maritime trade, the role of ports and merchants, and the nature of overseas trade networks connecting South India with the Roman world, West Asia, and Southeast Asia. It also analyses the socio-economic impact of maritime trade, including urban growth, monetisation, and cultural exchange. By integrating literary and material sources, the paper highlights Tamilakam's active participation in early transoceanic trade systems. The findings challenge the notion of ancient South India as a peripheral region and instead emphasise its role as a dynamic centre of commercial and cultural interaction in the Indian Ocean world.

Keywords: Maritime trade, Tamilakam, Sangam literature, Arikamedu, Indo-Roman trade

Introduction:

Ancient Tamilakam occupied a significant position in the history of Indian Ocean trade due to its strategic geographical location and access to maritime routes. The coastal stretch of South India, bordered by the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, facilitated contact with regions as distant as the Mediterranean, West Asia, and Southeast Asia. Maritime trade was not merely an economic activity

but a dynamic force that influenced social structures, urban development, and cultural interactions in the Tamil region.

The Sangam period, generally dated between the third century BCE and the third century CE, represents a formative phase in the political and economic history of Tamilakam. Sangam literature, composed by court poets and bards, offers valuable insights into contemporary society, economy, and trade practices. References to ships, ports, foreign merchants, and overseas goods indicate the importance of maritime commerce in sustaining regional prosperity. However, literary sources alone cannot provide a complete historical picture. Archaeological evidence from port sites and trade centres has therefore become crucial in validating and contextualising these textual references. (Singh, 2008) This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach by combining literary analysis of Sangam texts with archaeological data to reconstruct the maritime trade system of ancient Tamilakam. It seeks to examine the geographical setting that enabled maritime activity, the organisation of trade, the nature of commodities exchanged, and the broader socio-economic consequences of maritime interactions. By doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of South India's role in early global trade networks.

Geographical Setting and Maritime Environment of Tamilakam:

The physical geography of ancient Tamilakam was a major factor in the development of maritime trade. The region possessed a long coastline with numerous natural harbours, estuaries, and river mouths that facilitated maritime activity. Rivers such as the Kaveri, Vaigai, and Tamraparni connected the hinterland with coastal ports, enabling the movement of goods from interior production centres to overseas markets. (Casal, 1949)

The Coromandel Coast, stretching along the eastern side of Tamilakam, was particularly well suited for maritime trade. Seasonal monsoon winds made navigation across the Bay of Bengal predictable and relatively safe, allowing traders to maintain regular contacts with Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Similarly, access to the western coast through inland routes enabled connections with the Arabian Sea trade network. These favourable environmental conditions contributed to the emergence of major port towns such as Puhar (Kaveripattinam), Korkai, and Muziris.

Sangam literature frequently refers to coastal landscapes (neital tinai), portraying ports as vibrant spaces filled with merchants, sailors, and foreign traders. The description of wharves crowded with ships and warehouses stocked with goods reflects the economic vitality of these maritime centres. Archaeological excavations further confirm the significance of these ports by revealing evidence of urban planning, dockyards, and storage facilities. (Champakalakshmi, 1996)

The geographical integration of inland and coastal regions ensured that maritime trade was not an isolated activity but part of a broader economic system. Agricultural surplus, forest products, and artisanal goods from the hinterland were channelled through ports for overseas exchange. Thus, the

natural environment of Tamilakam provided both the resources and the infrastructure necessary for sustained maritime commerce. (Maloney, 1970)

In addition to its rivers and coastline, the ecological diversity of ancient Tamilakam also strengthened its maritime orientation. The region encompassed fertile river valleys, forested uplands, pearl-rich coastal waters, and mineral-bearing tracts, each contributing distinct commodities for trade. The abundance of pearls from the Gulf of Mannar, spices and aromatic woods from the hill regions, and fine textiles produced in agrarian settlements enhanced the commercial attractiveness of its ports. Moreover, the relative proximity of Tamilakam to Sri Lanka and the narrow sea passages toward Southeast Asia reduced travel distances, encouraging frequent voyages and cultural exchanges. This strategic location at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean world enabled Tamil merchants not only to export goods but also to absorb new ideas, technologies, and cultural influences. Consequently, geography did not merely facilitate economic exchange; it positioned Tamilakam as an active and enduring participant in transoceanic networks. (Rajan, 2015)

Maritime Trade in Sangam Literature:

Sangam literature constitutes one of the earliest and richest sources for understanding maritime trade in ancient South India. Poems composed during this period offer detailed and often poetic descriptions of economic life, including references to ships, merchants, ports, and foreign traders. Texts such as *Pattinappaalai* vividly describe the port city of Puhar as a bustling commercial hub where goods from distant lands were exchanged. (Champakalakshmi, 1996)

Merchants (*vanigar*) are portrayed as influential figures engaged in both inland and overseas trade. Sangam poems mention large ships laden with wealth arriving at Tamil ports, bringing luxury goods such as gold, wine, and horses, while departing with pepper, pearls, textiles, and precious stones. The presence of Yavana traders in these texts indicates contact with foreign communities, particularly those associated with the Greco-Roman world.

The organisation of maritime trade is also reflected in references to customs duties, warehouses, and royal patronage. Rulers are depicted as protectors of merchants and facilitators of trade, suggesting state involvement in regulating and encouraging commercial activity. Ports are described as cosmopolitan spaces where multiple languages were spoken and diverse cultural practices coexisted. (Nilakanta Shastri, 1955)

Importantly, Sangam literature does not romanticise trade alone but situates it within everyday life. The prosperity generated by maritime commerce is shown to support urban growth, patronage of poets, and the accumulation of wealth by ruling elites. While poetic in nature, these literary references provide valuable qualitative data that, when corroborated with archaeological evidence, allow historians to reconstruct the maritime economy of ancient Tamilakam with greater confidence.

Further insight emerges when Sangam works such as *Pattinappaalai*, *Maduraikanchi*, and

Akananuru are read alongside external accounts like the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. Together, these sources suggest that maritime trade was not sporadic but structurally embedded in the political and economic framework of the Tamil polities. The poems allude to regulated marketplaces, standardized measures, and secure harbours, indicating an organised commercial environment. They also hint at social mobility enabled by trade, as wealth from overseas exchange elevated certain merchant groups within urban society. When literary testimony is compared with Mediterranean records describing South Indian ports and commodities, a coherent picture of sustained transoceanic interaction emerges. Thus, Sangam literature functions not merely as poetic expression but as an important historical lens through which the scale, organisation, and social impact of early South Indian maritime commerce can be understood. (Subrahmanian, 1980)

Archaeological Evidence of Maritime Trade:

Archaeological discoveries have played a crucial role in substantiating the literary references to maritime trade found in Sangam literature. Excavations at several coastal and inland sites in Tamilakam have yielded material remains that confirm sustained commercial contact with overseas regions. Among these sites, Arikamedu near present-day Puducherry stands out as the most extensively studied port settlement linked to Indo-Roman trade. (Gurukkal, 2010)

Excavations at Arikamedu have uncovered a wide range of artefacts, including Roman amphorae, Arretine ware, glass beads, intaglios, and brick structures resembling Mediterranean construction techniques. These finds suggest the presence of foreign traders, possibly Romans, who either resided temporarily or maintained long-term trading establishments at the port. The stratigraphic evidence indicates that Arikamedu flourished between the first century BCE and the second century CE, corresponding closely with the period described in Sangam texts. (Begley, 1996)

Similarly, excavations at Kaveripattinam (Puhar), the capital port of the Cholas, have revealed evidence of urban planning, wharf structures, and industrial activity. The discovery of ring wells, brick platforms, and storage areas supports literary descriptions of the city as a major maritime hub. Korkai, associated with the pearl fisheries of the Pandya kingdom, has yielded evidence of shell-working and trade-related activity, reinforcing its importance in overseas commerce.

The discovery of Roman coins across Tamil Nadu further highlights the intensity of maritime exchange. Gold and silver coins bearing the images of Roman emperors such as Augustus and Tiberius have been found not only at port sites but also in inland regions, indicating the circulation of foreign currency within the local economy. These archaeological findings collectively validate the Sangam literary tradition and demonstrate that maritime trade in Tamilakam was both extensive and economically significant. (Selvakumar, 2011)

Overseas Trade Networks and Commodities:

Ancient Tamilakam was an integral part of vast overseas trade networks that connected South

India with the Mediterranean world, West Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sri Lanka. These networks were sustained by favourable monsoon winds, navigational knowledge, and the demand for luxury commodities in foreign markets. Tamil ports functioned as vital nodes in the Indian Ocean trading system, facilitating the exchange of goods, people, and ideas.

Pepper emerged as the most sought-after export commodity from South India, particularly in the Roman world, where it was valued as a luxury spice. In addition to pepper, Tamilakam exported pearls, gemstones, ivory, textiles, and aromatic substances. Sangam literature frequently mentions pearls from the Pandya kingdom, which were renowned for their quality and fetched high prices in overseas markets. Textiles produced in Tamilakam, including fine cotton cloth, were also in demand abroad. (Nilakanta Shastri,1955)

In return, Tamil ports received gold and silver, wine, glassware, coral, and horses. The inflow of precious metals, especially Roman gold, contributed significantly to the monetisation of the local economy. Archaeological evidence of amphorae used for transporting wine and olive oil further supports these literary references.

Beyond economic exchange, these trade networks facilitated cultural interaction. Foreign traders residing in Tamil ports influenced local material culture, as seen in the adoption of new artistic styles and technologies. At the same time, Tamil merchants ventured overseas, particularly towards Southeast Asia, where early South Indian cultural influences can be traced. Maritime trade thus functioned as a conduit for both economic prosperity and cultural exchange, integrating Tamilakam into a broader transoceanic world. (Mukund, 1999)

The structural strength of these overseas networks is further illustrated by the emergence of specialised port settlements and intermediary markets linking the interior to the coast. Ports such as Muziris, Korkai, and Puhar operated not merely as points of exchange but as organised commercial centres with storage facilities, customs collection, and merchant quarters. The discovery of Roman coin hoards in South India, often associated with emperors like Augustus and Tiberius, indicates sustained and structured commercial interaction rather than isolated contacts. These finds suggest that trade was conducted on a considerable scale, generating wealth that supported urban growth and political authority. Over time, the continuity of such exchanges strengthened Tamilakam's position within the Indian Ocean economy, enabling it to act as both a supplier of coveted commodities and an active participant in long-distance commercial diplomacy. (Gurukkal,2010)

Socio-Economic Impact of Maritime Trade:

The prosperity generated by maritime trade had far-reaching socio-economic consequences for ancient Tamilakam. One of the most visible impacts was the growth of urban centres along the coast. Port towns such as Puhar and Arikamedu developed into thriving urban settlements characterised by dense populations, specialised crafts, and commercial infrastructure. These towns attracted merchants,

artisans, sailors, and foreign traders, creating cosmopolitan environments.

Maritime trade also contributed to the emergence of powerful merchant communities. Sangam literature portrays merchants as wealthy and influential figures who enjoyed royal patronage and social prestige. The accumulation of wealth through trade enabled merchants to sponsor religious institutions, support poets, and participate actively in public life. This indicates a degree of social mobility facilitated by commerce.

The inflow of foreign currency and goods led to increased monetisation and market activity. Coins became more widely used in commercial transactions, and markets expanded beyond local exchange systems. Maritime trade also strengthened state revenue, as rulers imposed customs duties and taxes on imported and exported goods. This revenue supported administrative structures, military establishments, and cultural patronage. (Ray,2014)

Culturally, maritime trade fostered openness and interaction. Exposure to foreign cultures broadened artistic and technological horizons, while sustained contact with overseas regions contributed to the development of a more outward-looking society. Thus, maritime trade was not merely an economic activity but a transformative force that shaped the social and cultural fabric of ancient Tamilakam. (Narayanan, 1996)

Conclusion:

The study of maritime trade in ancient Tamilakam, based on Sangam literature and archaeological evidence, reveals the region's dynamic engagement with early global trade networks. Far from being an isolated or peripheral area, Tamilakam emerged as a significant centre of maritime commerce that connected South India with distant regions across the Indian Ocean.

Sangam literary sources provide vivid and detailed accounts of ports, merchants, commodities, and overseas contacts, while archaeological discoveries corroborate these narratives through material evidence. Together, these sources demonstrate the scale and sophistication of maritime trade during the Sangam period. The geographical advantages of the Tamil coast, combined with navigational knowledge and royal patronage, enabled sustained overseas interaction.

Maritime trade contributed significantly to economic prosperity, urbanisation, and social change. It strengthened merchant communities, enhanced state revenue, and facilitated cultural exchange. The integration of Tamilakam into transoceanic trade networks also underscores its role in shaping early patterns of globalisation. (Parker, 2008)

In conclusion, maritime trade was a foundational element in the historical development of ancient Tamilakam. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this paper highlights the importance of combining literary and archaeological sources to reconstruct the maritime past of South India. Such studies not only enrich our understanding of regional history but also contribute to broader debates on ancient economic and cultural connectivity.

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