Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

"Business is a combination of war and sport."

- André Maurois
CONCLUSION

Trade and commerce during the period of Sangam Age was in the safe hands of the three monarchs viz. Cera, Cola and Pantiya who for the most part of the five centuries, before and after the Christian era, maintained an equilibrium in the local and foreign business.

The sources available for determining the historical perspective of the Tamils’ trade activities were first and foremost the age-old Sangam literature consisting of the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Idylls, comprising of 2381 verses, of both Akam and Puram category. The notices of foreign travellers like Pliny, Ptolemy, Strabo and the unknown author of Periplus of the Erythraean Sea stretch a helping hand in confirming the messages drawn from the literary sources. Further, the archaeological excavations at various sites e.g. Pukär, Arikkamēdu, Uraiýür, Korkai, etc. and the rare findings thereon confirm the views arrived at regarding the past commercial activities. Historians and scholars such as K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, T.R.Sesha Iyengar, K.K.Pillay, V.Kanagasabai, N.S.Kandiah Pillai, V.R.Ramachandra Dikshitar, Mayilai Seeni Venkataswamy have written meaningful articles on the business affairs of ancient Tamils.

Tamilnadu some two thousand years ago was a land of plenty with rare commodities like pepper and various kinds of gems. Hence the Tamils knowing the weakness of the Westerners for such items began a flourishing trade which lasted for more than five centuries. Naturally the Tamils, a part of the Dravidian origin, who were supposed to be the original inhabitants of the
Lemuria or the Lost continent of Kumariṅkanṭam, and who were also the proud owners of the Indus Valley Civilization had the instinct of commercial activity in their mind.

Being adepts in sea-faring, the Tamils not satisfied with the internal and local trade visualised a bright avenue both in the West and the Far East which they exploited to the fullest possibility. Having all the three basic needs viz. food, dress, and dwelling in the villages and the towns, and in the five regions i.e. Kurinji, Mullai, Marutam, Neytal and Pālai, they were naturally a self-content and satisfied people. The variety of the food, the rare kinds of dresses and ornaments worn and the simple to palatial construction as their dwelling places only go to prove how much civilised and cultured they were. The customs, manners, the arts, the festivals, the entertainments and the pastimes, some of which were explained in the first chapter, do picture them as the connoisseurs of the best and the beautiful in all fields.

The area the Tamils were confined to was about 67,500 sq.km and the population was approximately less than a crore during the Sangam period. The geographical features of Tamilnadu were very much suited to their taste of living.

The ghats on the East and the West, the seas on the three sides, the north-east and south-west monsoons which bring copious rainfalls during seasons, the cool temperature on the hill places and the hot climate of the tropical region, the soft breeze (tenrai or zephyr) and the stormy winds (puyal or tempest) which frequent the interior and coastal regions and last but not
least the rivers which made the lands fertile to produce rice and grains in large quantities—all went in unison, hand in hand to enrich the glory and tradition of the Tamils. The hard working and ever toiling people of all vocations made the best use of prevailing conditions and made life pleasant and successful. This happiness in life was the springboard for them to venture for commercial activity and international trade. Having achieved what they wanted, many of the merchants became philosophical and poetical also.

It is to the credit of the Tamils to have developed certain towns as important centres of trade despite the handicap of modern machinery. Pāmpukār or Kāvirippāmpaṭṭinam was an emporium which may stand equal to Alexandria though not superior. The detailed description of the activities in Pukār by Tamil poets in Paṭṭinappālai and Cilappatikāram will make a casual reader wonder with awestruck.

In spite of not having natural harbours on the coasts, East and West, the Tamils were however able to carry on the trade with foreigners, the ships were at times anchored far away from the harbour, and the goods were loaded or unloaded with the help of boats. The business in the harbour was hectic as seen from Paṭṭinappālai. If Pukār was bustling with activity, Körkai on the west was not far behind. Along with Körkai, Tonći (Tyndis) and Muciri (Muziris) were important centres of trade on the West Coast. Though pirates called ‘kurumpar’ did much damage to their goods by way of burglary and destruction, killing or kidnapping, the business never faded out. One of the
Cera kings subdued the pirates at one stroke and made the business activities peaceful.

The interior cities like Maturai and Kāñci too were busy with trade of a different sort. They received all sorts of commodities from various places by road and made the business successful. The description of Maturai in Cilappatikāram and Maturaiikkāñci gives ample proof for this. A large number of streets, each one allotted to the sale of one commodity, is quite striking and the whole planning of town in the shape of a lotus flower is no doubt an astonishing one, at that distant time,

There were other centres of trade much smaller to Pukār and Maturai which too had and encouraging business. They include Poduke (Pondicherry), Sopatama (Eyirpaṭṭinam), Maruṅkurppaṭṭinam, Māmallapuram, Nākappattinam, Vañci and Uraiyūr.

The study of exports and imports during the period of maritime trade is quite absorbing. Even before the last Sangam Age, the Tamils used to send monkeys, peacocks, ivory, ginger and pearls to the West and the North, for which ant Bible and the Artha Sastra of Kautilya bear witness. The Ramayana and Mahabharata too record the frequent visits of Tamils to the Aryavarta i.e. North India.

On the export side, the most sought-after item was pepper. The Greeks and the Romans purchased bags of pepper for a heavy cost. They could not
resist the temptation of the hot taste of pepper which was far superior to the red chilly.

Next to pepper, the item which earned much of the foreign exchange by way of gold, was the pearl. The pearl-fishery was in full swing in the Pantiyan coast of Korkai which was superior in quality and was the much wanted luxury for the Greek and Roman ladies. Some of them used the pearls in ornaments to beautify their ears, neck and head. Some like Cleopatra used to put them in the wine glass and enjoyed the glitter at the time of drinking.

Travellers like Srabo and Ptolemy recorded the craze of these ladies for the pearls of Tamilnadu and said the treasuries of those countries were drained because of the import of pearls and other gems. In spite of the loud protest, the transaction did not cease for some centuries.

It is to be noted here that the Greeks were indebted to the Egyptians for the maritime trade, because from them, their predecessors in this field, they learnt the exquisiteness of the pearls and other items of Tamilnadu.

Ivory, silk clothes, tortoise shells and diamonds were some other articles exported to the West. In exchange, as no article worth mentioning was available in Greece and Rome, the Tamils got gold coins many times worth of the goods supplied.

Greeks who were sturdy and well-built later stayed in Tamilnadu and created a colony for themselves. They worked as guards and watchmen. Some
artisans from Greece worked in the glass industry and some showed their expertise in making furnitures.

China had a long history of trade contacts with Tamilnadu dating back to the 7th century B.C. The silk (Cīnappattu) was their product whose enchanting beauty attracted the ladies of this country. The trade with China was carried on mostly through the sea-route though there were land routes in the North East India.

The commercial activities of the Tamils in those days extended to Far East countries also. Java, Sumatra, Burma, Indo-China, Ceylon, and many other countries had trade relations with Tamilnadu. Articles like cātikkāy, paccaiikkarpūram, coral, cardamom, camphor and clove were imported from these countries. The incense timbers, akil and āram, were also imported and later they were sent to western countries. Here, the Tamils acted as middlemen in trade.

Tamils contact with North India has also to be mentioned. They sent gold, pearls, topaz, cloth, etc., to the North, especially to Magadha.

A large number of coins were found at many places in Tamilnadu confirming the Western and Chinese contacts with the Tamils. They were made of gold and silver and date back to Augustus Caesar. These were unearthed from many places e.g. Karur, Polācci, Maturai, Taṅcavūr and many places in the Coimbatore district.
The internal trade amongst the Tamils in the five regions, was mostly on the barter system. They sold salt, fish, flower, toddy etc and in exchange were paid with rice, pulses, and other essential things. Women too engaged in the local trade. Carts and donkey were used to carry item like salt and pepper.

Trade and commerce fetch the Government huge money by way of taxes. For the State, there were three kinds of income: one was land tax; the second was the customs tax; and the third, the spoils of war and the 'tirai' or the money from the subordinate kings.

Of all the taxes, the one which attracts our attention is the customs tax. For all the goods exported and imported the tax was collected at the harbour itself. The officials without even weighing collected the tax for the goods were of huge quantity. There were no coercion either from the king or from the officials and the merchants paid the taxes willingly for they knew quite well that the king would protect their interests with it.

No taxes were levied for simple articles like salt and fish. The king never resorted to heavy punishment for non-payment of taxes. If a king threatens the people and takes money by way of taxes from them he was considered a cruel one. Valluvar condemns such kings.

During the periods of natural calamity, like that of famines, kings were generous enough to consider the requests of the elders for the remission of taxes. The idea proposed by Artha Sastra of levying taxes on salt, fish, cosmetics or levying new taxes was totally neglected.
The taxes so collected from land, customs and other sources should be spent in right manner so that the people were benefited. The kings with the help of his advisers wisely spent them on irrigation, construction of dams and protecting the country form the enemies, etc.

It will be proper to quote Avvai S.Doraiswami Pillai who sums up the taxation policy of the Ancient Tamils in one of his lectures:

"National wealth of the country was freely allowed to grow and nationalisation of the sources of income was never dreamt of. As the monarchs were engaged in governing the civil life, the administration of justice and defence, people enjoyed freedom of speech, freedom of worship and freedom of movement; trade, commerce and industry were thriving independently in the hands of the public. But the kings were keenly watching the acquisition of wealth, instructions regulating the ways and means of earning wealth were issued, that no deviation from the paths of virtue took place. Unclaimed properties, tolls and customs duties, tributes paid by the subordinate and subdued kings and chieftains were added to the exchequer besides the regular land, mountain and forest revenues from the people. Every taxation was direct and there is no mention of any kind of indirect taxation."

The next important thing in commercial activities is transportation. For local use people carried their goods on the back of donkeys; sometimes they

used boats to cross rivers and canals with their goods. For bigger trade, ships of various sizes were made use of. Tamils were the first to use the seas for commerce and hence they had the best knowledge of ship-making which they used to their full advantage. There were lighthouses to help the sailors to identify the shores and reach them without difficulty at nights. They were called ‘kalahkarai vilakkam’ in Tamil and were at Eyirpaṭṭinam and Pūmpukär during those days.

Ethics and values are essential for the business community. Unwritten codes of conduct had to be followed by each one of the businessmen. Some of the unethical habits are adulteration, hoarding, selling sub-standard goods, supplying spurious articles which are injurious to health, fleecing the gullible people, low measurements and high margin of profit. Such kind unethical attitudes did not exist in the Sangam age. Pattinappālai and Tirukkural mention about the good conduct of the merchants. Therefore the traders were held in high esteem. They were also generous and helpful to the people whenever occasion demanded.

Wealth is not all; it is the good conduct, character and integrity that takes a man to the high pedestal. One should not aspire for ill-gotten money which will only result in one’s downfall. The expenditure should not exceed the income and if one spends within his limits his life will be happy.

Moral values are to be adhered strictly. If one loses money he loses all. Hence the merchants were careful while dealing with moral values.
Artha Sastra devises certain measures to dupe and extract money from the traders; but Valluvar and other Tamil scholars were totally against such evil methods.

Tamils who had a hoary tradition, and held moral values in high esteem were judicial in handling commercial activities. Without incurring anybody's wrath and without indulging any unlawful means, they were able to conduct business with every foreign country. Neither the Greeks nor the Romans, neither the Chinese nor the Far East people has any sort of complaint on Tamils regarding their character and integrity. The Tamils had roaring business on the East and West coasts, yet they were neither related nor greedy. They never grudged their failure and misfortune; They just worked hard and put much more effort to get once again to high position. Such was the conduct of the merchants in Sangam days.

In fine, we may say that the trade and commerce was at its zenith during the Sangam period, and enormous wealth went into the coffins of the king and the traders. The merchants were just and followed the best code of conduct. They never interfered in other's fields and concentrated on their own and became successful. They were generous and philosophical. They made money in a righteous way and lived happily with moral bent of mind.

The study of commercial activities in ancient Tamilnadu brings to the fore some areas which are yet to be explored in detail. The scope is so wide that the future scholars would certainly be interested to explore the following suggested areas:

2. Social Values and Human Factor in Trade and Commerce of the Sangam period.


5. Trade and Commerce in the Cola period between 900 – 1300 A.D.

6. The Commercial Centres of the Early Tamil Kingdoms.

7. The impact of religions on Commerce in Tamilnadu up to 13th Century.

The study of all the above topics in future may give us a complete history of the activities of the Tamils in Trade and Commerce.