

The Role of the Traders in Monetary Transactions in Ancient Sri Lanka (6th B.C.E. to 5th C.E)

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From the 6th to 3rd B.C.E.

The trade in Sri Lanka can mainly be seen as that of internal and external trade. The details of the internal trade and external trade can be obtained from the chronicles, Vinaya commentaries, inscriptions, coins, foreign accounts and other archaeological evidences. It is widely accepted that trade is considered as one of the indicators for the existence of the state. Trade and traders played an important role in the formation of inter and intra-regional networks and also served as a catalyst for the territorial expansions, during the early historic period (Rajan 2011: 181).

Proto-historic Sri Lanka

Proto-historic Sri Lanka was more closely linked with South India. In the excavations, conducted at Gedigē in Anurādhapura, Mahātitha, Pomparippu, Kantaroḍai and Ibbankatuwa, substantial quantities of potsherds were found which were parallel to the Iron Age and early historical wares of South India such as rouletted ware and Megalithic Black and Red ware (Bopearachchi 2008: 6). A comparative study carried out by K. Rajan and O. Bopearachchi on post firing graffiti marks unearthed at Koḍumaṇal and Ridiyagama revealed the close relation that existed between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka (Bopearachchi 2008: 7).

Several symbols both in simple or composite form are attested with the evidences unearthed at in Koḍumaṇal, Ridiyagama and Kālaṇiya (Bopearachchi 2008: 7). Various scholars have classified these symbols as porter's marks, owner's marks or as clan marks. S. Seneviratne has identified a few of these symbols as clan or family symbols (Seneviratne 1984: 237-306). K. Rajan identified the graffiti marks, attested in the megalithic burials at Koḍumaṇal as clan symbols, but he made it clear, based on statistical analyses, that graffiti found in the habitation had other meanings as well (Rajan 1997: 79-80; Bopearachchi 2008: 8). However, the occurrence of the identical individual or composite graffiti marks both in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu sites, enable us to presume without much of a risk that there was a continuous cultural and trade contacts between these two regions (Bopearachchi 2008: 7).

Ancient city of Anurādhapura

The Dīpavaṃsa, the first chronicle of Sri Lanka, written between the 4th and the 5th century C.E stated that the city of Tammennā, was established by prince Vijaya in the 6th century B.C.E. The Tambapaṇṇi was the first town in the Laṅkādīpa; where the king Vijaya resided and governed his kingdom (Dīpavaṃsa 1992. 9: 30, 31). The town of Tambapaṇṇi was built by Vijaya on the south the bank of the river (Dīpavaṃsa 1992. 9: 34).

Dīpavaṃsa uses the word “patubhedanañ”, it also says that the traders from four directions came to this place and they opened their parcels there (Dīpavaṃsa 1959. 9: 34-35). The meaning of this term can be found in the Mahā ParinibbānaSūtra Varṇanā in the Dīghanikāyaṭṭhakathā (Sumaṅgalavilāsini). It narrates the importance of the capital city for the commercial activities. As mentioned in it the place where the goods are tied and untied is called the “patubhedanañ”. As the particular goods are not available elsewhere, it could be found at the “patubhedanañ” (Dīghanikāyaṭṭhakathā (Sumaṅgalavilāsini) 2008: 476).

The Vijaya's minister Upatissa established Upatissanagara which had well organized markets (Dīpavaṃsa1992: 9: 36). It was near the bank of the river Gambīra, a tributary of the river Malwatu. As mentioned in the Thūpavaṃsa the giant Suranimala has purchased the fragrant from the market, situated near the city of Anurādhapura (Thūpavaṃsa1994: 151). These are a few yet important evidences of the different activities of traders, during the period prior to the introduction of Buddhism.

System of Barter and the Monetary Transactions

In account of the chronicles, the trade as a form of living during the Anurādhapura period had been considered as a reputed occupation. As per Fah-Hian there was a very wealthy community of merchants, living in attractive mansions inside the citadel of Anurādhapura. As recorded by Fah- Hian, it is believed that the Aryans who established the settlements had visited the Island in the caliber of traders. It has been accepted that the traders from across the world have always visited the Island. According to the Fah- Hian's record, the early inhabitants of the island, namely the "Yakkha" had left their goods on the sea shore with the prices, affixed with the goods, and the traders had come to the ashore where the relevant value was paid, prior the goods were bought (*Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun* 1993: 149). Fah-Hian's account does not categorically state as to how money was paid and how the value of the goods, were marked. Perhaps it might speak of an era where money was not yet known. Whilst evaluating the vinaya commentaries and chronicles, we can identify the barter system as well the monetary transactions in ancient Sri Lanka. The Buddhagōshathēro who came to Sri Lanka around the 5th century C.E. translated the SinhlaAtuwa into Pali. When explaining the word dhamma, has taken goats, as a symbol. This makes us to think that there was a system of barter. A person has exchanged two goats with a goat which had wool (*Vinayaṭṭhakathā (Samantapāsādikā)* 2009: 283). The story of Haṅkāla in the Seehalawattupparakaraṇa says that she gave her elder son as a worker to a rich family and in return received a cow. Having obtained the milk from that cow, she prepared the gruel for the saṅgha and sold the rest of the milk and bought the rice. (Seehalawattupparakaraṇa1958: 80). These information make us to think that there was a system of barter as well as the monetary transactions in ancient Sri Lanka, at least during early period.

Vanija

Several terms are used to denote a merchant: vanija (general trader); seṭṭhi (financier); and sārthavāha (caravan leader) (H. P. Ray 1994: 37). Where in India or Sri Lanka C. W. Nicholes, states that the word "Vanija" which is found in the Brāhmī inscriptions means of commerce in English and as such, it is understood that it has got a direct resemblance to the above said English word of "commerce". The word "vanija" is used in many of the Brāhmī inscriptions in Sri Lanka. As stated in the cave inscriptions, there were traders who called themselves vanija, and it is reported that they had donated the caves to the monks before the Common Era. These details enable us to think that the traders were in a wealthy position in the society and they were able to donate the caves, to the monks.

The Bambaragastalāva cave inscription in Pānama Pattu of the Ampāra district mentions a cave of the merchant chief Tissa (IC 1970. vol. i. no. 515: 40: "Parumaka vaṇijha Tiśahaleṇesaḡaśa"). The word "parumaka" is the old Sinhalese form of Sanskrit "pramukha", Pāli "pamukha" or "pāmokkha". It is most likely that these "parumakas" were the descendants of the Indo Aryan pioneers who established village settlements in various parts of the island, during the early days of its colonization by the immigrants from North India, and thus played a vital role in introducing settled agricultural life and the elements of Indo-Aryan culture, including the Sinhalese language to this Island (IC 1970: ixiv). Here the word "Tissa" can be taken as a title of a name of a local leader who used the same title.

The Maṅḡala cave inscription in the Yāla Game Sanctuary in MāgamPattu of the Hambantoṭa district, North East of Yāla mentions that the cave of the merchant Sumana given to the monks (IC 1970. vol. i. no. 585: 45: "Vaṇijha Śumanahaleṇesaḡaśa"). The Situlpavuva Dekundara Vāva cave inscription in MāgamPattu of the Hambantoṭa district; ten miles East of Kataragama speaks of the cave of Kasaka and of Siva, the merchants (IC 1970. vol. i. no. 660: 49: "KaśakaśacavanicaŚivaśaleṇe"). The VilbāVihāra cave inscription in the Kurunḡala district mentions that the cave of the merchant Tissa has been given to the Saṅgha (IC 1970. vol. i. no. 897: 70: "VaṇicaTiśahaleṇesaḡaśa"). The Haṅḡala cave inscription in the Anurādhapura district stipulates about a superintendent of trade (IC 1970. vol. i. no. 1128: 89: "SidhapaṇadakaCuḡaHaṇeyahaputaMajakaAbahaleṇe saga niyate"). As mentioned in the above inscription, the cave of MaṅjukaAbhaya, the son of CuḡaHaṇeya, the superintendent of trade has been dedicated to the Saṅgha.

The VāñijaSūtra in Suttasaṅgahaṭṭakathā (Paramatthajōtikā) the word “vāñija” has been described as trade, under which four type of vanijas are mentioned as they go as follows.

1. Sathavanijjā -The traders of weapons
2. Sattavanijjā -The traders of slaves
3. Mañsavanijjā -The traders of meat
4. Visa vanijjā -The traders of poisons

Further, it is advised not to engage with these kinds of trade (Su. Aṭṭ 2008: 64). The TinsakaVarṇṇā in Vinayaṭṭhakathā (Samantapāsādikā) says that “pattavanijja” mean the traders who trade the bowls in the village. “Amattikāi” means the vessels. “Amattikayō” means the person who sells the vessels. “Amattikāpaṇa” means the market where potteries are sold (Vin. Aṭṭ 2004: 171). The word “sattō” means the traders who go by caravans (Vina. Aṭṭ 2009: 286). The term “gahapati” can be gathered from Prakrit inscriptions, which have specifically associated with the merchant classes and prosperous landowning gentry who were the supporters of the Buddhist and the Jaina religions (Mahādēvan 2003: 124).

A good number of stories in the Rasavāhini gives account of traders who went abroad involved in trade activities. Although the Rasavāhini is written in the 12th century, it is based on facts from the older books (Paranavithana 1959: 235-240). According to the Rasavāhini a trader called “Nadndi” was engaged in foreign trade (Paranavithana, 1959: 219). The Rēvatī VimānaVarṇṇā in the Vimānavatthu Aṭṭhakathā (Paramattha Dīpanī) mentions that a trader called Nandi went on foreign trade and returned with the profit (VimānavatthuAṭṭhakathā2008: 270). The SērissakaVimānaVarṇṇā in the Vimānavatthu Aṭṭhakathā further mentions as to how the traders went on foreign trade (Vimānavatthu Aṭṭhakathā 2008: 399).

Guilds

As mentioned in the Brahmi inscriptions in Sri Lanka, there were well organized guilds of traders. These guilds have donated some caves to the monks. S. Paranavithana says the word “Puga” is treated as a collective noun to mean the members of the guild (EZ 1984. vol. vii. no. 35: 66). “Puga” can be a organization of the local traders. Nine Brahmi inscriptions mentioning the guild of traders have been identified. The Vālaellugoda cave inscription in the Ūva province mentions a cave, donated by the guild of traders (EZ 1984. vol. vii. no. 09: 55; IC 1970. vol. i. no.726: 55: “Pugiyanalēṣagaśa dine”).

There were some trade guilds which were established by their own different names before the 1st century C.E. In some cave inscriptions the name of the chief of the guild is also mentioned. According to the Avukana cave inscription in the Anurādhapura district a person called “Pussa”, is mentioned as the president of the guild (IC 1970. vol. i. no. 1152: 91). In the very same inscription, it is mentioned that the three categories of revenue have been given to the saṅgha. This evidence leads us to think that these revenues have been collected by the guild itself and donated to the saṅgha.

The Gaṇēkande Vihāra cave inscription in the Kuruṅgala district mentions a trade guild called “Sidaviya”. Here the name of the president and the vice president of the guild are also mentioned (IC 1970. vol. i. no. 1198: 96: “SidaviyapukanalēcatudisikasagasacaraTisejeṭeKabaraNakeanujete”). As mentioned in the foresaid inscription, journeyman “Tissa” became the president and the blacksmith “Nāga” became the vice president. Therefore, this is a good evidence for the guild of a combination of different kind of trades.

The Galgēkoṭuva cave inscription in the Ūva Province mentions the name of the chief of the trade guild “Paḍuguta” (EZ 1984. vol. vii. no. 35: 66: “Puganalēṣa Paḍugutejheṭe”). Karunākallu cave inscription in the Northern Central Province mentions a trade guild called “Dipikula” (EZ 1984. vol. vii. no.19: 60; IC 1970. vol. i. no. 320: 25: “Dipikulikanapukiyna [le]ṣagaśa”). The Gōnagala cave inscription mentions of another name of trade guild, called “Maḍukasaliya” (IC 1970. vol. i. no. 662: 50: “Maḍukaśaliyapugiyanalēṣagaśa”). The Veherakema inscription in the Hambantota district mentions of a corporation of the weavers. The striking evidence of this is, that there were different guilds for different employments as it is in the modern day (IC 1970. vol. i. no. 696a: 52). Therefore, it is evident that there were guilds for combination of different kinds of trade as well separate trade guilds.

The VērañjaKānda in the Vinayaṭṭhakathā (Samantapāsādikā) mentions people who sell grain together appointing two persons to measure the grain and to encash money. The person who comes to buy grain at first has to pay kahavaṇu and receive a token, after that he has to go to the person who measures grain (Vinayaṭṭhakathā (Samantapāsādikā) 2009: 162).

This shows that the trade guilds also have some agreements and it was well organized recalling some present day practises. The Brāhmī inscription in Māṅguḷam (no. 06) in South India mentions a merchant guild Veḷḷarainigamam (a guild (nigamam) of Veḷḷarai) in the 2nd B.C.E. (Mahadevan 2003: 323). E. Senart says the guilds also acted as banks (1905-6: 88).

Niyamatana (nigama)

It is believed that in ancient Sri Lanka, there existed a system which is similar to that of the present day banking system in order to deposit money and grain, and this particular financial institution is introduced as “Niyamatana”. The inscriptions of Tōnigala and Labuatabedigala clearly provide with further information, related to this particular practice. As these inscriptions are studied, it is understood that in this particular place of Niyamatana, not only the grain but also the money had been deposited, and with the interest of the said, a ceremony called “Ariyavansa” was conducted at the temples.

The Kāmasūtra Nirdēsa Varṇanā in Mahāniddēsaṭṭhakatā says that “nigama” means the place where we can see the markets (Mahāniddēsaṭṭhakatā) 2008:17). The words “nigama” and “nagara” have come into being from the word “gāma” (Vinayaṭṭhakathā (Samantapāsādikā) 2009: 286). Numismatic data would suggest that power was held by some form of urban corporate body also referred to by the term “nigama” (Ray 1994: 20). The Two inscriptions at Māṅguḷam of South India (nos. 3&6, ca. 2nd century B.C.E.) refer to the merchant guild “nikama” (<Pkt. nigama) at veḷ-araī (Veḷḷarai), identified with the modern village of Veḷḷarippaṭṭi near Māṅguḷam (I. Mahadevan 2003: 141). A pottery inscription from Koḍumaṇal, known as a place of manufacture of gems and steel, reads “nikā ma” (nikama) which indicate that merchant guilds were established at several industrial and trade centers in the ancient Tamil country (Mahādēvan 2003: 141). S. Paranavitāna has dated the Tōnigala rock inscription to the third year of Śrīmegahavarṇa (303-331 C.E.). The word Tōṇi means ‘a boat’ or ‘a trough’; and the name is given to this rock on account of some boat-shaped water-holes which are to be seen there. As such water-holes are very common on rocks in the dry regions of Sri Lanka, the word Tōnigalas is frequently met with as a place name (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 172). The king Mēghavarṇa was the contemporary of the great Indian emperor Samudragupta and is best known in history as the monarch in whose reign the ‘Tooth Relic’ was brought to Sri Lanka.

The contents of the inscription afford us some information about the economic conditions in Sri Lanka during the fourth century. It records that a certain minister deposited some quantities of grain and beans C.E. with a guild in the northern quarter of the city with the stipulation that the capital should remain unspent and the interests should be utilized for providing meals to the monks of the Yahisapavata monastery during the vassa season of every year. The interest on the deposited quantity of grain is specially mentioned, and this works out at the rate of 50 per cent, in the case of paddy and 25 per cent, in the case of beans. The interest on paddy was to be collected at three different harvests of the year. The record also enumerates the different kinds of provisions that had to be supplied of the feeding of the monks; and as it was customary to supply the monks with the richest available food. We can learn from this record the nature of the menu of a well-to-do person in Sri Lanka during the fourth century. It is noteworthy that among the different dishes enumerated, fish or meat does not find a place (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 177). It mentions [lines 2-6] two hakaḍas (cartloads) and ten amaṇas of paddy, six amaṇas of udi and ten amaṇas of beans were deposited neither be spent nor decreased, by Devaya the son of Sivaya, a member of the Council of Ministers, residing at the village of Kaḍubala, with the assembly of the merchants’ guild at Kaḷahumana situated in the northern quarter of the city; and were granted for the purpose of conducting the holy vassa in the new monastery of Yahisapavaya (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 178: lines 2-6).

Foresaid, two hakaḍas and ten amaṇas of paddy, the interest at the principal harvest (piṭadaḍahasa), the interest at the secondary harvest and the interest at the intermediate harvest, twenty-five amaṇas of paddy. Of the foresaid six amaṇas of udi, the interest is one amaṇa and two pekaḍas of beans (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 178: Lines 6-10). Of the above mentioned deposit, the capital should be left unspent and from the interest received, the expenses for two and a half hakaḍas of boiled rice, atarakaja, dishes taken with atarakaja, curd, honey, sweets, sesame, butter(?), salt, green herbs, and turmeric should be given at the refectory of the monastery (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 178: lines 10-14). [Line 2] Niyamatana. Niyama is derived from Pāli nigama ‘a market town’ or ‘guild’. Cf. Sin. niyamdeṭu for P. nigamajēṭhaka and niyamgama for Pāli nigamaḡāma. Tana, of which tanahi is the locative singular, may be either derived from Skt. sthāna ‘place’ and used to indicate the locative case of the word to which it is suffixed, very much in the same way as iḍattil ‘in the place’ is used in Tamil, or it may represent Skt. āsthāna, ‘assembly’, the initial a being elided for the purposes of euphonic combination (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 181).

Piṭadaḥasa, akalahasa, made hasa (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 181: Lines 7-8) in these three words, hasa stands for Pāli sassa (Skt. śasya) and means 'harvest' or 'crop'. From these terms, it becomes apparent that in ancient Sri Lanka there were three crops of paddy during the year, just as there are to-day in the villages of the North-Central Province where fields are irrigated by means of tanks and do not depend on the uncertain rainfall. The names of the three crops occurring in this inscription, two can be identified with their modern equivalents. Akala (from Skt. akāla, 'out of season') is the crop now known as yala.

The yala crop is sown at the time of the south west monsoon which, for these parts of Sri Lanka, brings only a small quantity of rain. The principal harvest of the year in all parts of Sri Lanka is now known as māha, a word which is a contraction of maha-hasa; and is sown during the north east monsoon. The name corresponding to this in the present inscription is piṭadaḥa. There is no doubt that the word stands for māha as its being first mentioned points to it as the principal harvest of the year. The third crop called because it intervenes between the two major harvests. It is the least important of the three; and in many a year when the tanks are not full, is altogether neglected. This crop is not known in many districts of Sri Lanka, including the greater part of the low country, where the cultivation of paddy depends entirely on the rainfall (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 185). Here the word Veḍha or veḍa, is derived from Skt. vṛddhi, (P.vaḍḍhi) and means 'interest' (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 185: Lines 7-8).

The Labuāṭabāṅdigala inscription situated about one and a half miles to the north east of Moravāva, a village in the KalpēKōraḷē of the North Central Province. (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 247). A study of its paleography makes it possible to ascribe it to the fifth century or thereabouts. The script shows a later stage of development than that of the Tōṅigala rock inscription of the third year of Śrimeghavarṇṇa (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 248). The contents tell us that a certain individual named Sirinakayi deposited one hundred kahāpaṇas, the interest accruing from which was to be given to the monks of the Devagiri monastery for defraying the expenses connected with the vassa festival. DevagiriVihāra was evidently the name of the monastery which existed on this rock during ancient times (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 250).

Another inscription found in the Labuāṭabāṅdigala belonged to the same period tell us that a person named NiṭalaviṭiyaSivayi, son of RaṭiyaSumanaya, deposited twenty kahāpaṇas for the benefit of the Devagirivihāra for the purpose of conducting the sacred vassa festival (EZ 1933. vol. iii: 252).

Categorization of Wealthy People

The Vinaya commentaries in Sri Lanka Sheds light on the categorization of Wealthy people in the 5th C.E. The MahāParinibbānaSūtraVarṇṇā in the Dīghanikāyaṭṭhakatha (Sumaṅgalavilāsini) gives the meaning of the words KśstriyaMahāsāla, Brāhmaṇa Mahāsāla and Gruhapati Mahāsāla (Dīghanikāyaṭṭhakatha2008: 521).

1. Kśstriya Mahāsāla – The person who has buried ten million or hundred millions of money and spent one cart of kahavaṇu daily and, getting the income of two carts of kahavaṇu daily.
2. Brāhmaṇa Mahāsāla – The person who has buried fifty million of money and spent one pot of kahavaṇu daily and getting the income of one cart of kahavaṇu daily.
3. Gruhapati Mahāsāla - The person who has buried fourty millions of money and spent eleven drōna of kahavaṇu daily and getting the income of a kumbha daily. Here it is difficult to identify what is drōna and kumbha.

Taxes

Taxes have collected in some ports. In an inscription belonging to either the 1st or the 2nd century C.E., found in the Godawāya mentions, a sea port called Godapavatha, situated near the river Walawē. As stated in this particular inscription, "Suka," a tax, collected in this port was donated for the maintenance of the Godapavatha Vihāraya (Paranavitana 1983 vol. ii: 101). As mentioned in this inscription the authority of collecting taxes must have vested to the monks in Godapavatha Vihāraya by the king.

Summary

In account of the Chronicles, the trade as a form of living during the Anurādhapura period had been considered as a reputed occupation. We can identify the barter system as well the monetary transactions in ancient Sri Lanka.

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