

---

**ECONOMIC AND TRADE PRACTICES IN ANCIENT INDIA: INSIGHTS FROM  
CILAPPATIKARAM**

---

**Ms. Shalini Clayton**

Assistant Professor, Department of Management Studies, Tolani College of Commerce (Autonomous) Andheri (E), Mumbai-93. Mobile Number: 8691904121

**ABSTRACT**

*Classical literary compositions frequently function as historical archives that illuminate the social organization, political authority, and economic activities of early societies. Classical texts often function not only as literary compositions but also as repositories of indigenous knowledge systems that reflect the cultural, ethical, and economic practices of the time. The Tamil epic Cilappatikaram, traditionally attributed to Ilango Adigal, presents a vivid account of the economic life of early South Indian society. The epic narrates the story of Kovalan and Kannagi while simultaneously offering detailed descriptions of commercial centers, trade activities, merchant communities, and maritime commerce.*

*This paper examines the economic and trade practices portrayed in Cilappatikaram and interprets them within the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems. Through textual analysis, the study explores the functioning of marketplaces, the role of merchant communities, and the significance of maritime trade in urban centers such as Kaveripattinam and Madurai. The research also highlights the ethical and governance principles embedded within economic activities as reflected in the narrative.*

*The findings suggest that the epic illustrates a sophisticated economic structure characterized by organized markets, international trade networks, and regulated commercial activities. Furthermore, the study identifies several principles from ancient trade practices—such as ethical commerce, community-based trade networks, and sustainable resource use—that remain relevant for contemporary economic systems. By examining Cilappatikaram as a source of indigenous knowledge, this paper demonstrates how literary texts can contribute to the reconstruction of economic history while also offering insights that can inform present-day economic thinking.*

**Keywords:** *Indian Knowledge Systems, Ancient Trade, Tamil Literature, Maritime Commerce, Economic History*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Ancient literary texts often serve as valuable historical sources that provide insights into the social, political, and economic life of early civilizations. In the Indian context, classical works frequently contain detailed references to trade practices, market systems, governance structures, and social institutions. These descriptions help scholars understand the economic organization and cultural values of early Indian societies.

One such important literary work is *Cilappatikaram*, a celebrated Tamil epic traditionally attributed to Ilango Adigal. The epic is regarded as one of the five great works of classical Tamil literature and is widely appreciated for its narrative depth and cultural significance. Although the text is primarily known for the story of Kovalan and Kannagi, it also provides rich descriptions of urban life, trade practices, and commercial activities in ancient South India.

Scholars generally place the composition of *Cilappatikaram* between the 2nd and 5th centuries CE, during the later phase of the Sangam period. This period was characterized by flourishing literary production, expanding trade networks, and the growth of urban centers in the Tamil region. Historical evidence suggests that South India maintained active maritime trade connections with regions such as Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean world. Port cities played a crucial role in facilitating these exchanges.

The narrative of the epic unfolds across three important political and economic centers associated with the ancient Tamil kingdoms. The story begins in the prosperous port city of Kaveripattinam, an important maritime hub of the Chola kingdom known for its bustling markets and international trade activities. It then moves to Madurai, the capital of the Pandya kingdom, which functioned as a major cultural and administrative center. The final phase of the narrative is associated with the Chera kingdom, where Kannagi's virtue is recognized and commemorated.

The timeline of *Cilappatikaram* therefore reflects the interconnected political and economic landscape of ancient Tamil society, where trade, governance, and social institutions were closely linked. Through its detailed

descriptions of marketplaces, merchant communities, maritime trade routes, and urban commercial life, the epic offers valuable insights into the economic structures of the time.

Understanding the economic insights contained in such texts not only helps reconstruct the economic history of early India but also reveals principles that may still hold relevance for contemporary society. By examining the depiction of trade networks, merchant communities, and market structures in *Cilappatikaram*, it becomes possible to appreciate the sophistication of economic life in ancient Tamil society.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the economic and trade practices depicted in *Cilappatikaram*, particularly with reference to markets, merchant communities, and maritime commerce.
2. To identify traditional economic principles embedded in the epic that can offer practical insights for contemporary economic and business practices.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

**George L. Hart (1975)** Study of classical Tamil literary traditions Highlighted the role of Tamil literature in preserving knowledge about governance, social structures, and cultural life during the Sangam period. Did not specifically analyze the economic practices described in *Silappatikaram* or interpret them within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems.

**Kenneth R. Hall (2011)** examined the evolution of **early Asian maritime trade networks**, with particular emphasis on the strategic role played by South Indian ports in facilitating international commerce. His work highlights how port cities along the Coromandel and Malabar coasts functioned as critical nodes linking the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia, China, and the Mediterranean world. Hall argues that these ports were not merely centers of trade but also hubs of cultural exchange, diplomacy, and political influence. He explores the movement of commodities such as spices, textiles, precious stones, and metals, which formed the backbone of long-distance trade. Furthermore, Hall discusses the role of merchant guilds, maritime technology, and political patronage in sustaining these networks.

**Kanakalatha Mukund (2012)** examined the role of merchant communities in South India and their contribution to regional and international trade networks. Her study highlights the organization and influence of merchant guilds that facilitated long-distance commerce and maintained commercial trust. Mukund explains how these communities operated through structured trade networks linking inland markets with coastal ports and foreign trading centers. The research also discusses institutional aspects such as credit systems, partnerships, and community-based regulation in trade activities. However, the study mainly relies on historical records and inscriptions.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach to analyze the economic and trade practices described in *Cilappatikaram*. The study primarily relies on textual analysis of the epic and secondary scholarly sources related to Tamil literature and ancient Indian economic history.

The research involves examining passages from the epic that describe market activities, merchant communities, and maritime trade. These descriptions are analyzed to identify patterns and structures that reflect organized economic systems.

Secondary sources, including scholarly works on Tamil literature and economic history, are also consulted to provide historical context and support the interpretation of the text. The study adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, combining insights from literature, history, and Indian Knowledge Systems.

## 5. ECONOMIC STRUCTURE IN CILAPPATIKARAM

The Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram* offers valuable insights into the economic structure of early historic Tamil society by portraying the functioning of urban commercial centers, occupational groups, and organized market systems. The narrative particularly highlights the economic life of the port city of Puhar (Kaveripattinam), which is depicted as a major commercial hub where diverse economic activities were systematically organized.

The text describes clearly differentiated commercial zones within the city, suggesting the existence of a structured urban market economy. Markets were arranged according to commodity specialization, where traders dealing in textiles, ornaments, grains, perfumes, and precious stones operated in separate trading quarters. Such spatial organization indicates a regulated system of exchange that facilitated efficient trade and minimized market congestion. Merchants engaged in both retail and long-distance trade, while itinerant traders brought

goods from inland regions as well as overseas markets. The presence of luxury commodities such as pearls, gold ornaments, and fine textiles also suggests the existence of a stratified consumption pattern among different social groups.

Another significant feature of the economic structure reflected in the epic is the prominence of merchant communities and guild-like commercial groups. These traders were not merely individual sellers but formed organized networks that coordinated the movement of goods across regions. The narrative implies that merchant groups maintained commercial linkages with other urban centers, thereby integrating local markets into broader regional trade systems. Such networks were essential for facilitating the circulation of commodities between production centers and port cities.

The economic structure depicted in the epic also highlights the important role of artisans and specialized occupational groups. Craftsmen involved in weaving, metalwork, jewellery making, and other skilled professions contributed to the production sector of the economy. These artisans were often concentrated in specific localities within the city, suggesting the existence of occupational clustering similar to craft quarters. Their products supplied both domestic markets and external trade, thereby linking production activities with commercial distribution networks.

In addition, the epic indicates the significance of port-based trade in sustaining the urban economy. The city of Puhar functioned as a maritime gateway through which goods moved between inland production zones and overseas markets. The continuous movement of merchants, ships, and commodities reflects a dynamic commercial environment supported by port infrastructure and trading institutions. This integration of inland production, urban markets, and maritime exchange illustrates a well-developed economic system in which trade played a central role in sustaining urban prosperity.

Overall, the economic structure portrayed in *Cilappatikaram* demonstrates that ancient Tamil society possessed a complex and organized commercial framework characterized by specialized markets, active merchant networks, skilled artisanal production, and vibrant port-based trade. These elements collectively reveal the sophistication of economic organization during the period and highlight the importance of literary sources in reconstructing indigenous economic practices within the broader context of early Indian economic history.

## 6. MARITIME TRADE AND INTERNATIONAL COMMERCE

Overseas commerce occupies a significant place in the economic narrative presented in the Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram*, particularly through the depiction of the port city of Puhar as a thriving centre of maritime exchange. Which presents the port city of Puhar (also known as Kaveripattinam) as a major centre of overseas commerce. The text portrays Puhar as a strategically located maritime hub where sea-borne trade connected the Tamil region with distant economic zones across the Indian Ocean. Through its detailed description of ships, merchants, and traded commodities, the epic illustrates the significance of maritime exchange in sustaining urban prosperity and regional economic growth.

The narrative refers to the regular arrival of merchant vessels at the port, indicating the existence of organized maritime trade routes. These ships transported a wide range of commodities, including luxury and high-value goods such as pearls, spices, and fine textiles. The circulation of such commodities suggests that the Tamil region participated actively in long-distance trade networks, supplying products that were in high demand in foreign markets. Pearls from the Tamil coast and finely woven textiles were particularly prized export commodities, demonstrating the region's specialization in high-quality production.

The epic also suggests the presence of foreign merchants who participated in commercial activities within the port city. The interaction between local traders and overseas merchants indicates that port cities like Puhar functioned as cosmopolitan commercial centres where different cultures and trading communities converged. Such commercial interaction not only facilitated the exchange of goods but also enabled the transmission of economic practices, market information, and trade-related knowledge across regions.

Another important aspect of maritime trade depicted in the epic is the integration between inland production centres and coastal ports. Goods produced by artisans and agricultural communities in the hinterland were transported to Puhar for export through maritime routes. This system highlights the existence of a coordinated supply chain linking production zones, urban marketplaces, and port-based trade. The port therefore functioned not merely as a point of exchange but as a crucial node within a wider economic network.

The prominence of maritime commerce in *Cilappatikaram* demonstrates that overseas trade played a vital role in the economic structure of early historic Tamil society. By facilitating the movement of high-value commodities and connecting regional markets with international trading systems, maritime trade significantly contributed to

the prosperity and commercial dynamism of the Tamil region. The descriptions contained in the epic thus provide important literary evidence for understanding

### **7. ROLE OF MERCHANT COMMUNITIES**

Merchant communities constitute a significant component of the economic system portrayed in the Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram*. The narrative highlights the social and economic prominence of trading groups through the character of Kovalan, who is introduced as the son of a wealthy merchant family in the port city of Puhar. His background reflects the elevated social status and economic influence enjoyed by merchant households in early historic Tamil society. The portrayal of such families in the epic suggests that commerce was not merely an economic activity but also a respected and prestigious occupation within the social hierarchy.

Another important feature reflected in the narrative is the economic capacity and organizational strength of merchant families. The wealth attributed to trading households indicates access to substantial financial resources, which enabled them to invest in commercial ventures, transport goods across regions, and sustain large-scale trading operations. This concentration of economic capital also suggests that merchant communities functioned as influential actors in the urban economy, capable of shaping market activities and maintaining commercial stability.

### **8. MARKET REGULATION AND GOVERNANCE**

The Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram* also provides important insights into the relationship between governance and economic regulation in early historic Tamil society. The narrative suggests that commercial activities operated within a framework of political authority that ensured order, accountability, and fairness in market transactions. Urban centres such as Madurai and Puhar are depicted not only as commercial hubs but also as administrative centres where governance mechanisms played a crucial role in maintaining economic stability.

The functioning of marketplaces in these cities implies the presence of regulatory oversight exercised by royal authorities and local administrators. Market operations, including trade exchanges and commercial dealings, were likely supervised to ensure standard practices and prevent disputes among merchants and consumers. Such administrative involvement suggests that economic life was embedded within an institutional framework where governance supported the orderly functioning of markets. The presence of officials responsible for maintaining civic order further indicates that trade and commerce were closely linked to urban administration.

The governance structure of Madurai, ruled by the Neduncheliyan, is particularly significant in illustrating the relationship between political authority and justice. The episode involving the wrongful execution of Kovalan demonstrates how judicial decisions could directly affect economic actors and the broader social order. Kovalan, a merchant by profession, becomes the victim of an unjust ruling after being falsely accused of theft, revealing the critical importance of accurate legal procedures in maintaining economic confidence and social stability.

The response of Kannagi, Kovalan's wife, further emphasizes the moral and ethical dimension of governance in the epic. By challenging the king's decision and proving Kovalan's innocence, Kannagi symbolically represents the principle that justice must prevail over arbitrary authority. Her confrontation with the ruler ultimately exposes the failure of governance and underscores the necessity of ethical accountability in political institutions.

### **9. ECONOMIC INSIGHTS WITHIN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS**

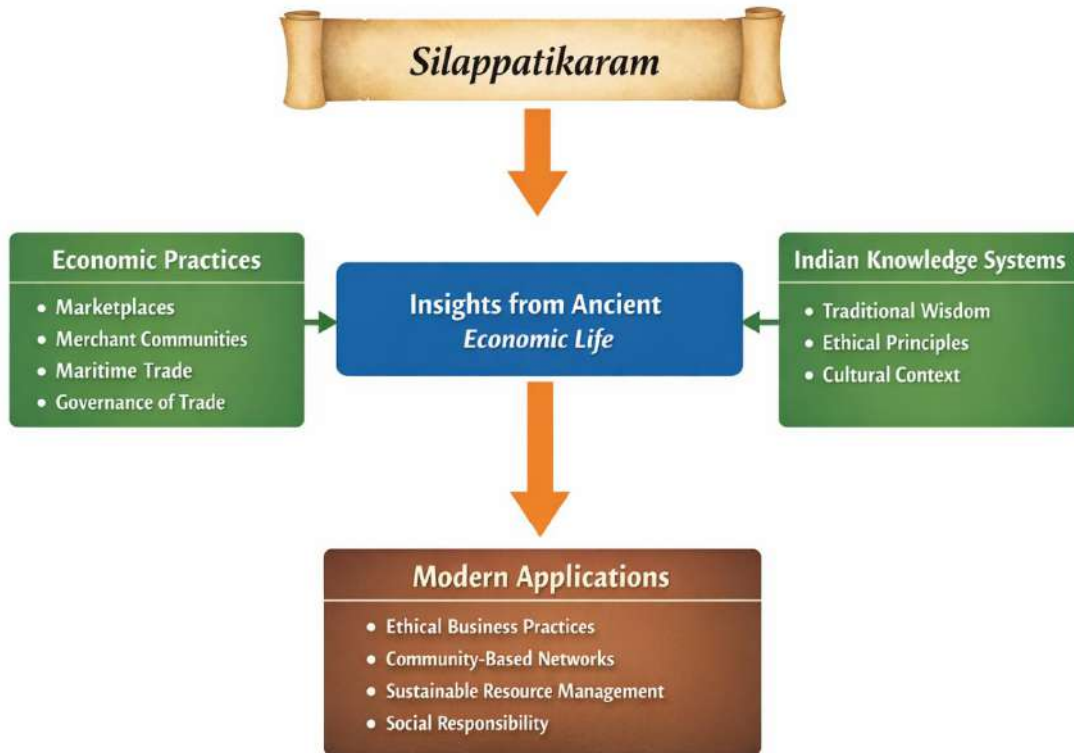
The economic ideas reflected in the Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram* can be interpreted within the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), which emphasizes the integration of economic activity with ethical values, social responsibility, and moral governance. Unlike modern economic models that often treat markets as purely transactional systems, classical Indian knowledge traditions conceptualized economic practices as part of a holistic socio-cultural order in which economic prosperity was closely linked to ethical conduct and social harmony.

In the narrative of *Cilappatikaram*, commercial activities are consistently embedded within a framework of social norms and moral expectations. Trade and commerce are portrayed not only as mechanisms of wealth generation but also as activities that require integrity, fairness, and accountability. Merchant communities are depicted as respected members of society whose economic roles contributed to urban prosperity and social stability. This representation reflects the indigenous economic philosophy in which wealth creation was considered legitimate when aligned with ethical principles and collective welfare.

Another important dimension of Indian Knowledge Systems evident in the epic is the close relationship between governance and economic order. Political authority was expected to regulate markets, administer justice, and ensure the protection of economic actors. The episode involving the unjust punishment of Kovalan and the

moral intervention of Kannagi highlights the consequences of administrative failure and reinforces the idea that justice is a fundamental requirement for maintaining economic stability. Such narratives illustrate how economic life in ancient society was inseparable from ethical governance and institutional accountability.

Furthermore, the epic demonstrates that economic prosperity was sustained through the interaction of multiple social institutions, including merchant communities, artisanal groups, and political authorities. These interconnected systems reveal a form of economic organization where commercial success depended not only on trade networks but also on adherence to shared social values and institutional norms. This perspective aligns with the broader intellectual tradition of Indian knowledge systems, where economic activities were viewed as part of an integrated social framework rather than isolated market processes.



Source: Author’s conceptualization based on literature review.

**10. CONCLUSION**

The analysis of Cilappatikaram demonstrates that classical Tamil literature functions as an important repository of indigenous knowledge that reflects the broader intellectual traditions of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). From an IKS perspective, the epic illustrates how economic activities were conceptualized within a holistic framework that integrated commerce, governance, ethics, and social responsibility. Rather than presenting economic exchange as an isolated activity, the narrative situates trade and commercial life within a moral and institutional order that emphasizes justice, accountability, and community welfare.

The episodes and social structures depicted in the epic reveal that economic organization in ancient Tamil society was deeply embedded in normative values and cultural practices. Merchant communities, market exchanges, and governance systems operated within an ethical framework that promoted fairness and responsibility in economic conduct. The narrative surrounding Kovalan and Kannagi, for instance, highlights the importance of justice and moral accountability in maintaining social and economic stability. Such depictions reinforce the principle within Indian knowledge traditions that economic prosperity must be aligned with ethical governance and social harmony.

Viewed through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems, Cilappatikaram represents more than a literary narrative; it serves as a cultural text that preserves indigenous economic philosophies and institutional practices. The epic demonstrates how traditional societies conceptualized economic life as part of an integrated knowledge system where material prosperity, ethical conduct, and social order were mutually reinforcing. This perspective underscores the value of classical literary sources in reconstructing indigenous intellectual traditions related to economic organization and governance.

---

The study of texts such as Cilappatikaram therefore contributes significantly to contemporary scholarship on Indian Knowledge Systems by highlighting the intellectual depth embedded in classical literature. By examining these sources, researchers can gain deeper insights into how early Indian societies understood the relationship between economy, ethics, and governance. Such explorations not only enrich historical understanding but also provide a foundation for engaging with indigenous knowledge traditions in modern academic discourse.

**REFERENCES**

- Subrahmanian, N. (1980). *Sangam polity*. Asia Publishing House.
- Nilakanta Sastri, K. A. (1955). *A history of South India: From prehistoric times to the fall of Vijayanagar*. Oxford University Press.
- Mahadevan, I. (2003). *Early Tamil epigraphy: From the earliest times to the sixth century A.D.* Harvard University Press.
- Shulman, D. (2016). *Tamil: A biography*. Harvard University Press.
- Singh, U. (2008). *A history of ancient and early medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th century*. Pearson Education.
- Karashima, N. (2009). *South Indian history and society: Studies from inscriptions AD 850–1800*. Oxford University Press.
- Rajan, K. (2015). *Early historic Tamil Nadu: Archaeology and culture*. Primus Books.
- Lal, B. B. (2017). *The Saraswati flows on: The continuity of Indian culture*. Aryan Books International.
- Venkatachalapathy, A. R. (2006). *In those days there was no coffee: Writings in cultural history*. Yoda Press.
- Cutler, N. (1987). *Songs of experience: The poetics of Tamil devotion*. Indiana University Press.