

GUILDS: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN ANCIENT INDIA

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Guilds were one of the most significant economic and social institutions in ancient India, playing a crucial role in the organisation of trade, crafts, and industry. Known as *Shrenis*, these guilds were associations of merchants, artisans, and craftsmen who came together to regulate production, maintain quality, protect mutual interests, and promote collective welfare. Emerging prominently during the period of early historic urbanisation (c. 600 BCE onwards), guilds became highly organised bodies with their own rules, leadership structures, and codes of conduct.

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. The guild's rules were 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 any similarity between them and the European merchant guilds or the Hang of China in Sung and Yuan times or the Karimi of Egypt. It would perhaps be more appropriate to use the term organisation, which is the nearest equivalent to the term *Samaya* (in)used in the inscriptions¹.

In the digests and commentaries of the period, we come across various terms such as *sreni*, *puga*, *vrata*, *naigama* and *samgha* to denote one or the other type of a corporate body. Hemacandra tell us that a group or corporation was known by as many as thirty-five names, including *samghata*, *samuha*, *samudaya*, *vrata*, *mandalam* and *gana*, and adds that a group of 'human beings' was known as *samgha* or *sartha*. As the true nature and character of the corporations noted above may have varied from place to place and also from time to time, they have led to different interpretations by legal authors and commentators. There is, however, no doubt that, during the early medieval period, there existed a large number of guilds of both traders and artisans who were united in the interest of their common profession².

The term *sreni* is explained by the *Viramitrodaya* and *the Mitaksara* as a corporate body of those 'who follow one occupation but belong to different castes'. The *Mitaksara* cites examples of such *srenis* as those of horse-dealers, betel-sellers, weavers and leather workers, while the *Viramitrodaya* refers to the organization of merchant (*vanigadisamuha*) as *sreni*. Similarly, Medhatithi explain *sreni* as group of 'people following a common profession' such as that of talesmen, artisans, money-lenders, coach-drivers and so forth'. According to Hemacandra, however, *sreni* was a group (*gana*) of artisans exclusively. Elsewhere, he refers to the traditional view of eighteen types of guilds (*srenis*) but does not specify them. However, another Jaina text, *Jambudvipa-prajhapati*, tells us that the eighteen guilds included those of weavers, potters, goldsmiths, betel-sellers, braziers, tailors, oil pressers etc. Jinesvara Suri too suggests that the persons who formed *srenis* (*senigaya*) were goldsmiths, blacksmiths, potters, washer men, and other artisans and craftsmen (*silpakarmakarasamuddya*). Thus, it seems that during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries the term *sreni* was used chiefly in the sense of a group of artisans and craftsmen³.

The term *puga* is not mentioned in the *Abhidhacintamatni*, but is used for an association or a corporation of merchants in the *Viramitrodaya* and the *Katyayana*. According to the *Mitaksara*, It was an assembly of persons of different castes and different occupations but dwelling at one place as, for instance, a village or city. The exact nature and composition of the group called *vrata* is not clear. Jaimal Rai is of the view that it was originally an association of uncivilized persons who lived by violence or physical labour but later 'under the impact of mercantile and industrial economy they turned o trade and industry, retaining nevertheless their old name'. In the *Abidhanacintamani*, a group of persons who earned their livelihood by physical labour is called *vratinah*. Thus, *vrata* was probably an association of porters and the like⁴.

The term *naigama* is explained by the commentators on legal texts as an association of caravan merchants (*sarthavahadisamuha*) of different castes who travel together for the purpose of carrying on trade with other countries. In the *Moharajaparajaya*, we are told that the merchant Kubera of Anahilavada went out to trade, after having deposited his property with the important *naigamas* of the town (*mahattara naigamesu nagaram*). It suggests that *naigama* was a corporate body formed by the town merchants engaged in foreign trade. Hemacandra, however, does not mention *naigama* as group but holds it synonymous with *vanik*⁵.

The corporation of merchants was also known as *samgha*. Commenting upon the term *desasamgha* in the *Manusmrti*, Medhatithi points out that it was 'a combination formed by

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persons professing the same faith or path, even though inhabiting different countries and belonging to different castes', for instance, the confederation of traders (vanijam), the confederation of mendicants, etc. It seems that the term desi, which is used in some inscriptions of the period for inter-state traders, was the distorted form of desasamgha. Another term for an association of merchants was mandalam or mamdalika. The Arthuna inscription reveals that each mamdalika or trader association was to pay a monthly tax of one drama in favour of a temple⁶.

In short, the legal commentators by way of explanation disclose the existence of a large number of guilds or corporations. For instance Medhatithi mentions the guilds of tradesmen (vaniks), artisans, money-lenders, coach-drivers, etc., while the Mitaksara refers to those of horse-dealers, betel-sellers, weavers and leather workers. Their evidence is supported by the epigraphic records which, while referring to pious grants made to religious institutions, indicate the corporate activities of merchants and artisans.

The first step towards the organisation of a guild was to inspire mutual confidence among the intending members. This was done by one of the following means.

1. Kosha: - This no doubt refers to the ordeal described in detail by Narada and Yajnavalkya, The person to be tested as " to drink three mouthfuls of water in which (an image of) the deity whom he holds sacred has been bathed and worshipped. If he should meet himself with any calamity within a week or a fortnight (after having undergone this ordeal), it shall be regarded as proof of his guilt," otherwise he would be considered pure and of course a worthy member of the guild.

2. Lekha-kriya: - This probably refers to a convention or agreement, laying down the rules and regulations of the guild, to which all must subscribe.

3. Madhyastha:-It is difficult to understand what this really means. It may refer to the practice of a well-known man standing guarantee for the faithful conduct of another.

After having inspired mutual confidence by one or other of these means the intending members set themselves to work. The list of items of business included various things besides the strictly professional business,' and these were probably inserted in a document to which each of the intending members had to subscribe⁸.

It's a truism that no art can be learnt without proper guidance and training. This fact was also realized in ancient India and that was why enough importance was attached to technical and vocational training in those days. We find enough evidence of the fact in ancient scriptures that men (particularly Vaishya) were given training in various arts and crafts either

in the guilds or at the houses of the expert artisans, who, in their capacity as instructors, were known as Acharya or Guru. We find references to Acharya and their "Antevasi" (apprentices) as early as the periods represented by Jataks. For example, references to the apprentices are found in the Varuni and Kusa Jataks. This system of apprenticeship for technical or vocational education has lasted even up to this day⁹.

An apprentice in those days was known as "Ante-vasi". He had to put up with his instructor (master craftsman), known as "Acharya", for a stipulated period, for getting training in one of the various arts and crafts. The Ante-vasis had to serve the Acharyas during the period of training in the capacity of their employees, in return of which the Acharyas gave them food, clothes and shelter, and, of course, training in the particular art or craft which the apprentice wished to learn. If the apprentice evinced extraordinary merit and intelligence he was duly rewarded for it. This fact is established by Kusa Jataka (No. 531) which states that a reward of one thousand "Karshapanas" was given to the apprentices who evinced extraordinary merit and intelligence¹⁰.

Apart from Jataks, we find references to the apprentices in some ancient law books, particularly in Yajnavalkyasmriti and Naradsmriti, wherein certain rules and regulations were laid down for observance by apprentices and their masters.¹¹

Yajnavalkya, for example, observed that an apprentice, after finishing his technical education, had to remain at his master's place for completing the stipulated period, receiving his maintenance from the master and giving him the proceeds of his skilled labour. It thus appears that there was some sort of a contract between the Acharya and the Antevasi with regard to the period of apprenticeship and it was settled before the training was initiated. The apprentice had, thus, to stay at the house of his Acharya to complete the period agreed upon and to work for him in return of the maintenance. Whatever return his technical skill and efficiency brought in, during the stipulated period, belonged to the Acharya. The work that the apprentice did for the Acharya, in the latter's house or workshop, more than compensated the master, for the food, clothes and shelter that he provided to the apprentice. Yajnavalkya, however, did not mention anything about the fees that was payable to the Acharya on completion of the training, nor did he mention anything about the relations between the Acharya and the Antevasi¹².

The Antevasi was, however, free to bid good bye to an Acharya who was negligent in imparting training and assigned such jobs to him as were not even remotely connected with the craft which he had come to learn. Neglect of training and assignment of jobs not connected

with the craft were sufficient grounds to bring the stipulations, regarding the training of the worker, to an abrupt end. Also Narad charged the master with the duty of treating the apprentice as his son, the apprentice was charged to be loyal and respectful to his Acharya, for the Acharya was his friend, philosopher and spiritual guide as well ; and if he ever forsake his Acharya if the Acharya was of unblemished character the apprentice was punished for the offence¹³.

On completion of the training and after serving for the stipulated period the Antevasi became a "Karmakar" and could decide to have his own workshop, or to work with another person as his employee. Besides it, one more course was open to him. He could decide to stay with the Acharya as a Karmakar for a stipulated wage, which the Acharya fixed on taking into consideration the efficiency of the apprentice¹⁴.

According to Graves, "There is some resemblance between the Indian apprenticeship system and the system prevailing in Medieval Europe. In Europe too the apprentice had to spend the earlier part of his indenture period learning his craft and getting no wages. When he had learnt his art, he could become a journeyman but he could undertake no work except through and for the benefit of his master. After his apprenticeship period he was at liberty to start his own business."¹⁵

Thus the activity of the guilds was extended to a variety of objects of public utility such as the construction of assembly, of a shed for (accommodating travelers with) A water, a temple, a pool, and a garden. They also helped the poor people to perform the "Samskaras" - or sacrificial acts enjoined by the sacred texts¹⁵.

All these were written in a formal document which was a valid agreement in the eyes of law. This aspect of the activity of guilds is borne witness to by the inscriptions. Thus the Junnar inscription already referred to above mentions the excavation of a cave and the construction of a cistern by the guild of corn-dealers. The Mandasor inscription "describes how a guild of silk-weavers built a magnificent temple of the Sun, in the year 437 A.D., and repaired it again in 473-4 A. D¹⁶.

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