

Cultural Patronage and Commerce: Role of Merchant Guilds in Promoting Performing Arts in Ancient India



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Abstract

This interdisciplinary study explores the role of merchant guilds in promoting performing arts in India during the ancient times. By analyzing the inscriptions, the literary sources, and temple sculptures, this paper attempts to highlight how the merchant guilds supported performing arts. The research aims to understand how the philosophy and values system set in the ancient Varṇa system supported and promoted performing arts, due to which the Vaiśya class to which the merchants belonged contributed greatly towards performing arts. By combining historical, cultural, and economic perspectives, this study incorporates qualitative analysis of the inscriptional sculptural and literary data. The research findings highlight that value based social policies hold timeless importance.

Keywords : Merchant Guilds, Varṇa System, Cultural Patronage, Social Harmony

Research Paper

Introduction

Ancient Indian society was structured around the Varṇa system which comprised of four types based on occupation: Brahmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra (Kane 51).

These classes, distinguished by their occupational choices, had distinct responsibilities towards society. A Brāhmaṇa was tasked to teach the Veda, a Kṣatriya with protecting the people, a Vaiśya with rearing cattle and lending money and a Śūdra with serving the people of all classes (Kane 105). This well-defined structure ensured the smooth functioning and stability of society.

English translations often attempt to call these four categories as priests, warriors, merchants, and peasants (Smith 215) However, such a translation risks oversimplifying the roles and overlooking the intricate interconnectedness and interdependence of these societal classes. Brāhmaṇa-s were not just priests but intellectual leaders and educators of society. The Kṣatriya-s weren't meant only to fight in the battles and wars. Their duty

was to protect the people of society. Through this they significantly contributed towards secure governance. Also, Vaiśya encompassed all kinds of businessmen and entrepreneurs, including manufacturers, chartered accountants, merchants, agriculturists, bankers, who significantly contributed to the economy. Lastly, Śūdra-s were the civil servants of society. They could be anyone from the doctors, to drivers, to a layman doing mason job. P V Kane describes Varṇa as:

“The idea of varṇa was as we have seen based originally on race, culture, character and profession. It takes account mainly of the moral and intellectual worth of man and is a system of classes which appears more or less natural. The idea of varṇa even in the Smṛtis lays far more emphasis on duties, on a high standard of effort for the community or society rather than on the rights and privileges of birth.” (Kane 54)

The assumed duties of individuals in various classes towards the welfare of society irrespective of their birth, are discussed in various texts including Manusmṛti. According to Manusmṛti in a Varṇa system, a Vaiśya

is characterized by strong desires, acquisitiveness, and possessiveness towards wealth and their societal responsibilities focused on industry, trade, business, and agriculture (Bhagat and Kantekure 124). Pratibha Bhagat and Ravichandra Kentekure note that despite Vaiśya-s' inclination towards wealth accumulation, the Manusmṛti mandates that the wealth accumulated by them should serve communal interests rather than personal hoarding.

Manusmṛti also asserts on protecting Dharma[A principle that drives every individual to focus on maintaining harmony in a society and contributes to its sustainability while also taking care of their own individual growth.]. It says that the one who doesn't protect it shall be doomed or destroyed.

*“dharma eva hato hanti dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ |
tasmād dharmo na hantavyo mā no dharmo hato'vadhī
|| 15 || (Manusmṛti 8.15)”*

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Evidently, moral values installed in all classes of people of the society, emphasizes Vaiśya-s' responsibility towards supporting the community's financial stability and contributing to societal welfare through their economic activities. It highlights the interconnectedness and interdependence of societal classes, emphasizing that the business collaborations and other transactions carried out by the Vaiśya-s were integral to overall social well-being and social function.

The multifaceted roles of these four Varṇa-s allude to the values that was intertwined within the social policies back then. Society did not just expect individuals to contribute but it was also an affirmative responsibility that individuals assumed and delivered to maintain an economic balance in society. Thus, it contributed greatly towards the sustainability of all classes of people.

Neef for The Study

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is made mandatory in India through an act called “Companies Act, 2013” which is taken care by the ministry of corporate affairs (Khurana 82–83). Effectiveness of these implemented policies is questionable with significant amount of studies reflecting their inefficiency in creating social impact (Khurana 90). Studies suggest many shortcomings in the implementation of corporate social responsibility. There seems to exist a communication gap between corporates and society which puts the efficiency of the existing policies handled by the ministry of corporate affairs into doubt (Saini 445). There is a need to bring awareness

among individuals in society and interconnectedness of the professions in a social structure through mutual support is essential. It maintains the overall social balance. There is a need to relook, reexamine, and introspect the government policies, to arrive at prospective reforms in those policies. So, a retrospective study of ancient merchant guild activities provides a different vantage point to CSR policies which could help in their effective implementation.

Objectives

- To understand the cultural patronage of merchant guilds in ancient India.
- To highlight the social policies that nurtured the artistic communities.
- To suggest prospective reforms in cultural policies enabling artistic communities thrive.

Hypothesis

The ancient Indian cultural policies offered by Varṇa system benefited all classes of people to thrive through a mutual sustainability principle. The merchant guilds supported and promoted several cultural activities by abiding by the value system set by the social policies. The study of inscriptions, sculptures and temple architecture helps understand the same.

Methodology

This qualitative research work employs a historical research approach to critically examine the primary sources like inscriptions and sculptures to arrive at crucial findings.

Limitation

The study mainly focuses on the primary sources belonging between the 5th to 8th century CE. inscriptions of Guptas, inscriptions from Bihar and Bengal, and the Ellora cave temple sources, Gurjara-Pratihāra temple architecture are subjected to the analysis.

Discussion

Merchant guilds are like the trade associations that exist in present times. They regulated different trade activities of individual merchants. They ensured mutual aid among different merchants. They also took care of the international trade and protect the interest of traders (Merchant Guild | Medieval, Craftsmen, Guilds | Britannica).

Merchants donated temple idols like viṣṇu, gaṇeśa, tāra, vināyaka, dvādaśa āditya across regions like Bihar and also Bengal whose offerings were recorded on inscriptions (Prasad 126–28). The Mandasor Stone



Inscription [The inscription is written in Sanskrit, in verse form using the Anuṣṭubh metre.] of Kumāragupta II and Bandhuvarman provides a detailed account of the works of a silk weavers' guild, that highlights their role in supporting and promoting social infrastructure. (Bhandarkar 323–32).

Present scenario where the governing bodies impose policies on the corporates to maintain the social responsibility implemented for example has been quoted in studies by scholars like Khurana as, “about 460 companies spending 6388 crore rupees for about 1790 different projects in the year 2014 -2015 alone”(Khurana 93). So that makes it up to an average of 3.5 crore rupees for each project spent. Looking into this data with the earlier cited research problem persistent at the grass root level, clearly the amount of money spent is huge but hardly reaching the cultural sector stakeholders. Hence such patronage observed by the ancient Indian merchant guilds suggests that the policies that initiate small micro contributions to maintain sustainable art and cultural heritage during the time rather than only focusing on macro level investments.

During the reign of Kumāragupta II and Bandhuvarman, Dāsapura's governor and Vishnuvarman's son, witnessed the migration of several silk weavers who originated from the central and southern Gujarat [Lāṭa Viśaya], into the city of Dāsapura. While some of them found other occupations, a large number remained committed to their traditional craft, by forming a separate guild. This guild contributed to cultural development by constructing a temple dedicated to Sūrya in the city during Bandhuvarman's rule. The 29th verse in inscription in line 16 and 17 narrates the guild's contributions to temple. 18 and 19 describe the beauty of the temple along with description that suggest the season when it was inaugurated. Below is an extract of an inscription from the ASI publication:

16.Tasminn=eva kshitipativriṣhē
Bamdhu- varmmanṣy=udārē s a m y a k -
sphītaṁ Daśapuram=idam pālayaty=unnat-āmsē|
śilp-āvāptair=ddhana-samudayih paṭṭavāyair=
udāram śreṇībhūtair=bbhavanam= atulam kārītam
17. dīpta-raśmeh || [29*] vistīrṇa-tunga-śikharam
śikhari-prakāśam=abhyudgat-ēndv- amala-
raśmi-kalāpa-gauram(ram) (|*) yad=bhāti
paśchima-purasya nivishṭa-kānta- chū d ā m a ṇ i -
pratisaman==nayan-abhirāman(mam)|| [30*]
Rāmā-sanātha-bhavan-ōdara-bhāskar-āmśu-
vahni-pratāpa-subhāge jala-līna-mīnē chandr-
āmśu-harmyatala-

18. chandana-tālavṛinta-hār-ōpabhōba-rahitē hima-
dagdha-padmē || [31*] Rōdhara- priyāngu-
taru-kundalatā-vikōśa-pushp-āsava-pramud[i*]
t-āli-kal-ābhirāmē [|] kālē tushāra-kaṇa-
karkkaśa-śīta-vāta-vēga-pranṛitta-lavalī-nagan-
aikaśākhē||[32*] Smara-vaśaga-taruṇajana-
vallabh-āṅganā-vipula-kānta-pīn-ōru- [|*]
19. stana-jaghana-ghan-āliṅgana-nirbhartsita-tuhina-
hima-pātē || [33*] (Bhandarkar 326)

Verse 29 says that when the noble Bandhuvarman, the great king, ruled with a steady hand, Daśapura flourished abundantly under his elevated patronage. This unparalleled temple, adorned with splendid wealth and the fine artistry of silk weavers, was constructed by their prosperous guilds, shining with radiance (Bhandarkar 329).

Verse 30 also described the beauty of the temple, that it has extended lofty pillars that shines brightly like a peak of a mountain. The poet describes its light radiating by moonlight and the whole structure to be a charming crest-jewel in the city that was so pleasing to the eyes

Verse 31 gives the picture about the season, as that time when the houses were filled with young women, and warmth reached from the sun rays, when fish stayed deep in the water, and the moonlight gave joy, roofs, sandal paste, palm leaf fans, and garlands are absent, and water lilies are harmed by frost

Verse 32 – The composer of the verse says that the temple was done during the season of bees busy collecting the nectar of the blossoming Rodhra and Priyangu trees, and jasmine creepers and the Lavali creepers branches dance vigorously in the chill wind, filled with mist.

Significantly, the inscription records that the Sun temple was restored by a merchant guild who traded silk. This act of restoration underscores the guild's ongoing commitment to maintaining religious and cultural sites, thus highlighting their role as patrons of the arts and architecture.

30th verse in line 17 that reads as *vistīrṇa-tunga-śikharam śikhari-prakāśam* indicates height and prominent appearance of the temple. *abhyudgat-endv-amala-raśmi-kalāpa-gauram* suggests the structure shined brightly and was overall had a visually striking appearance.

Rōdhara-priyāngu-taru-kundalatā-vikōśa-pushp-āsava in the 32nd verse alludes to the spring season during which the opening ceremony of the restored temple took place. The description of the blossoming trees and

dancing creepers, especially of priyaṅgu, alludes to the Vasantotsava or the spring festival here. Pryanṅu flowers is often mentioned in reference to dohada festival in Sanskrit literature –

strīṅām sparśāt priyaṅgu

rkasati bakulaḥ sīdhugaṇḍūṣasekāt

pādāghātādaśokastilakakuravakau

vīkṣaṇāliṅganābhyām |

mandāro narmavākyātpaṭuma

dhuhasanāccampako vaktavātāt

cūto gītānmerurvikasati hi

puronartanāt karṇikārah| (ज्ञा)

Translation: Priyaṅgu blooms at the touch of women, Bakula blossoms from the sprinkling of wine from their mouths, Aśoka flowers upon being kicked by their feet, Tilaka blooms from their gaze, Kuravaka flowers when embraced by them, Mandāra blooms at their sweet words, Campaka blossoms from their gentle laughter, Cūta tree blooms from their breath, Nameru flowers at their singing, and Karṇikāra blooms in front of their dancing. So, bringing Vasantotsava within the verses that declare the formal restoration of the temple here suggests that the guild supported temples with seasonal celebrations and cultural activities. Performing arts were a part of their cultural patronage towards grand festivities and celebrations.

Merchant guilds were not merely economic entities but also fostered cultural and religious life. Mandasor inscription is a typical example of their cultural sponsorships. Also, the inscription is crucial to note that during the Gupta king's reign it records the patronage of silk merchants. It shows that the era had

honorable traders, who led prosperous settlement in the city called Daśapura. The monarchal patronage and support enabled the guild to contribute significantly to the city's cultural and architectural heritage, reflecting the interconnectedness of political and economic activities with the cultural patronage during the time of Gupta-s.

Similar phenomena can be observed even until the times of Gurjara-Pratihāra-s. "Teli temple" of Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh is an architectural masterpiece that stands as a testament to the patronage offered by yet another such trade association. This monument in Gwalior built during the Gurjara-Pratihāra times i.e., 8th- 9th Century CE dedicated to lord Viṣṇu is important because of the historical significance that it testifies and got its name, "Teli Ka Mandir", due to its patronage by the oil merchants guild (Saxena). Temples often served as a performance space for the dancers to present their devotional offerings through dance and music in ritualistic ceremonies (Kersenboom 27). Kersenboom also notes some items from the repertoire of dances that were done in the temple premise. Through the temple dance repertoire that she records it is evident that the temple premises were huge and were built to accommodate recitals with many dancing girls dancing in the temple premises. Likewise, even the Teli temple's architecture is remarkably huge, with its tower about 100 ft high. The temple structure is built on a platform of about 3600 sq ft. The sculptures on the temple are minimal yet it reflects some dancer motifs on temple panels which suggests the importance of art for its patrons. Just like the Sūrya temple mentioned above, even the Teli temple architecture clearly indicates merchants' involvement in promoting performing arts and other cultural activities in the temples.

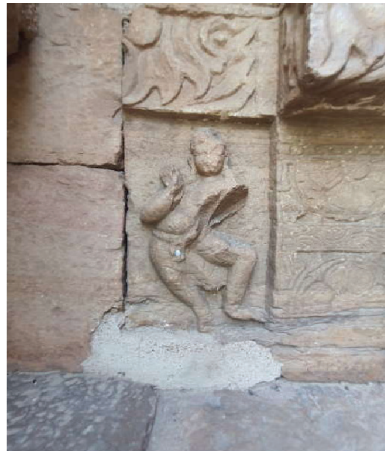


Fig 1: 'Teli' Temple Gwalior

Fig 2: Panel showing dancer

Fig 3: Dancer on temple wall

(Note: Figures 1,2 and 3 given above are the pictures of the primary sources collected by the researcher during a field study at Teli Temple, Gwalior.)

Result

Merchant guild's multiple cultural patronage towards temple construction and idol donations, suggests a lot of best practices that can be implemented into present day cultural policies. Along with macro investments many micro level investments from the corporate sectors can benefit cultural stake holders bringing good balance in the society. Artistic professionals also could get the deserved monetary benefits through this. The study emphasizes the need for the governing bodies to initiate the corporates to take up mandatory micro projects towards the cultural sector.

A deeper understanding of these historical practices has provided valuable insights for contemporary cultural policy and heritage preservation, emphasizing the interconnectedness of social structures and cultural development. Thus, this research opens an avenue for future scholars to delve deeper into the socio-cultural dynamics and their evolution, further enriching our understanding and application of heritage conservation strategies like formulating policies that balance heritage preservation with contemporary needs, ensuring sustainable cultural tourism and community engagement and so on.

The evidence highlights the interconnectedness of economic activities and cultural patronage within the Varna system which stood on the life principle and values. Merchant guilds, who were the Vaisya-s, supported the cultural landscape of ancient India. Their support to temple institutions and cultural festivities fostered social cohesion and cultural continuity, reflecting the principles of mutual sustainability and interdependence that were central to the Varna system.

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