

## **Sreni (Guilds): a Unique Social Innovation of Ancient India**

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Ancient Indian guilds are a unique and multi-faceted form of organisation, which combined the functions of a democratic government, a trade union, a court of justice and a technological institution. The trained workers of the guilds provided a congenial atmosphere for work. They procured raw materials for manufacturing, controlled quality of manufactured goods and their price, and located markets for their sale. Though seen through the Eurocentric blinkers they have been misunderstood. It was believed that the Indian *Guild system* also followed the European *feudal* or the manorial system of the high Middle Ages, due mainly to sudden increase in trade. These European guilds identified as Merchant Guilds and Craft Guilds lasted in some places until the nineteenth and the twentieth century, though probably their golden age was in the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. The Craft Guilds being the direct producers were more important than the Merchant Guilds. But the Indian guilds were far more important and complex institutions than the European examples.

Ancient Indian guilds have been a subject of some debate, both about their real character and antiquity.

### **Historical Review**

Romila Thapar (2000:73 ) informs us that “The ancient sources frequently refer to the system of guilds which began in the early Buddhist period and continued through the Mauryan period. ....Topography aided their development, in as much as particular areas of a city were generally inhabited by all tradesmen of a certain craft. Tradesmen's villages were also known, where one particular craft was centred, largely due to the easy availability of raw material. The three chief requisites necessary for the rise of a guild system were in existence. Firstly, the localization of occupation was possible, secondly the hereditary character of professions was recognized, and lastly the idea of a guild leader or *jetthaka* was a widely accepted one. The extension of trade in the Mauryan period must have helped considerably in developing and stabilizing the guilds, which at first were an intermediate step between a tribe and a caste. In later years they were dominated by strict rules, which resulted in some of them gradually becoming castes. Another early incentive to forming guilds must have been competition. Economically it was better to work in a body than to work individually, as a corporation would provide added social status, and when necessary, assistance could be sought from other members. By gradual stages guilds developed into the most important industrial bodies in their areas.

“Having arrived at a point when the guilds controlled almost the entire manufactured output, they found that they had to meet greater demands than they could cater for by their own labour and that of their families; consequently they had to employ hired labour. This consisted of two categories, the *karmakaras* and the *bhrtakas* who were regarded as free labourers working for a regular wage, and the *dasas* who were slaves. Asoka refers to both categories in his edicts when he speaks of the *bhatakas* and the *dasas*. Thus by the Mauryan period the guilds had developed into fairly large-scale organizations, recognized at least in the northern half of the sub-continent if not throughout the country. It would seem that they were registered by local officials and had a recognized status, as there was a prohibition against any guilds other than the local co-operative ones entering the villages. This suggests that a guild could not move from one area to another without official permission.”

Thapar explains that the distribution of work was not only organized in terms of the professions living in the town but also in terms of the physical occupation by different professions of different parts of the town. Each *sreni* had its own professional code, working arrangements, duties and obligations and even religious observances. Matters relating to wider areas of dispute were sometimes settled by *srenis* among themselves. Social mobility among such groups, where an entire group would seek to change its ritual status on the basis of an improvement of actual status, would be more frequent, since the economic opportunities for improving actual status would be more easily available, particularly in periods of expanding trade. It is not coincidental that the greatest activity of heterodox sects and of religious movements associated with social protest was in periods of expanding trade (Thapar 1996: 133).

U.N. Ghosal informs us that Narada prohibits mutual combination and unlawful wearing of arms as well as mutual conflicts among the groups. Brihaspati lays down the extreme penalty of banishment for one who injures the common interest or insults those who are learned in the Vedas. According to Katyayana, one committing a heinous crime, or causing a split, or destroying the property of the groups, is to be proclaimed before the King and ‘destroyed’. On the other hand, all members, we are told by Brihaspati, have an equal share in whatever is acquired by the committee of advisers or is saved by them, whatever they acquire through the King's favour as well as whatever debts are incurred by them for the purpose of the group...The evidence of the late Smriti law of guilds is corroborated in part by a certain type of clay-seals, which, have been recovered from the excavations of Gupta sites at Basarh (ancient Vaisali) and Bhita (near Allahabad). These seals bear the legend *nigama* in Gupta characters (Bhita) and more particularly the legends *sreni-kulikanigama* and *sreni-sarthavaha-kulika-nigama* (Basarh). These names are often joined with those of private individuals. We have here a probable reference to the conventions or compacts made by local industrial and trading groups with private individuals or individual members. Such documents would be called *sthitipatras* or

*samvitpatras* in the technical sense of the late Smritis (Ghosal 1997: 603-607).

Recently Kiran Kumar Thaplyal (2001) has come out with a very critical and comprehensive study of guilds (*srenis*) in ancient India.

Thaplyal shows that both Merchant Guilds as well the Craft Guilds were very much present and played a vital role in the socio-economic structure of ancient India. His database is literary evidence as found in the scriptures, texts and also archaeological findings. He discusses the institution of the Guilds in four time brackets: 1) The Vedic period, 2) Buddhist/Jain period, 3) Mauryan period and 4) and the Post-Mauryan period. Thaplyal sketches a brief historical review and discusses various aspects of the laws, apprenticeship, structure, offices, accounts and the functions of these guilds. He also shows the relationship of the guild to the state. Reference is made to the cobblers' guild, the oil millers' guild, potters guild, weavers' guild, and hydraulic engineers' guild.

Thaplyal writes that Buddhism and Jainism, which emerged in the 6th century BC, were more egalitarian than Brahmanism that preceded them and provided a better environment for the growth of guilds. Material wealth and animals were sacrificed in the Brahmanical *yajnas*. The Buddhists and Jains did not perform such *yajnas*. Thus, material wealth and animals were saved and made available for trade and commerce. Since the Buddhists and Jains disregarded the social taboos of purity/pollution in mixing and taking food with people of lower *varnas*, they felt less constrained in conducting long distance trade. The *Gautama Dharmasutra* (c. 5th century BC) states that "cultivators, traders, herdsmen, moneylenders, and artisans have authority to lay down rules for their respective classes and the king was to consult their representatives while dealing with matters relating to them." The *Jataka* tales refer to eighteen guilds, to their heads, to localization of industry and to the hereditary nature of professions. The *Jataka* stories frequently refer to a son following the craft of his father. Often, *kula* and *putta* occur as suffixes to craft-names, the former indicating that the whole family adopted a particular craft and the latter that the son followed the craft of his father. This ensured regular trained manpower and created more specialization. Here it is pointed out that the hereditary nature of profession in Indian guilds makes them different from the European guilds of the Middle Ages whose membership was invariably based on the choice of an individual. It may, however, be pointed out that adopting a family profession was more common with members of craftsmen's guilds than with members of traders' guilds.

As regards the existence of the Guilds in India prior to the Buddhist/Jain period, Thaplyal informs that scholars are divided on the issue of whether the guild system was in existence in the early Vedic period. Some consider Vedic society sufficiently advanced to warrant the existence of such economic organizations and consider terms, like *sreni*, *puga*, *gana*, *vrata* in Vedic literature as indicative of guild organization and *sreshthi* as president of a guild. Others consider early Vedic society to be rural with nomadism still in vogue and opine that the Aryans, preoccupied with war as they were, could not produce surplus food-grains, so vital for enabling craftsmen to devote their whole time in

the pursuit of crafts. They hold that neither terms like *sreni* and *puga* in Vedic literature denote a guild, or *sreshthi*, the 'guild president'. However, Thaplyal says that division of labour under the *varna* system may have been conducive to the emergence of guild organization. Agriculture, animal husbandry and trade, the three occupations of the Vaisyas, in course of time developed as separate groups. In the *Upanishads* (c. 6th century BC) there are several pieces of evidence regarding the existence of guilds in that period.

The Mauryan period is highlighted by the extensive treatment given to Guilds by Kautilya who considers the possibility of guilds as agencies capable of becoming centres of power. Thaplyal points out that the Mauryan Empire (c. 320 to c. 200 BC) witnessed better maintained highways and increased mobility of men and merchandise. The state participated in agricultural and industrial production. The government kept a record of trades and crafts and related transactions and conventions of the guilds, indicating state intervention in guild-affairs. The state allotted guilds separate areas in a town for running their trade and crafts. The members of the tribal republics that lost political power due to their incorporation in the extensive Mauryan Empire took to crafts and trades and formed economic organizations.

Thaplyal considers the period c. 200 BC to c. AD 300 as the last phase of guilds in ancient India. The decline of the Mauryan Empire (c. 200 BC) led to political disintegration and laxity in state control over guilds, allowing them better chances to grow. The epigraphs from Sanchi, Bharhut, Bodhgaya, Mathura and the sites of western Deccan refer to donations made by different craftsmen and traders. Guilds of flour-makers, weavers, oil-millers, potters, manufacturers of hydraulic engines, corn-dealers, bamboo-workers, etc. find mention in the epigraphs. The period witnessed a closer commercial intercourse with the Roman Empire in which Indian merchants earned huge profits. The evidence of the *Manusmriti* and the *Yajnavalkyasmriti* shows an increase in the authority of guilds in comparison to earlier periods. Epigraphic evidence of the period refers to acts of charity and piety of the guilds as also their bank-like functions.

### **Guild Laws**

Apart from their socio-economic importance, the guilds must have exercised considerable political influence as well in those times as is shown by Thaplyal by quoting from the texts and the scriptures at length. Thaplyal says that Guilds had their laws, based on customs and usage, regarding organization, production, fixation of prices of commodities, etc. These rules were generally recognized by the state. The laws were a safeguard against state oppression and interference in guild affairs. The *Gautama Dharmasutra* enjoins upon the king to consult guild representatives while dealing with matters concerning guilds. In Kautilya's scheme, a Superintendent of Accounts was to keep a record of the customs and transactions of corporations. Manu enjoins that a guild member who breaks an agreement must be banished from the realm by the king. According to Yajnavalkya, profits and losses were to be shared by members in proportion to their shares. According to the *Mahabharata*, for breach of guild laws, there was no expiation. Yajnavalkya prescribes severe punishment for one who embezzles guild property.

According to him, one who does not deposit in the joint fund money obtained for the corporation was to pay eleven times the sum by way of penalty. The guild rules helped in smooth functioning of the guilds and in creating greater bonds of unity among guild members.

## **Guild Structure**

Thaplyal explains that the Guilds had three components: (a) the General Assembly, (b) the Guild Chairman or the Head, and (c) the Executive Officers, each with its well-defined sphere of jurisdiction.

### *(a) The General Assembly*

All the members of the Guild constituted the General Assembly. *Jataka* stories give round figures of 100, 500, 1000 as members of different guilds. There is a reference to 1000 carpenters of Varanasi under two heads. This could be because the number was considered large enough to make the guild unwieldy, though it may be pointed out that a few references to 1000 members of a guild, without division, do occur. The Nasik Inscription of the time of Nahapana refers to two weavers' guilds at Govardhana (Nasik). Mention of bickering within large Guilds is not infrequent and it is possible that a place had more than one Guild of the same trade.

### *(b) The Guild Head*

The head of a guild is often referred to as the *jetthaka* or *pamukkha* in early Buddhist literature. Often he is referred to after the occupation followed by the guild of which he was the head, e.g. 'head of garland makers' (*malakara jetthaka*), 'head of carpenters' guild' (*vaddhaki jetthaka*), etc. Apparently the Guild Head exercised considerable power over the members of his Guild. *Setthis* were merchant-cum-bankers and often headed merchant guilds. The guild head could punish a guilty member even to the extent of excommunication. Ancient texts do not seem to specify whether the office of the head of a guild was elective or hereditary though there are positive references to either. It appears that normally headship of a guild went to the eldest son. Succession is mentioned only after the death of the head and not in his lifetime, which would suggest that the head remained in office life-long. The evidence of two Damodarpur Copper-plate inscriptions of the 5th century AD shows that one Bhupala held the office of *nagarasreshthi* for well nigh half a century, supports this.

### *(c) Executive Officers*

To assist the guild head and to look after the day-to-day business of the guild, Executive Officers came to be appointed. The earliest reference to Executive Officers is met with in the *Yajnavalkyasmriti*. Their number varied according to need and circumstances. Yajnavalkya says that they should be pure, free from avarice and knower of the Vedas. It is not specially stated whether the Executive Officers were elected by the Assembly or were nominated by the guild head.

## **Functions of the Guilds**

Besides serving the purpose of keeping the members of a trade together like a close

community, the Guilds undertook many useful roles such as administrative, economic, charitable and banking functions. Thaplyal reports that the powerful Guilds performed judicial functions as well. The guilds had a good deal of administrative control over their members. Looking after the interests of their members making things convenient for them was their prime concern. The trained workers of the guilds provided a congenial atmosphere for work. They procured raw materials for manufacturing, controlled quality of manufactured goods and their price, and located markets for their sale. Although the *Arthashastra* does not contain any reference to guilds loaning money to the general public, yet there are references suggesting that the king's spies borrowed from guilds on the pretext of procuring various types of merchandize. This shows that guilds loaned money to artisans and merchants as well. Guilds established their efficiency and integrity, and epigraphic evidence shows that not only the general public, even the royalty deposited money with them. However, the guilds had limited scope in banking in comparison to modern banks. Thaplyal refers to a few epigraphs here. A Mathura Inscription (2nd century AD) refers to the two permanent endowments of 550 silver coins each with two guilds to feed Brahmins and the poor from out of the interest money. Of the two Nasik Inscriptions (2nd century AD) one records the endowment of 2000 *karshapanas* at the rate of one percent (per month) with a weavers' guild for providing cloth to *bhikshus* and 1000 *karshapanas* at the rate of 0.75 percent (per month) with another weavers' guild for serving light meals to them. Apart from these more epigraphs and inscriptions are mentioned as evidence in this regard. In addition to this the guilds engaged in works of Charity as well. Guilds worked to alleviate distress and undertook works of piety and charity as a matter of duty. They were expected to use part of their profits for preservation and maintenance of assembly halls, watersheds, shrines, tanks and gardens, as also for helping widows, the poor and destitute.

Besides these functions, the Guilds could try their members for offence in accordance with their own customs and usages, which came to acquire almost the status of law. A guild member had to abide by both guild and state laws. The *Vasishtha Dharmasutra* holds the evidence of guilds as valid in settling boundary disputes. However the jurisdiction of guild courts was confined to civil cases alone. All guilds acted as courts for their members but either only important ones, or representatives of various guilds authorized by the state, would have acted as courts for general public. Guilds, being organizations of people of different castes following the same profession, would also have had some Brahmin members, some of whom would have been Executive Officers and probably they, with the help of members or Executive Officers of other *varnas* would have formed the courts of justice.

Considering the distinction between the caste and the guild Thaplyal holds that though similar in some respects, they were basically different. Guilds were economic institutions; castes were social groups. Whereas caste is necessarily hereditary, the guild membership is not so. One could be a member of only one caste, but one could be a member of more than one guild. However, in areas populated by people of the same caste membership of guild and caste coincided and the head of the guild presided over the meetings of both guild and caste.

Lastly, Thaplyal looks into the relationship between the guild and the state informing us that the Guilds enjoyed considerable autonomy, which came not as a favour from the state but by their inherent right. The guilds safeguarded the interests of traders and craftsmen against oppression by the king, as well as legal discrimination they were normally subjected to. Manu enjoins upon a king, to acquire knowledge of laws of the *srenis* and other institutions while dealing with them. Yajnavalkya lays down that such rules of corporations as are not against sacred laws should be observed. Even Kautilya, a champion of state control over all spheres of activity, lays down rules for the protection of artisans. Since the state earned a sizable income from taxation through guilds, it naturally provided facilities to them by maintaining roads for transport of merchandise and also granted subsidies and loans to them. Some prosperous merchants, as members of the guilds, or otherwise, must have extended financial support to kings in times of emergency. Kings honoured guild heads by offering gifts. Guild heads were present at important state ceremonies. The heads of guilds accompanied Suddhodana in welcoming the Buddha, and also Bimbisara in paying a visit to the Buddha. Tradition believes that they, along with others, waited for the coronation ceremony of Bharata, and also accompanied Bharata to visit Rama at Chitrakuta. The *naigamas* participated in Rama's coronation ceremony.

There is no evidence of a guild or a combination of guilds attempting to capture political power. The guilds of the period were local in character, with no central organization. Interests of different guilds were of different kinds, sometimes even conflicting and so they could hardly form a joint front against the state. However, in case of contests for succession to the royal throne, they might have helped the claimants of their choice in acquiring it. However, Kautilya advises the king to see that heads of different guilds do not unite against him, and win the support of the guilds by means of reconciliation and gifts, and to weaken the ones as are inimical to him. He also advises the king to grant land, which is under attack from enemy to the guild of warriors. Guild quarrels, both internal and external, provided the king with appropriate opportunities to interfere in guild affairs. Yajnavalkya enjoins that a king should settle quarrels among guilds according to their usages and make them follow the established path.

So we find that Thaplyal in this article, well substantiated by literary evidence, has tried to show that the social institutions that we generally attribute to the ingenuity of the west were already present in the socio-economic structures of ancient Indian society.

We had made such unique social innovations which served a variety of useful functions: specialisation of crafts, quality control of products, defence against state's oppression, composing differences among different sections of society, providing justice to the needy, charity to the poor etc. Guilds were perhaps the earliest democratic institutions of the world.

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