

The Sangam Age

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- The Sangam Age refers to the period when most of the Tamil literature was composed by a body of Tamil scholars and poets in three successive literary gatherings called Sangam.
- The Sangam Age spanned from about 3rd century BC to 4th century AD. As highlighted above, the literature composed during this period was known as sangam because literary works were compiled in assemblies of poets (known as sangam). Thus, these literary works are also known as 'Sangam literature'.
- It is believed that the literature compiled during the first Sangam has been lost. A large mass of literature was produced by poets during the Second Sangam.
- Of all the works, only Tolkappiyam written by Tolkappiar has survived. Tolkappiyam is regarded as the oldest book of Tamil literature. Of the third Sangam Period also, only few literary pieces have survived.
- Wars and relations among the three major South Indian kingdoms—the Pandayas, the Cheras and the Cholas—are mentioned in Sangam literature. Their wars and deeds are the major theme of Sangam literature. According to this literature, the Cheras finally established their supremacy over the other two kingdoms.

Sources

Sangam literature is the chief source of information about the Sangam Age. Besides, many archaeological sources such as megaliths and inscriptions also provide us with information about the period.

Literary Sources

Sangam literature mainly consists of Tolkappiyam, the ten poems (Pattuppattu), eight analogies (Ettuttogai), eighteen minor works (Patinenkilkanakku) and famous epics such as Silappadikaram, Manimegalai and Sivaga Cindamani.

Tirukkural

- The eighteen minor works form an important source of the period. These are called minor works because the poems are generally shorter in length as compared to the other Tamil works belonging to this period.
- Tirukkural written by Tiruvalluvar is a collection of Tamil couplets divided into 133 chapters. It comprises the Dharmashastras, the Arthashastras and the Kamasutras. It preaches simplicity and truth in its verses.

Poems

- Ettuttogai comprises a large body of poetic literature. It is a compilation of more than 2,000 poems composed by more than 200 authors.
- Besides, there are ten long poems called Pattuppattu. These are divided into two main parts—Aham and Puram. While the poems in the Aham categories idealise love and respect, the Puram deals with militarism and hero worship.

Tolkappiyam

- It is one of the oldest surviving literary works of the Sangam Age. It was written by Tolkappiar.
- It is not only a textbook on the Tamil grammar but also includes the classification of animals, plants, habitats and human beings.
- Tolkappiyam is divided into three chapters. While the first two chapters codify language, the third chapter, Porul, refers to people and their behaviour.

Epic

- There are three main epics of the Age. These are Silappadikaram, Manimegalai and Sivaga Cindamani.
- Silappadikaram is regarded as one of the greatest epics of the period. It was written by Illango Vadigal. It deals with the revenge of a wife against her husband's killer.
- Manimegalai was written by poet Sattanar of Madurai. It deals with the ideals and teachings of Buddhism. It is an important source of the development of fine arts during the Sangam Age.
- Sivaga Cindamani was written by Tiruttakkadevar who was a Jain monk. It deals with the story of a superman who becomes a Jain monk in the end.
- The other two important epics of the period are Kundalakesi and Valayapathi.

Archaeological Sources

Several archaeological remains such as punch-marked coins, pottery, shells, beads, urns, megaliths and inscriptions have been discovered which provide us with information of the period.

Megaliths

- Megaliths are large pieces of stones found mostly at burial sites.
- A renowned historian, Champalakshmi, has identified the Sangam Age coinciding with the last phase of megalithic culture in Tamil Nadu.
- Large agricultural settlements with their chieftains belonging to the Sangam Age have also been identified with the megalithic communities.

Hero Stones

- Hero stones were the memorial stones which were erected on the burial ground of the people who died for the common cause of their village, country and the king.
- Many references to such hero stones have been made in Sangam literature.
- Sometimes, hero stones were also erected along with inscriptions. These hero stones along with inscriptions are found either alone or in groups generally near an irrigation tank or lake outside the village.

Inscriptions

- Inscriptions form an important source of the Sangam Age. One cave inscription which was deciphered in 1966 dating back to 2nd century BC deals with a record of the gift of a monastery by a Pandyan king to a Jain monk.
- Many references to the Chera Dynasty are found in Tamil Brahmi inscriptions dating back to the 3rd century AD.
- Inscriptions written on poetry have also been found from about 20 archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu.

Tamil Kingdoms

Three important kingdoms during the Sangam Age were the Chera, Chola and Pandyan kingdoms.

Chera Kingdom

- The Chera kings of the Sangam Age were known by many titles such as Vanavar, Villavar and Malaiyar.
- Their capital was at Vanji, and Thondi was their chief port.
- Cheran Senguttuvan was the most popular king of the Sangam Cheras. Many Sangam works tell about his military expeditions. It is said in one of the texts that he reached the Himalayas and hoisted the Chera flag.
- The territories of the Sangam Cheras mostly comprise the present state of Kerala.

Chola Kingdom

- The Chola Kingdom is called Chonadu, Kaveri Nadu and Punal Nadu in Sangam literature.
- These names reflect the richness of the water resources of the Chola Kingdom. The River Kaveri was considered sacred as it added to the fertility of the Chola land.
- Uraiyur was the capital of the Sangam Cholas. Their second capital was Kaveripoompattinam or Puhar. It was also the main port of the Sangam Cholas.
- Karikalan was the most popular king of the Sangam Cholas. The Sangam works give information about his kingship. He was a great warrior who defeated the Cheras and Pandya kings at Venni. He also encouraged the growth of agriculture and commerce. He built a dam across the River Kaveri which helped in the irrigation of crops.
- It has been recorded in Sangam literature that merchants from abroad visited the capital city Puhar.

The Pandyan Kingdom

- The extent of the Pandyan Kingdom comprises the present-day territories of Madurai, Tirunelveli and Ramanathapuram. The Pandyan kings were known as Maran, Valudhi and Chezhiyan.
- Madurai was their capital city, and the city of Korkat was the chief port.
- The Pandyan kings gave patronage to the Tamil Sangam.
- Mudhukudumi Peruvazhthi was a Pandyan king who performed many sacrifices to celebrate his victories.
- Another famous Pandyan ruler, Thalaiyalanganathu Nedunchezhiyan, defeated the combined forces of the Chera, Chola and other local chieftains.

The kingdoms of the Pandyans, Cheras and Cholas began to disintegrate by the beginning of the 3rd century AD.

Local Chieftains

- Apart from these three famous kingdoms, many local chiefs also ruled in different parts of Tamil Nadu. They were known as Velirs.
- The local chiefs provided patronage to the Tamil poets. Thus, the Sangam poets praised them for their generosity.
- They also extended their help to resolve disputes among the kings. These chiefs also played an important part in the development of the political, social and cultural development of the period.

Society

Sangam literature provides us a near accurate picture of society existing during the Sangam Age.

Social Classes

- The caste divisions and tribal arrangements existed together in the Sangam Age.
- The Tamil Sangam society was basically divided between the high born and the low born, differentiating the Brahmins from the common people.
- The Tolkappiyam mentions four castes—Brahmans, kings, traders and farmers—ignoring the other common people. This shows the influence of Sanskrit social ideas on the Sangam poets.
- The Brahmins were a respectable and learned community of people. The concept of pollution caused by the low born was present in society.
- Both Vaishyas and Vellalas were engaged in trade. The Vaishyas cultivated the land, protected cows, made gifts to the kingdoms and performed sacrifices. The same functions were also performed by the Vellalas.

- Apart from these classes, the Tamil land was also inhabited by hunters, gatherers and communities whose main occupation was fishing and animal husbandry. They also practised shifting cultivation.
- People mainly consumed grains, meat, fish, milk and milk products. Main sources of entertainment for the people were cock fight and goat fight. Gambling was also popular. Wrestling was also organised.
- During the Sangam Age, women were provided with education as we find many women poets during the Sangam Age. Women also enjoyed freedom of movement. However, their position was not equal to that of men.

Economy

- The economy of the Sangam Age was simple and self-sufficient. Agriculture was the main occupation of the people. Rice, wheat, pepper, ginger, cardamom and various other spices and fruits were grown.
- Embankments were made by the state to support irrigation. Chera country was known for its jackfruit, pepper and turmeric.
- Spinning and weaving were other major occupations of the people. Uraiyur was an important centre of cotton trade.
- Ship making, metal working, carpentry, rope making, tanning and making of ivory products are important industries.
- Sangam literature gives us a vivid description of the trading activities during this period. Internal and foreign trade practices were well organised. Trade was mainly carried through barter.
- Paddy was the main medium of exchange in the rural regions.
- There were established markets known as angadi in large towns. Hawkers also carried goods from one place to the other.
- Extensive foreign trade was carried out with many countries. Spices were in great demand in foreign countries. Ivory products, pearls and precious stones were exported and hoarded, and gold and glass were imported.
- According to an important manuscript, Periplus, trade flourished between India and the Roman Empire. According to the text, Cannanore, Ponnani and Kottayam were important trading ports.
- Uraiyur was a city from which pearls and fine quality muslin were exported. Many gold and silver coins struck by Roman emperors have been found in the interiors of the Tamil land. This shows that extensive trade flourished between the Tamil land and the Roman Empire.