

Unit 1

Society and Culture in Ancient Tamizhagam: The Sangam Age



Learning Objectives

- To understand that Sangam Tamil literature is the main source for the study of ancient Tamil society
- To know the rule of Muvendars (Three Great Kings) – the Chera, Chola and the Pandya kings – and their contemporary minor chieftains
- To gain an understanding of the administrative system and the socio-economic conditions of Tamizhagam
- To learn about the Kalabhra period

The Sangam Age

The word 'Sangam' refers to the association of poets who flourished under the royal patronage of the Pandya kings at Madurai. The poems composed by these poets are collectively known as Sangam literature. The period in which these poems were composed is called the Sangam Age.

ArumugaNavalar (Jaffna), U.V.Swaminatha Iyer and Damodharam Pillai (Jaffna) strove hard and spent many years in retrieving and publishing the Tamil classics and the ancient Tamil texts, which were originally present as palm leaf manuscripts.

Sources

Inscriptions

Hathigumpha Inscription of King Karavela of Kalinga, Pugalur (near Karur) Inscription, Ashokan Edicts II and XIII, and inscriptions found at Mangulam, Alagarmalai and Kilavalavu (all near Madurai)

Copper Plates

Velvikudi and Chinnamanur copper plates



Coins	Issued by the Cheras, Cholas, Pandyas and the chieftains of Sangam Age as well as the Roman coins
Megalithic Monuments	Burials and Hero stones
Excavated Materials from	Adichanallur, Arikamedu, Kodumanal, Puhar, Korkai, Alagankulam, Uraiyur
Literary Sources	<i>Tholkappiyam</i> , <i>Ettuthogai</i> (eight anthologies), <i>Pathupattu</i> (ten idylls), <i>PathinanKeezhkanakku</i> (a collection of eighteen poetic works), <i>Pattinapalai</i> and <i>Maduraikanji</i> . Epics <i>Silapathikaram</i> and <i>Manimegalai</i> .
Foreign Notices	<i>The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea</i> , <i>Pliny's Natural History</i> , <i>Ptolemy's Geography</i> , <i>Megasthenes's Indica</i> , <i>Rajavali</i> , <i>Mahavamsa</i> and <i>Dipavamsa</i>

Tholkappiyam is a work on Tamil grammar. It represents the quality of Tamil language and the culture of Tamil people of the Sangam Age.

Time Span	3rd century BC (BCE) to c. 3rd century AD (CE)
Tamizhagam	Vengadam (Tirupathi hill) in the north to Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin) in the south, Bounded by sea on the east and the west.
Age	Iron Age
Culture	Megalithic
Polity	Kingship
Dynasties ruled	The Cheras, the Cholas and the Pandyas

George L. Hart, Professor of Tamil language at the University of California, has said that Tamil is as old as Latin. The language arose as an entirely independent tradition with no influence of other languages.

Cheras

Muvendaras (Three Great Kings) controlled the territories of Tamizhagam during the Sangam Age. The Tamil word 'Vendar' was used to refer to three dynasties, namely the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas. The Cheras ruled over the central and north Travancore, Cochin, south Malabar and Kongu region of Tamil Nadu. The *Pathitruvalu* (a collection of ten decades of verses) provides information about the Chera kings. It is known that the Chera king Senguttuvan went on a military expedition to North India. He brought stones from the Himalayas for making the idol of Kannagi, an epic character from *Silappathikaram*. He introduced *pattini* cult. Chera Senguttuvan's younger brother was Ilango Adigal. He was the author of *Silappathikaram*. Another Chera king, Cheralirumporai, issued coins in his name. Some Chera coins bear their emblem of bow and arrow.

Prominent Chera Rulers

- Udayan Cheralathan
- Imayavaramban Netun Cheralathan
- Chera Senguttuvan
- Cheralirumporai

Cholas

The Chola kingdom of Sangam period extended upto Venkatam (Tirupathi) hills. The Kaveri delta region remained the central part of the kingdom. This area was later known as Cholamandalam. Karikalvalavan or Karikalan was the most

famous of the Chola kings. He defeated the combined army of the Cheras, Pandyas and the eleven Velir chieftains who supported them at Venni, a small village in the Thanjavur region. He converted forests into cultivable lands. He built Kallanai (meaning a dam made of stone) across the river Kaveri to develop agriculture. Their port Puhar attracted merchants from various regions of the Indian Ocean. The *Pattinapalai*, a poetic work in the *Pathinenkeezhkanakku*, gives elaborate information of the trading activity during the rule of Karikalan.

Kallanai

It was a dyke, built with stones. It was constructed across the Kaveri to divert water throughout the delta region for irrigation.

When it was built, Kallanai irrigated an area of about 69,000 acres.



Prominent Chola Rulers

- Ilanchetsenni
- Karikalvalavan
- Kocengannan
- Killivalavan
- Perunarkilli

Pandyas

The Pandyas ruled the present-day southern Tamil Nadu. The Pandya kings patronized the Tamil poets and scholars. Several names of Pandya kings are mentioned in the Sangam literature. Nedunchezhiyan is hailed as the most popular warrior. He defeated the combined army of the Chera, Chola and five Velir Chieftains at Talayalanganam. He is praised as the lord of Korkai. Pandya country was well known for pearl hunting. Pandya

kings issued many coins. Their coins have elephant on one side and fish on another side. MudukudimiPeruvazhuthi issued coins to commemorate his performance of many Vedic rituals.

Prominent Pandya Rulers

- Nediyan
- Nanmaran
- MudukudimiPeruvazhuthi
- Nedunchezhiyan



The Titles Assumed by the Muvendaras

CHERAN

- Adhavan
- Kuttuvan
- Vanavan
- Irumporai

CHOLAN

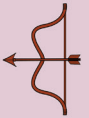

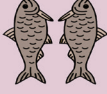
- Senni
- Sembiyan
- Killi
- Valavan

PANDIYAN

- Maran
- Valuthi
- Sezhiyan
- Tennar

Royal Insignia

Sceptre (*kol*), drum (*murasu*) and white umbrella (*venkudai*) were used as the symbols of royal authority.

Muvendar	Garland	Port	Capital	Symbols
Cheras	Palmyra flower	Muziri/Tondi	Vanchi/Karur	 Bow and arrow
Cholas	Fig (Athi) flower	Puhar	Uraiyur/Puhar	 Tiger
Pandyas	Margosa (neem) flower	Korkai	Madurai	 Two Fish

Minor Chieftains – Ay, Velir and Kizhar

Apart from three great kings, there were several brave independent minor chieftains. The name 'Ay' is derived from the ancient Tamil word 'Ayar' (meaning shepherd). Among Ay chiefs of Sangam Age, Anthiran, Titiran and Nannan were the important names.



The Velirs–Vellalars– constituted the ruling and land-owning class in the ancient Tamizhagam. The famous Velirs were the

seven patrons (*KadaiyezhuVallalgal*). They were Pari, Kari, Ori, Pegan, Ay, Adiyaman and Nalli. They were popular for their generous patronage of Tamil poets.

Kizhar was the village chief.

Sangam Polity Kingship

The kingship was hereditary. The king was called *Ko*. It is the shortened form of *Kon*. *Vendan*, *Kon*, *Mannan*, *Kotravan* and *Iraivan* were the other titles by which the king was addressed. The eldest son of the reigning king generally succeeded to the throne. The coronation ceremony was known as *arasukattilerudhal* or *mudisoottuvila*. The crown prince was known as *komahan*, while the young ones were known as *Ilango*, *Ilanchezhiyan* and *Ilanjeral*. King held a daily durbar (*naal-avai*) at which he heard and resolved all



the disputes. The income to the state was through taxation. Land tax was the main source of revenue and it was called 'Irai'. This apart, the state collected tolls and customs (*sungam*), tributes and fines.

The kings and soldiers wore the heroic anklet (Veera kazhal). On the anklet, the name and achievement of the wearer were blazoned. Spies were used not only to find out what was happening within the country, but also in foreign countries.

A wound in the back was considered a disgrace and there are instances of kings fasting unto death because they had suffered such a wound in the battle.

The Court

The king's court was called *Arasavai*. The king occupied a ceremonious throne in the court called *Ariyanai*. In the court, the king was surrounded by officials, distinguished visitors and court poets. The rulers had five-fold duties. They were encouraging learning, performing rituals, presenting gifts, protecting people and punishing the criminals. Ambassadors were employed by the kings. They played a significant role. The king was assisted by a number of officials. They were divided into *Aimperunguzhu* (five-member committee) and *Enberaayam* (eight-member group).

Army

The king's army consisted of four divisions, namely, infantry, cavalry, elephants and chariot force. The army was known as 'Padai'. The chief of the army was known as *Thanaitalaivan*. The prominent weapons used during this period were sword, *kedayam*

(shield), *tomaram* (lance), spears, bows and arrows. *Tomaram* is mentioned as a missile to be thrown at the enemy from a distance. The place where the weapons were kept was known as *paddaikottil*. The forts were protected by deep moats and trenches. The war drum was worshipped as a deity.

Law and Justice

The king was the final authority for appeal. In the capital town, the court of justice was called *Avai*. In the villages, *Mandram* served as the place for dispensing justice. In civil cases, the method of trial followed was to call upon the plaintiff to thrust his hand into a pot containing a cobra. If the cobra bit him, he was sentenced; if the cobra did not bite him he was considered innocent and acquitted. Punishment was always severe. Execution was ordered for theft cases. The punishment awarded for other crimes included beheading, mutilation of the offending limbs of the body, torture and imprisonment and imposition of fines.

Local Administration

The entire kingdom was called *Mandalam*. *Mandalam* was divided into *Nadus*. *Kurram* was subdivision of *Nadu*. The *Ur* was a village, classified into *perur* (big village), *Sirur* (a small village) and *Mudur* (an old village) depending upon its population, size and antiquity. *Pattinam* was the name for a coastal town and *Puhar* was the general term for harbour town.

Important Towns

Puhar, Uraiyur, Korkai, Madurai, Muziri, Vanji or Karur and Kanchi.

Thinai (tract)-based Sangam Society

The land form was divided into five *thinai*s (eco-regions).



Eco-region (<i>thinai</i>)	Landscape	Occupation	People	Deity
Kurinji	Palmyra flower	Hunting /gathering	Kuravar/kurathiyar	Murugan
Mullai	Forest region	Herding	Aayar/aaichiyar	Maayon
Marutham	Riverine track (plains)	Agriculture	Uzhavan/uzhathiyar	Indiran
Neithal	Coastal region	Fishing/saltmaking	Parathavar/ nulathiyar	Varunan
Palai	Parched land	Heroic deeds	Maravar/Marathiyar	Kotravai

Land was classified according to its fertility. Marutham was called *menpulam* (fertile land). It produced paddy and sugarcane. The rest of the landscape, excluding Neithal, was called *vanpulam* (hard land), and it produced pulses and dry grains.

Status of Women

There was no restriction for women in social life. There were learned and wise women. Forty women poets had lived and left behind their valuable works. Marriage was a matter of self-choice. However, chastity (*karpu*) was considered the highest virtue of women. Sons and daughters had equal shares in their parents' property.

Women Poets of Sangam Age

Avvaiyar, VelliVeethiyar, Kakkaipadiniyar, AathiManthiyar, PonMudiyar.

Religious Beliefs and Social Divisions

The primary deity of the Tamils was Seyon or Murugan. Other gods worshipped during

Sangam period were Sivan, Mayon (Vishnu), Indiran, Varunan and Kotravai. The Hero stone (*natukkal*) worship was in practice. Buddhism and Jainism also co-existed.

Veerakkal/Natukkal

The ancient Tamils had a great respect for the heroes who died in the battle field. The hero stones were erected to commemorate heroes who sacrificed their lives in war.



Caste did not develop in Tamizhagam as it did in the northern India. Varuna system (occupation-based caste) came to the Dravidian south comparatively late.

Dress and Ornaments

The rich people wore muslin, silk and fine cotton garments. The common people



wore two pieces of clothes made of cotton. The Sangam literature refers to clothes, which were thinner than the skin of a snake (*Kalingam*). Women adorned their hair plaits with flowers. Both men and women wore a variety of ornaments. They were made of gold, silver, pearls, precious stones, conch shells and beads. The People were fond of using aromatic perfumes.

Arts

There are many references to variety of musical instruments such as drum, flute and yazh. Karikalan was master of seven notes of music (*EzhisaiVallavan*). Singing bards were called *panar* and *vraliyar*. Dancing was performed by *kanigaiyar*. *Koothu* (folk drama) was the most important cultural practice of the people of Sangam Age. They developed the concept of *Muthamizh* (*Iyal, Isai, Naatakam*).

Occupation

The major occupations of the people were: agriculture, cattle rearing, fishing and hunting. Other craftsmen like carpenter, blacksmith, goldsmith, and potters were

also part of the population. Weaving was the most common part-time occupation of the farmers and a regular full time job for many others.

Festivals and Entertainments

People celebrated several festivals. The harvest festival, (Pongal) and the festival of spring, kaarthigai, were some of them. Indira vizha was celebrated in the capital. There were many amusements and games. This included dances, festivals, bull fights, cock fights, dice, hunting, wrestling and playing in swings. Children played with toy cart and with the sand houses made by them.

Trade

Trade existed at three levels: local, overland and overseas. The extensive and lucrative foreign trade that Tamizhagam enjoyed during this period stands testimony to the fact that Tamils had been great seafarers. Warehouses for storing the goods were built along the coast. The chief ports had light houses, which were called *KalangaraillanguSudar*. Caravans of merchants carried their merchandise to different places in oxen-driven carts. Barter system was prevalent.

Malabar Black Pepper

When the Mummy of Ramses II of the Egypt was uncovered, archaeologists found black pepper corns stuffed into his nostrils and in his abdomen (as a part of embalming process practised in olden days).



There were two kinds of markets or bazaars in the leading cities like Puhar and Madurai. In Madurai they were Nalangadi (the morning bazaar) and Allangadi (the evening bazaar). In these markets large varieties as well as large quantities of goods were sold and purchased.

Major Ports: Musiri, Tondi, Korkai

Main Exports

- salt, pepper, pearls, ivory, silk, spices, diamonds, saffron, precious stones, muslin, sandal wood

Main Imports

- Topaz, tin, wine, glass, horses

Silk supplied by Indian merchants to the Roman Empire was considered so important that the Roman emperor Aurelian declared it to be worth its weight in gold.

Muziris – First Emporium

The Roman writer Pliny the Elder writes of Muziris in his *Natural History* as the 'first emporium (shopping complex) of India'. A temple of Augustus was built at Muziris, which had a Roman colony.

A papyrus document (now in Vienna museum) of 2nd century BC (BCE) records the agreement between two merchants' shippers of Alexandria and Muziris.

Trade Contact with Overseas Countries

Archaeological excavations have confirmed the trading relations between the Tamizhagam and the countries such as Greece, Rome, Egypt, China, South East Asia and Sri Lanka.

Kalabhras

Towards the end of the 3rd century AD (CE), the Sangam period slowly went into a decline. Following the Sangam period, the Kalabhras had occupied the Tamil country for about two and half centuries. We have very little information about Kalabhras. They left neither artefacts nor monuments. But there is evidence of their rule in literary texts. The literary sources for this period include *Tamil NavalarCharithai*, *Yapernkalam* and *Periapuranam*. *SeevakaChinthamani* and *Kundalakesi* were also written during this period. In Tamizhagam, Jainism and Buddhism became prominent during this period. Introduction of Sanskrit and Prakrit languages had resulted in the development of a new script called *Vattezhuththu*. Many works under *PathinenKeezhkanakku* were composed. Trade and commerce continued to flourish during this period. So the Kalabhra period is not a dark age, as it is portrayed.

Elsewhere



Gateway
Han Dynasty – China
206 BC(BCE) – 220 AD(CE)



Pyramid
Mayan Civilisation
Central America



Colosseum
Roman Civilisation – Italy
3rd BC(BCE) – 1st AD(CE)

Summary

- The word 'Sangam' refers to the association of poets who flourished under the royal patronage of the Pandya kings at Madurai.
- Muvendars – the Cheras, Cholas and the Pandyas—controlled the territories of Tamizhagam during the Sangam Age.
- Apart from three great monarchs, Tamil country was ruled by several independent minor chieftains.
- Archaeological excavations have confirmed the trading relations between Tamizhagam and many foreign countries.
- Towards the end of the 3rd century AD (CE), the Sangam period slowly started to decline. The Kalabhras occupied the Tamil country. Evidence of their rule is available in Jain and Buddhist literature.

GLOSSARY

Strove	-	tried hard	-	கரும் முயற்சி
Dynasty	-	a line of hereditary rulers	-	ராஜ வம்சம்
Commemorate	-	to honour the memory of	-	கௌரவிப்பதற்காக
Royal insignia	-	symbols of power	-	அரச சின்னம்
Patronage	-	support given by a patron	-	ஆதரவு
Blazoned	-	displayed vividly	-	வெளிக்காட்டுதல்
Acquitted	-	released	-	விடுதலை
Bards	-	poets singing in praise of princes and brave men	-	புலவர்கள்
Warehouses	-	a large building for keeping goods	-	சேமிப்புக் கிடங்கு
Portrayed	-	described elaborately	-	சித்தரிக்கப்பட்டுள்ளது