

SANGAM PERIOD: LITERARY AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE FOR SOUTHERN INDIA

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study **Sangam period** one of the main sources used for documenting **literary** advances in Pandyan empire. The Sangam period or age or the third Sangam period, is the period of history of ancient Tamil Nadu, Kerala and parts of Sri Lanka (then known as Tamilakam) spanning from c. 6th century BCE to c. 3rd century CE. It was named after the famous Sangam academies of poets and scholars centered in the city of Madurai.

In Old Tamil language, the term Tamilakam (Tamilakam Purananuru 168. 18) referred to the whole of the ancient Tamil-speaking area, corresponding roughly to the area known as southern India today, consisting of the territories of the present-day Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, parts of Andhra Pradesh, parts of Karnataka and northern Sri Lanka also known as Eelam. Sangam literature paints an authentic picture of the life and times of the Tamil people between 2 century BC and 2 century AD. It portrays a civilisation that was highly advanced in the spheres of culture, personal and social values and humanism. It tells us how the Tamil language became inextricably intermingled with the life of the people. The flavour of ancient Tamil has permeated the collective consciousness of the people and continues to influence their daily life, making it as much classical as the language itself. The diverse literature is broadly classified into Akam and Puram, where life and language are deftly harmonised. Akam deals with the course of life and love, joy and sorrow and the wanderings of the heart towards ultimate felicity. Puram centres round society, kingship, valour of kings, their generosity and the virtue of fellowship. The poets praised the kings lavishly and received sumptuous gifts. By honouring the poets, the kings verily acknowledged the primacy of the language they cherished. Avvaiyar, Kapilar, Mosikeerananar and Kanian Poonkundranar were among the great poets of the Sangam age.

Key words: Sangam Age; Tamil Literature; Tamil poetry; Thiruvalluvar; Avvaiyar; Kapilar

Introduction

Sangam, the earliest writings in the Tamil language, thought to have been produced in three chankams, or literary academies, in Madurai, India, from the 1st to the 4th century CE. The Tolkappiyam, a book of grammar and rhetoric, and eight anthologies (Ettuttokai) of poetry were compiled—Ainkurunuru, Kuruntokai, Narrinai, Akananuru, Kalittokai, Patiruppattu, Purananuru, and Paripatal. A ninth anthology, Pattupattu, consists of 10 idylls that present a picture of early Tamil life.

Sangam writings are possibly unique in early Indian literature, which is almost entirely religious. The poems are concerned with two main topics: those of the first five collections are on love (akam), and those of the next two are on heroism (puram), including the praise of kings and their deeds. Paripatal, the eighth collection, contains poems of both types. Many of the poems, especially on heroism, display great freshness and vigour and are singularly free from the literary conceits of much of the other early and medieval literatures of India. Since they deal almost entirely with nonreligious subjects, these poems are also free from the complex mythical allusions that are such an outstanding feature of most Indian art forms. There are nonetheless some instances of religious works in sangam poetry. Paripatal, for example, contains poems about Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, and Murugan. According to Tamil legends, there were three Sangam periods, namely Head Sangam, Middle Sangam and Last Sangam period. Historians use the term Sangam period to refer the last of these, with the first two being legendary. So it is also called **Last Sangam period** (Tamil: கடைச்சங்க பருவம், *Kadaiccanga paruvam*), or **Third Sangam period** (Tamil: மூன்றாம் சங்க பருவம், *Mūnṛām sankā paruvam*). The Sangam literature is thought to have been produced in three Sangam academies of each period. The evidence on the early history of the Tamil kingdoms consists of the epigraphs of the region, the Sangam literature, and archaeological data.

The period between 600 BCE to 300 CE, Tamilakam was ruled by the three Tamil dynasties of Pandya, Chola and Chera, and a few independent chieftains, the Velir.

Sangam	Time span	No. of Poets	Kingdom	Books
First	4440 years	549	Pandiya	No books survived
Second	3700 years	1700	Pandiya	<i>Tolkāppiyam</i> (author - Tolkāppiyar)
Third	1850 years		Pandiya	covers entire corpus of Sangam Literature

There is a wealth of sources detailing the history, socio-political environment and cultural practices of ancient Tamilakam, including volumes of literature and epigraphy.

Tamilakam's history is split into three periods; prehistoric, classical (see Sangam period) and medieval. A vast array of literary, epigraphical and inscribed sources from around the world provide insight into the socio-political and cultural occurrences in the Tamil region. The ancient Tamil literature consists of the grammatical work Tolkappiyam, the anthology of ten mid-length books collection Pathupattu, the eight anthologies of poetic work Ettuthogai, the eighteen minor works Patinēṅkīṭṭaṅakku; and there are The Five Great Epics of Tamil Literature composed in classical Tamil language — *Manimekalai*, *Cīvaka Cintāmaṇi*, *Silappadikaram*, *Valayapathi* and *Kundalakesi* as well as five lesser Tamil epics, *Ainchiṟuppiyaṅgal*, which are *Neelakesi*, *Naga kumara kaviyam*, *Udhyana kumara Kaviyam*, *Yasodhara Kaviyam* and *Soolamani*.

The four fold vedic system of caste hierarchy did not exist during sangam period. The society was organised by occupational groups living apart from each other. The land was controlled by chieftains who indulged in constant war fare.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **Sangam Period** ; poets and bards who flourished in three different periods and in different places under the patronage of the Pandyan kings. Also scrutinize **literary and historical significance of their poetry**

Themes of Sangam Literature

On the basis of interpretation and context, the Sangam literature can be described into two types viz. *Agam* (inner) and *Puram* (outer). The topics of *Agam* are related to personal and human aspects such as love and sexual things. The topics of *Puram* are related to human experiences and emotions such as Heroism, Valor, Ethics and Philanthropy. The poems have also been classified on nature themes which are known as **Thinai**. The themes are as follows:

- **Kurinji** (Mountainous Theme).
- **Mullai** (Forests Theme)
- **Marutham** (Agricultural Land Theme)
- **Neithal** (Coastal Theme)
- **Paalai** (Desert Theme)

The literature was lost and forgotten. The Tamil Scholars S V Damodaram Pillai and U V Swamitha Iyer brought it into light. They printed and published different works such as Tholkappiyam, Nachinarkiniyar urai, Tholkappiyam Senavariyar urai, Manimekalai, Cilappatikaram, Pattupattu, and Purananuru in different parts of the 19th century, all with commentaries.

Classification of Sangam Literature

Broadly, we can divide the Sangam literature in 2 parts viz. *Patinenmēlkanakku* and *Patinenkīlkanakku*. Out of them, the *Patinenmēlkanakku* refers to the oldest surviving Tamil Poetry of the Sangam Age, dating back to 200 BC to 100 BC while the *Patinenkīlkanakku* refers to the collection of 18 poetic works, which belongs to Post Sangam period, and date back to 100 AD to 500 AD. This classification has been further summarized as follows:

Patinenmēlkanakku

This is the collection of the Sangam Period works. Ettutokai is a large volume of the poems which is consisting of more than 2000 poems. These works, which are called “The Eight Anthologies”, are on deferent themes such as Narrinai on love, Kuruntokai on love, Aiankurunuru on erotic love etc. So most works of Ettukottai are of *Agam* style. Most works of Pattuppāttu are of *Puram* context and they have works on seasons and picturesque nature of Tamil Country. They are based upon the themes of the nature.

Patinenkīlkanakku is the post Sangam work that is of Agam as well as Puram context. Some important points of some of these works is as follows:

- **Naaladiyar** was composed by Jain monks and the theme is the transient nature of life and youth. It was work of **Nalatiyar**.
- **Nanmanikkatiga** is the collection of 100 songs of Vilambi Naganaar and deals conditions / emotions of 4 types of people who cannot sleep in the night and they are thief, lovelorn, after money, and worrying about losing money.
- **Inna Narpathu** describes the things which should be avoided by the people. It deals with the things that bring unhappiness such as beautiful but disloyal wife, wealth of a miser, life under a tyrant and a beautiful flower without fragrance.
- **Iniyavai Narpathu** deals with the things which should not be avoided by a person and seek even in adverse situations such as learning even by begging, advice of learned persons, healthy children, and not coveting other's spouse.
- **Kalavazhi Narpathu** deals with war and politics.
- **Ainthinai Aimpathu** deals with human emotions, love, separation, lovers' quarrels.
- **Thinaimozhi Aimpathu** also deals with the Agam subjects such as love, separation, lover fights etc.
- Same is with **Ainthinai Ezhupathu**.
- Same is with **Thinaimalai Nurru Aimpathu**.
- **Thirukkural** is the first work in all of the Dravidian literature which deals with the ethics. It was authored by Thiruvalluvar. **It is also known as Kural** and is a collection of 1330 couplets.
- **Thirikatukam** deals with herbal medicines.
- **Acharakkovai** deals with the personal behavior and correct methods to follow.
- **Pazhamozhi Nanuru** deals with the character of the person.
- **Siruppanchamulam** deals with the nature and combines the benevolent humans with benevolent neighbors.
- **Muthumozhikkanch** deals with the right behavior and chastity.
- **Elathi** deals with human qualities and also narrates some herbal medicines.
- **Kainnilai** deals with the agam concepts.

Impact of Sanskrit on Sangam Literature

The Tamil language and literature did not flourish in isolation and was influenced by Sanskrit. The Aryans had penetrated the whole of the Tamil Land by 6th century AD and Post Sangam literature contains some traces of Aryan Culture. Influence of Sanskrit is more on the **five epics** of Tamil Literature, which were written between 1st century AD to 9th century AD. Out of them **Silappatikaram**, which was written by **Ilango Adigal**, brother of Senguvattan, a Chera King and who was a Jain monk is a highly regarded epic. The other four epics are

- *Manimegalai* which is a Buddhist Religious Work
- *Civaka Chintamani* which is a Jain Religious work
- *Valayapathi* which is also a Jain work of 9th Century
- *Kundalkesi* which is a Buddhist work of 5th century by Nagasena.

The people were divided into five different clans (*kudes*) based on their profession. They were:

- Mallars: the farmers
- Malavars: the hill people who gather hill products, and the traders
- Nagars: people in charge of border security, who guarded the city walls and distant fortresses
- Kadambars: people who thrive in forests
- Thiraiyars: the seafarers
- Maravars: the warriors.

All the five *kudes* constituted a typical settlement, which was called an *uru*. Later each clan spread across the land, formed individual settlements of their own and concentrated into towns, cities, and countries. Thus the Mallars settled in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, while the Malavars came to live in Kerala, western Tamil Nadu, eastern Andhra Pradesh and southern Sri Lanka. The Nagars inhabited southern and eastern Tamil Nadu, and northern Sri Lanka, while the Kadambars settled in central Tamil Nadu first and later moved to western Karnataka. The Thiraiyars inhabited throughout the coastal regions. Later various subsects were formed based on more specific professions in each of the five landscapes (Kurinji, Mullai, Marutam, Neithal and Palai).

- Poruppas (the soldiers), Verpans (the leaders of the tribe or weapon-ists), Silambans (the masters of martial arts or the arts of fighting), Kuravar (the hunters and the gatherers, the people of foothills) and Kanavars (the people of the mountainous forests) in Kurinji.
- Kurumporai Nadan-kizhaththis (the landlords of the small towns amidst the forests in the valleys), Thonral-manaivi (the ministers and other noble couples), Idaiyars (the milkmaids and their families), Aiyars (the cattle-rearers) in Mullai.

- Mallar or Pallar (the farmers), Maravars (the warriors) Vendans (Chera, Chola, and Pandya kings were called *Vendans*), Urans (small landlords), Magizhnans (successful small-scale farmers), Uzhavars (the farm workers), Kadaiyars (the merchants) in Marutham.
- Saerppans (the seafood vendors and traders), Pulampans (the vegetarians who thrive on coconut and palm products), Parathars or Paravas (people who lived near the seas-the rulers, sea warriors, merchants and the pirates), Nulaiyars (the wealthy people who both do fishing and grow palm farms) and Alavars (the salt cultivators) in Neithal.
- Palai symbolises the dry arid lands and scorching deserts of Tamil country where nothing except for the hardy and war-like perseverant tribes native to those lands can survive. It is also the only land among all five lands of the Sangam landscape that a female God, fierce mother goddess, Kotravai was worshipped which is synonymous with the common belief that all the other lands of Tamil country emerged from these original dry arid lands. The tribes existed in these lands were the ruthless and fearsome Maravars (Noble Warriors, Hunters and Bandits) and Eyinars (Warriors and Bandits). They actively seek out for wars, knowledge, invade far and distant lands and engage in banditry.
- People were known on the basis of their occupation they followed such as artisans, merchants etc.
- Warriors occupied a special position in society and memorial stones called "Nadukan" were raised in honour of those who died in fighting and they were worshiped.

Aham poetry deals with inner lives of protagonists. It also depicts family life and interpersonal relationships, with the accent on love in its myriad shades – separation, unrequited love and reconciliation. Puram poetry emphasises the outer or public domain. The themes were wars, administration, trade, customs, philosophy and elegies with an emphasis on heroism. A variation was Akappuram, verses which were a combination of Aham and Puram. Thus a separation due to war would fall under this category. We get clues on several varied aspects of life: geographical locations, architecture, clothing, social mores.

Seasons and landscapes were used as metaphors and similes in Thinaï poems called ‘The Ten Idylls’ dealing with nature. They set the mood for the poem. Some parts of ‘The Ten Idylls’ are detailed descriptions of the natural riches of the kingdom, the terrain, the seasons, wild life, the interplay of human emotions, sentiments and economic wealth connected to the greatness of the poet’s benefactor – the king. The poems show great variety of form and adherence to rules of grammar. Poets used meter, rhyme and blank verse. Yet other poems were set to music which varied to suit different occasions. Mention has been made of several kinds of percussion, string and wind instruments. Some of the poems were sung in a specific raga, accompanied by a string and a wind instrument.

The drum was the most popular and used in festivals to enliven proceedings, as an accompaniment for singers and in war. Details of the process of making and tuning these instruments are also given. We also come to know of foreigners who visited the Tamil shores. ‘Yavana’ applied to both Greeks and Romans. They are described as being of “fine physique and strange speech” whose “well-built boats rode the waves of foaming rivers”. The Pattinapalai talks of “well-weighed goods in abundance being exported with the Tiger mark impressed on them so as to recover customs duty.” The exports included

ivory, pearls from the Pandyan kingdom, pepper from the Chera port Muziris. Also in the list were perfumes, herbs, sesame oil, coconut oil, gold, sandalwood, betel, diamonds, rubies, coral, tamarind, tortoise shell and salt. Extremely fine cloth, described in Sangam works as “webs of woven wind” was much sought-after. Sangam literature also mentions imports amongst which counted fine Italian wine served in golden goblets. Some of the foods and dishes mentioned are sesame, salt, rice, ragi, rabbit, quail, tamarind, sweet potato, sugarcane, idli, roast meat and appam. Even a cursory glance shows the antiquity of these foods and the fact that eating patterns have not altered significantly in millennia! Equally interesting are the comments and point of view of these writers, so ancient in their age yet so modern in their assessment of human nature.

Conclusion

Sangam Era, named after the assembly (sangam) of poets based in Madurai. Tradition holds that there were two earlier such sangams, the works of which have been lost. What has come down to the present-day, dates to the first and second century CE. Sangam literature consists of eight anthologies (Ettuthogai) and ten long poems (Pathupattu). The poetics of these sublime works of poetry are based on the Tolkappiyam, which is the earliest Tamil grammar. At some point after the Sangam period, two epic narratives were written—the Silappadikaram (the Tale of an Anklet) by Ilango Adigal and another closely-linked work, the Manimeghalai (named after its heroine) by Sattanar. Tamil literature goes back to the Sangam Era, named after the assembly (sangam) of poets. Tradition holds that there were three sangams. The first sangam ‘sat’ for 4,440 years and was presided over by the sage Agastya

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