

SANGAM AGE: A UNIQUE IDENTIFICATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE OF TAMILNADU

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ABSTRACT

Tamil Nadu has a great tradition of heritage and culture that has developed over 2,000 years and still continues to flourish. This great cultural heritage of the state of Tamil Nadu evolved through the rule of dynasties that ruled the state during various phases of history. Many of the ruling dynasties gave patronage to Art and Culture that resulted into the development and evolution of a unique Dravidian culture which Tamil Nadu today symbolizes. The Sangam Age in Tamil country is significant and unique for its social, economic, religious and cultural life of the Tamils. There was an all round development during this period. The Sangam literatures as well as the archaeological findings reveal these developments. The Tamil society during the Sangam period was broadly divided into several groups. In the beginning of the Sangam Age, The Tamil society was not organized on the basis of the Vedic caste system, namely Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Sudras. However, the earliest of the Sangam literature, Tolkappiyam refers to the four divisions prevalent in the Sangam society namely, Anthanar, Arasar, Vaislyar and Vellalar, it may be said that this classification roughly corresponds to the Vedic Social division. Another Sangam work, Purananuru mentions the names of ancient Tamil tribes such as Thudiyar, Pannan, and Kadamban. These divisions indicate the complex social structure prevalent in the Sangam Age. Tamil Nadu is one of the most urbanized states of India but most of the people still live in villages.

Keywords: Sangam People, Cultural values, Tradition of Sangam, Social structure, Tamil literature

INTRODUCTION

Historians and Ideologists regard the Sangam period as the 'classical age' of the Tamils analogous to the age of the classics in Greece and Rome and to that of the Renaissance of later period in Europe. Some even consider the Sangam age as the 'Golden age' of the Tamils, which marked a unique epoch in the history of the *Tamilakam*. The archaeological sources found from different explored or excavated sites throw light on the various aspects of the political, social, economic, religious and cultural life of the Sangam age people. However, the precious literary finds of this period discovered from various places in South India provide us with the significant information in this regard. In other words, the Sangam literature is the major source for the study of the Sangam age.

'SANGAM':

The term 'Sangam' literally means 'confluence'. However, in the context of early South Indian history this term can be rendered into English as an assembly, a college or an academy of learned people, held under the patronage of the *Pandyan* kings, who were great lovers of literature and the fine arts. The *Sangam* was a voluntary organization of poets. It was similar to a Round Table Conference, which allowed sitting room only to an authentic poet. This academy or assembly of learned people including the *Sangam* poets produced literary works of high quality.

CHRONOLOGY

There is controversy among the scholars regarding the chronology of the Sangam age. The main reason behind this is the lack of unanimity concerning the age of the Sangam works, which are of great historical value for the study of the Sangam age. On the basis of the composition of Sangam literature K.A.N. Sastri traces the Sangam age to the period A.D. 100-250. According to tradition, the *Tolkappiyam* is the oldest among extant Tamil works. M. Arokiaswami holds that as *Tolkappiar*, the author of *Tolkappiyam*, flourished sometime in the 4th or 3rd c.B.C., the same date can be assigned to this literary work. The corroboration of the literary sources with archaeological data enables us to place the Sangam age in the chronological span of roughly about 600 years from c. 300 B.C to A.D 300.

THE TRADITION OF THE THREE SANGAMS

The theory of the three Sangams establishes that these were successive and not contemporary. The traditional accounts of *Iraiyanar Ahapporul* mention that there were three Sangams (I, II and III) held, which

flourished for 9990 years at frequent intervals. These were attended by 8598 scholars. Sage *Agastya* was the founding father. The *Ahapporul* commentary also mentions about their successive order and the deluges occurring during the intervals between them. These Sangams or academies were patronized by 197 Pandyan kings. According to the tradition, of the three successive Sangams the first two belong to prehistory. All the three were held in the capital of the Pandyas. As the capital was shifted from time to time, old Madurai was the headquarters of the first Sangam, and the second academy was held at *Kapatapuram*. Both these centers were washed away by the sea during successive deluges. The third Sangam was located in modern Madurai. The date of the third Sangam can be established with more probability than the other Sangams. This date is taken to be the first two centuries of the Christian era and probably the century immediately preceding the Christian era. The age of *Tolkappiar* is believed to be in the second Sangam era and the third Sangam era coincides with the Indo-Roman trade with the contemporary Imperial Rome. This dating is based on the evidence available in the accounts of the Greek writers of the time. There are several references to the overseas trading activities between the Mediterranean world and Tamil region. The same is also attested by the Sangam literature. Thus, the third Sangam witnessed the production of numerous extant works. The Sangams can be compared to the French Academy in Europe in modern times, which aimed at maintaining the purity of the language and literary standards. In the beginning, admission to the Sangam was by co-option, but later it was by means of miraculous contrivance by the Lord Siva, who was the permanent president of this august body.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SANGAM LITERATURE:

As mentioned earlier, the Sangam works contain mines of information for the study of early history of *Tamilakam*. They reflect the matter of great historical importance. *Tolkappiyam*, a treatise on Tamil grammar and poetics, composed probably during the second Sangam, is the oldest extant literary work in Tamil. Whereas, the earliest Tamil poetry now available, generally known as Sangam poetry, is said to have been produced during the period of the third Sangam. Modern scholarship use the term 'Sangam Literature' for only those works in verse (prose is of much later origin), which are comprised in the *Ettutogai* (Eight collections), *Pattupattu* (Ten songs) and *Patinenkilkanakku* (The Eighteen Minor Works), which are judged to have been produced in that order during the period A.D 150-250. The so called 'Five Epics' ('the five great poems') include *Jivakachintamani*, *Silappadikaram*, *Manimekalai*, *Valayapathi* and *Kundalakesi*. These are assigned much later dates. Of these the last two are not extant. So, of the three 'great poems' that we now have, *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* are called the 'twin epics' because they form a continuous story narrating the story of a single family – Kovalan (the rich merchant prince of *Puhar*), Kannagi (Kovalan's chaste wife), Madhavi (the dancer) with whom Kovalan lived in wedlock and *Manimekalai*, the child of this wedlock. *Ilango Adigal* was the author of *Silappadikaram*. In the epic, *Ilango* is mentioned as the brother of the reigning Chera king Senguttuvan. *Manimekalai* was written by *Sathanar* mainly to propound the Buddhist doctrine among Tamils. Nonetheless, these poetical works describe about the social, religious, economic and political conditions of *Tamilakam* with the focus on the cities like Madurai, *Puhar* (*Poompuhar/ Kaveripattinam*), *Vanji (Karur)* and *Kanchi*.

While the individual poems included in the above mentioned three groups may be taken to have been produced within the first three centuries of the Christian era, they were very probably collected and arranged in the order in which they are now found, at a much later date. Length of the poem was one of the very important bases for the classification into three broad divisions. The poems in the 'Eight collections' run from three to thirty one lines, whereas in the 'Ten Songs', the shortest poem runs to 103 lines and the longest has 782 lines. The 'Eighteen Minor Works' include the ethical and didactic literature. The didactic literature, which includes the world famous *Tirukkural* is mostly in stanza form, the stanza having from two to five lines.

The *Sangam* collections at present consist of 2279 poems of varying lengths from 3 lines to about 800 lines. Some of these works are attributed to a single author, while others like the *Naladiyar*, contain the contributions of many poets. This *Sangam* poetry available to us runs to more than 30,000 lines. These were composed by 473 poets including women besides 102 being anonymous. Among the poets nearly 50 were women poets. These works reflect fairly advanced material culture. They also show that by the *Sangam* age, Tamil as a language had attained maturity and had become a powerful and elegant medium of literary expression. The language is inevitably archaic, though not perhaps more difficult to understand for the modern Tamil. The *Sangam* poems are of two varieties, though scholars have divided them into various categories on the basis of their subject matter. The two varieties are – the short ode and the long poem. For a historian the short odes are of greater value than the long lyrics. However, generally the historical values of these sources are irrespective of their length.

The oldest are collected in 9 anthologies. The anthologies in which these are collected include – *Ahananuru, Purananuru, Kuruntogai, Narrinai, Kalittogai, Paripadal, Aingurunuru, and Patirrupattu*. These are collectively called Ettutogai. The ten long lyrics or descriptive poems (10 idylls) known as Pattupattu is said to be the ninth group. These consist of – *Tirumurugarrupadai, Sirupanarrupadai, Porunarrupadai, Perumbanarrupadai, Nedunalvadai, Kurinjippattu, Maduraikkanji, Pattinappalai, Mullaipattu and Malaipadukadam*. Of these *Tirumurugarrupadai* is a devotional poem on Lord Muruga; *Sirupanarrupadai* deals with the generous nature of *NalIyakkodan* who ruled over a part of the Chola kingdom; *Perumbanarrupadai* describes about Tondaiman Ilantiraiyan and his capital Kanchipuram; *Porunarrupadai* and *Pattinappalai* sings in the praise of Karikala, the great Chola king; *Nedunalvadai* and *Maduraikkanji* deal with *Talaiyalanganattu Nedunjeliyan*, the great Pandyan king; *Kurinjippattu* portrays the description of the hilly regions and hill life; and *Malaipadukadam* refers to the Chieftain *Nannan* and also to the music and songs to encourage the army, to celebrate the victory won by the king in a war, etc. Nevertheless, these works reflect the worth of the poets in Sangam age.

POLITICAL SYSTEM:

The *Sangam* poems present a sketch reflecting the evolution of the state system in South India for the first time. These works indicate the process of historical evolution in which we find the tribes decreasing in number but existing as well established units by the side of the king. So, the evidences suggest that state as an organized political structure had come into existence although it was not yet stable. Though the democratic conception of the state government had not yet become established the administration of the times partook of the character of the monarchy tempered by the best effects of the democratic principle.

KINGSHIP:

Of the three *muventars* (three crowned monarch) the Cholas controlled the fully irrigated fertile Cauvery (Kaveri) basin with their capital at Uraiyur, the Pandyas ruled over the pastoral and littoral parts with the capital at Madurai, and the Cheras had their sway over the hilly country in the west with Vanji (Karur) as the capital. The *Sangam* works mention the names of so many kings that ascertaining both their genealogy and chronology are highly problematical. However, the genealogy of the Chola kings *Uruvaphrer Ilanjetchenni*, his son Karikala and his two sons, Nalankilli and Nedunkilli have been confirmed to a great extent by the scholars. The kings of other two dynasties include *Muthukudumi Peruvaludi, Ariyapadaikadantha Nedunjeliyan, Verrivercheliyan and Talayalankanathu Ceruvenra Nedunjeliyan* among the Pandyas and *Imayararamban Nedumceralatan, Cheran Senguttuvan and Mantaram Cheral Irumporai* among the Cheras. Monarchy was the prevalent form of government. The “king” was called ventan. He was the head of the society and government. As the head of the society, he took the lead in every event of social importance like the festival of Indra, inaugurations of dance performances, etc. The “king” assumed important titles at the time of coronation. He was equated with gods so as to provide divine sanctity. The ancient Tamils considered the drum, the sceptre and the white umbrella as the three great insignia of his office. According to the *Sangam* classics, kingship descended by heredity from father to son. The king was responsible for maintaining the law and order in the state. He also looked after the welfare of his subjects, worked hard for their good and frequently toured the country to put things in order. The king also had recourse to advisers in the course of his administration. The literature frequently mentions them as *surram* which literally means the men who always surrounded the king giving him advice whenever needed.

CHIEFTAINS:

This was not only a period of great kings but also of great chieftains who were subordinate to the kings. They are divided into two – *velir* and *non-velir*. Some of them were great patrons of letters. Some of the great chieftains of the period included *Palayan Maran of Mohur* (near modern Madurai), *Nannan Venman and Villavan Kothai* (both of the West Coast of the Peninsula), *NalIyakkodan of Oimanadu* (in modern South Arcot), *Tithyan* (Tinnevely region) and the whole band of *Velir* chieftains like *Pari of Parambunad, Vel Pegan of the Palni region, Vel Evvi of Pudukottai region, Vel Avi and Irukkuvel of Kodumbalur* and others. The later *Sangam* period witnessed greater consolidation of monarchical power with the reduction of the traditional chieftains to the position of royal officers. However, in the post-*Sangam* period the royal officers grew stronger and the centre became weak gradually.

ADMINISTRATION:

Now, let us discuss the administrative machinery as described by the *Sangam* texts. The policies of the king were controlled by a system of checks and balances in the councils. *Silappadikaram* refers to the

two types of councils — *Aimperunkulu* and *Enperayam*. The *aimperunkulu* or the council of five members was the council of the ministers. The *enperayam* or the great assembly (perayam) consisted of 8 members (government officers). This worked as an administrative machinery of the state. These two assemblies that of the Five and that of the Eight functioned as administrative bodies, though their function was generally advisory in character. However, their advice was rarely rejected by the king. Their important function was judicial though the *aimperunkulu* seems to have been solely in charge of it as described by *Maduraikkanji*. It is important to note that in spite of all the glory attached to the ancient king, the ethos of Indian administration has been in the direction of limited or popular monarchy. This can be observed in South India from very early times even more than in the north and each followed its own model of administration. Every local unit, however small and in whatever corner it was situated, was administered by a local assembly. The *avai* and the *manram* are the terms used for this unit in Sangam works. Such assembly is commonly referred to as *arankuravaiyam*, which were known for its just decision. These can be taken to be the forerunner of our modern *panchayat*.

DEFENCE:

Major ruling dynasties and chieftains maintained large standing army. The wars were frequent and were fought not only for defence but also with a desire to extend one's territories or to save suffering people of neighbouring kingdoms from tyranny or misrule. Sometimes the wars occurred for matrimonial alliances. Such was the mental state of the people that almost everyone trained himself for war and besides the army maintained by the kings potential soldiers were all over the country to join the royal force in times of need. Even kings trained themselves in such activities. The king maintained all the four kinds of armies mentioned in Sangam literature — the chariot, the elephant, the cavalry and the infantry. There are references to the navy of the Chera that guarded the sea-port so well that other ships could not enter the region. The Sangam texts also mention about the army camp on the battle field. The king's camp was well made and even in camp he slept under his white umbrella and many soldiers slept around him mostly without sword. The camps of ordinary soldiers were generally built with the sugarcane leaves on the sides and cut paddy crop on the top with paddy hanging from it. Generals and officers of high rank were accompanied by their wives on the campaign and stayed in the special camps built for the officers. The king frequently visited the camp of soldiers and officers to enquire about their welfare. He did so even in the night and in pouring rain. Tamil people had a great respect for the warrior and particularly the hero who died in the battle field. Suffering a back-wound was considered as highly disreputable as there are instances of kings who died fasting because they had suffered such a wound in battle. The hero stones were erected to commemorate heroes who died in war. There was the provision for the prison which indicate the coercive machinery of the state. Sangam polity was influenced by the North Indian political ideas and institutions in many aspects. Many rulers sought their origin and association with deities like Siva, Vishnu and ancient sages. Many kings are said to have participated in the *Mahabharata* war like their North Indian counterparts. The rulers of Sangam age were also the patrons of art, literature and performed *yajnas* (sacrifices).

CONCLUSION

Thus, the picture that emerges from the study of *Sangam* literature reflects that the period witnessed the conception of state for the first time in South India. However, it was still in the process of crystallization. *Sangam* polity was characterized by the patriarchal and patrimonial systems in which the administrative staff system and various offices were directly controlled by the rulers. We also notice social inequalities with the dominance of the *Brahmanas*. But the acute class distinction, which appeared in later times, were lacking in Sangam age. Agriculture was the backbone of *Sangam* economy. The trading activities, especially trade relations with the Mediterranean World enriched their economy. The foreign elements also influenced the socio-economic and cultural life of people. The beliefs and customs practised by *Sangam* people suggest the complex nature of their religion. Both, animism and idol worship, were followed during the *Sangam* age. Many of the traditions of the age continued and survived in the later periods and some exist even till today. Thus, the picture that emerges from the study of *Sangam* literature reflects that the period witnessed the conception of state for the first time in South India. However, it was still in the process of crystallization. *Sangam* polity was characterized by the patriarchal and patrimonial systems in which the administrative staff system and various offices were directly controlled by the rulers. We also notice social inequalities with the dominance of the *Brahmanas*. But the acute class distinction, which appeared in later times, were lacking in *Sangam* age. Agriculture was the backbone of *Sangam* economy. The trading activities, especially trade relations with the Mediterranean world enriched their economy. The foreign elements also influenced the socio-economic and cultural life of people. The beliefs and customs practiced by *Sangam* people suggest the

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