

Chapter 9| Sangam Age

The Sanskrit word 'Sangha' means a group of persons or an association. The three important kingdoms of the Cholas, the Pandyas and the Cheras, combinedly were known as **Tamilakam**.

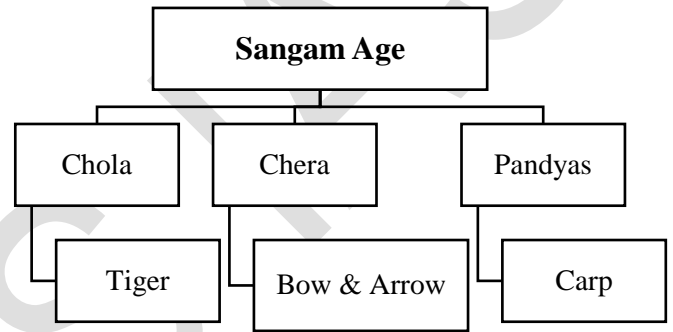
Sangam Literature

Sangam was a college or assembly of Tamil poets held under the Royal patronage of Pandayan Kings in Madurai. It is said that the assembly lasted for 9,990 years and was attended by 8,598 poets and 197 pandyas. According to the legends, there were three Sangams (Academy of Tamil poets) held in ancient South India popularly called Muchchangam. The First Sangam is believed to be held at Madurai, attended by gods and legendary sages. No literary work of this Sangam is available. The Second Sangam was held at Kapadapuram, only Tolkappiyam survives from this. The Third Sangam was also held at Madurai from where a few of these Tamil literary works have survived.

The Sangam corpus includes six of the eight anthologies of poems included in the *Ettutokai* (The Eight Collections), and nine of the ten *pattus* (songs) of the *Pattuppattu* (The Ten Songs). The style and certain historical references in the poems suggest that this literature is most likely composed between the 3rd Century BCE and the 3rd century CE. Around the mid-8th century, they were compiled into anthologies. It is rather interesting to note that the anthologies include a total of 2381 poems ascribed to 473 poets, out of whom 30 poets were women. Apart from these poems, the first two books of the *Tolkappiyam* (a book on Tamil grammar and poetics written by Tolkappiyar) are also a part of the corpus of Sangam Literature. There is also mention of the *Agattiyam*, which was the first known book on Tamil grammar. It was supposedly written by the sage Agathiyar and is believed to be lost beyond redemption. The sage Agathiyar, according to Hindu legends, brought the Tamil language and its syntax to the Tamil people from the god Shiva. It is believed that Tolkappiyar, the author of *Tolkappiyam*, was the disciple of Agathiyar. Poems within Sangam literature were composed on two broader themes of *akam* (love) and *puram* (mostly based on war but also included public poetry such as poems on good and evil, community and kingdom).

Tamil epics such as *Silappadikaram* deals with love story of Kovalan, who prefers a courtesan Madhavi of

Kaveripattnam to his noble wedded wife Kannagi) and *Manimekalai* (a sequel to *Silappadikaram*) deals with the adventures of the daughter born of the union of Kovalan and Madhavi and her subsequent conversion to Buddhism) were written in the period between the 5th and 6th centuries. Bharatam, a Tamil epic, was composed of Perudevanar. It also has great importance in Tamil literature.



Chola

The kingdom of the Cholas with its capital at *Kaveripattanam* was started from the Kavery delta to the adjoining region of modern Tanjore and Trichinopoly. One of their early kings, *Karikala* (A.D. 190), who figures very prominently in ancient literature, is credited with victories over the rulers of the neighbouring Pandya and Chera kingdoms and is believed to have even extended his authority over **Ceylon**. He constructed 160 km of embankment along the Kaveri River. It is mentioned that this was built with the labour of 12,000 slaves brought as captives from Sri Lanka. He defeated a confederacy of Pandyas, Cheras and their allies at the **Battle of Venni**. **Tondaiman Ilandiraiyan** was another important Chola ruler who ruled from Kanchi either as an independent ruler or as a subordinate ruler of Karikala. He was a gifted poet, and in one of his poems, he emphasised the personal character of the king.

Chera

The earliest reference to the Chera (Keralaputra) kingdom can be traced in the Ashokan inscription. Its capital was *Vanji*. The people of Chera Kingdoms were a sea-faring people who, established close commercial relationships with Egypt and the Roman Empire. Tondi, Musiri, Kaveripathanam and Korkai were among the well-known trade centres of Peninsular India. **Udianjerai** is the earliest known Chera king. **Nedunjerai Adan** was one of the prominent kings of

the Chera dynasty, who probably defeated seven crowned kings and won the coveted title of *adhiraja*. It is also claimed that he not only defeated an enemy on the Malabar coast but also captured several *yavana* traders and later released them after taking ransom. **Senguttuvan** was Nedunjeral Adan's son and was their greatest king, also known as the Red or Good Chera. He won a battle against the Mokur chieftain. He also claimed to have invaded the north and fought against an Aryan chieftain in order to obtain stone for an image of Kannagi (the heroine of the *Silappadikaram* and considered the goddess of chastity), and crossed the Ganga and had a bath in the Ganga before bringing the stone back to his country. **Kudakko Ilanjerai Irumporai** was one of the last Chera kings mentioned in the Sangam texts, who is also believed to have won wars against the Cholas and Pandyas.

Pandyas

The kingdom of the Pandyas with its capital at *Madurai* extended to the modern districts of Madura, Ramnad, Tinnevely and the southern parts of Travancore. A Pandya king is also known to have been sent as an embassy to the court of the Roman emperor **Augustus** and **Trojan**. **Nedunjeliyan I** was the earliest known king of Pandyas. It is believed that he died of remorse due to his tragic role (as he ordered the execution) in the death of Kovalan, the hero and the husband of Kannagi of the *Silappadikaram*. It is believed that at a very young age, he defeated a confederacy of Cheras, Cholas and five other chieftains in the battle of *Talaiyalanganam*.

Sangam Polity

The Tamils during the Sangam period were ruled by powerful kings. The kings were regarded as **Vendar** while the local chieftains were called **Mannar**. The form of government was a hereditary monarchy. The eldest son usually succeeded the father. The crowned king held impressive courts to which the subjects were allowed. **The king was regarded as God**. The theory of the divine right of kingship was accepted. But he was always assisted and guided by wise men whether a minister, a poet or a purohitar. These wise men were divided into two categories—**Aimperukulu** consisting of Purohita, the army chief, the ambassador, the spies and the ministers; and **Enperayam** consisting of accountants, executive officials, treasury officials, palace guards, and the leading men among his subjects. Wars occurred on the pretext of cattle-lifting.

Justice

Sangam literature does not describe any posts of Judge disputes that were settled by learned men of high character, and the judgement was based on integrity and impartiality. The Cholas have gained great respect because of this. The king was the supreme magistrate.

The town court was called '**Avai**' and the village court was known as '**Manrams**' which might have been pachayats, were distributed across *Mandalam* (kingdom) in *Nadu* (districts) and *Ur* (town).

Society

The Sangam society was based on binary fission, i.e., Vyarntoc (high-born people), Ilipirappalar (low-born people). However, Tholkappiyar mentions four categories of castes—Andanar (Brahmanas,) Arasar (kings), Vaisiyar (Traders), Velalar (Farmers). Moreover, these communities, called **parciyas** experienced untouchability among higher classes. Women took part in various fields, i.e., they contributed in literature, evidence is from their poetry, and they were allowed to choose their life partners (*love-marriage* was permitted). *Widows* lived a miserable life and the *sati* system was practiced in higher classes of society. The kings and nobles patronised dancers for their entertainment.

Economy

The Sangam economy was the most prosperous. The common people included agriculturists or cow herders, hunters and fishermen. Indigenous industries such as textile, weapon making, ship-building, carpentry, metal smelting, etc. There were also a large number of merchants who indulged in comprehensive trade with foreign countries, particularly with Rome. Roman **coins** of **Augustus Caesar's** period have been found in a large number in South India. However, South Indians did not have a system of coinage and they bartered their goods. Examples of honey and roots exchanged for fish oil and of sugarcane and cornflakes for venison and toddy are mentioned.

Religion

Sangam religion is based on the synthesis of the non-Aryan Tamils and the Aryan Vedic deities. The people of Sangam Tamil generally worshipped stones, water, stars and planets. The Sangam religious worship is classified into three categories— (i) Worship of indigenous Gods, (ii) Worship of exotic Hindu Gods (iii) Worship or faith in exotic non-Hindu rituals. The people worshipped **Murugan, Tirumal, Balram** and **Indra** in the temple known as **Nagar, Koil, Kottam, Purai or Devalayam**. The worship of Vedic deities was also not uncommon. The Vedic practices of Yagna (Velvi) Sraddha and Panda were practised by the Sangam people. The Sangam poems reflect the emergence of new bases of royal prestige and legitimacy by performing Brahmanical sacrifices. For instance, a Pandya ruler, Mudukudumi, took the title *Palshalai* (one who has many sacrificial halls). The influence of Buddhism, Jainism and Ajivikas was paramount.