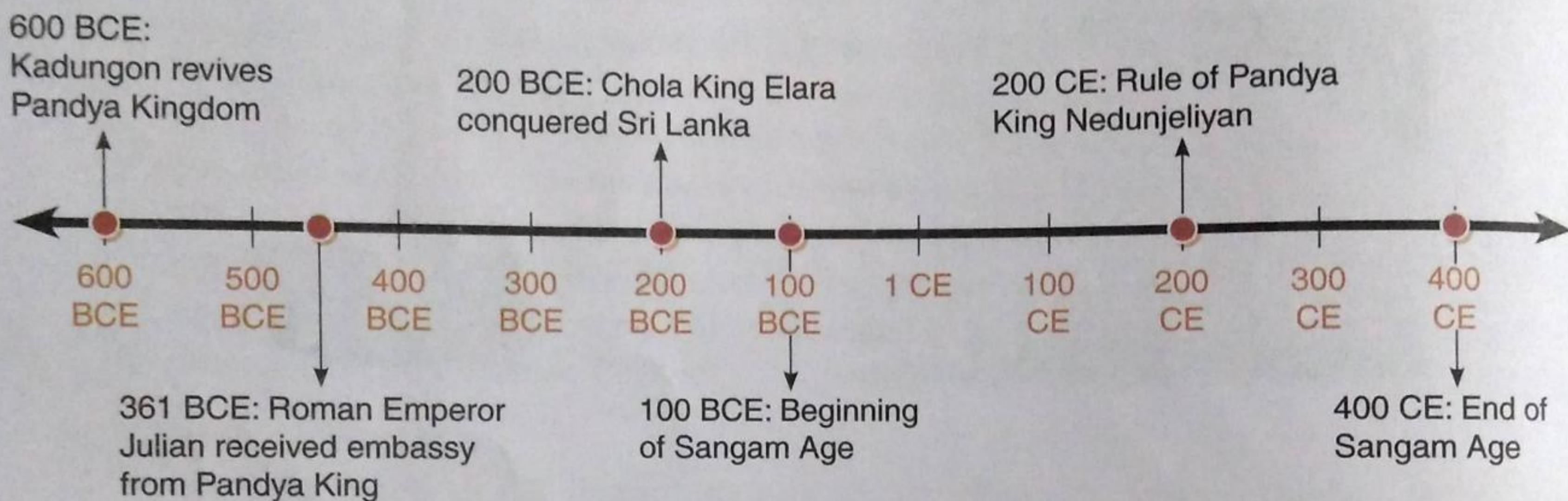


The Sangam Age

Scope

- Sources: Literary — *Tirukkural*; Archaeological — megaliths
- A brief study of society and economy



The Sangam Age is considered the most significant period in the history of ancient South India. The word *Sangam* in Tamil stands for the Sanskrit word *Sangha* meaning 'a group of people' or 'an association'. The Sangam Age refers to a gathering of poets and bards called *Sangam*, who flourished in three different periods in various parts of South India under the patronage of the Pandya kings. The period witnessed a rapid development of literary works called Sangam literature in the southern India.

The different phases of the Sangam literature are:

- **First Tamil Sangam:** It was held in the ancient city of Madurai graced by hundreds of scholars. It is believed that it was also attended by gods and legendary sages. Many valuable treatises were produced. However, all the works of this Sangam have **perished**.
- **Second (Middle) Tamil Sangam:** It was held in Kapatapuram and was attended by several poets. Important members of this Sangam were Akattiyandar and Tolkappiar. *Tolkappiyam* by Tolkappiar, which has survived, is ascribed to the Second Sangam.
- **Third Tamil Sangam:** It was held in present-day Madurai (Uttara or upper Madurai). Over two thousand poems composed by about 470 poets have been ascribed to the Third Tamil Sangam. This is grouped as 'Ten Idylls' and 'Eight Anthologies'. A few of these literary works have survived and serve as useful sources to reconstruct the history of the Sangam period.

The Tamil poets of the Sangam period, both men and women, came from various professions and classes of society such as kings, learned scholars, noble people, accountants, peasants, physicians, traders, teachers, goldsmiths, metal smiths and cattle herders. **The corpus is the oldest extant literature written in Tamil and occupies a canonical position in the cultural history of the Tamil people.** The themes of the secular Sangam poems related to life include kingship, warfare and family life.

Sources

There are two kinds of sources that help us reconstruct the Sangam Age. These are the literary and archaeological sources.

Literary sources

The corpus of Sangam literature includes *Tolkappiyam*, *Ettutogai*, *Pattuppattu*, *Pathinenkilkanakku* and the two epics, *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai*. *Tolkappiyam* by **Tolkappiyar** (one of the twelve disciples of Saint Agastya) is **one the earliest works in Tamil grammar.** The *Ettutogai* or **Eight Anthologies** consist of a large body of poetic literature. The *Pattuppattu* or **Ten Idylls** consists of ten long poems. Both *Ettutogai* and *Pattuppattu* were divided into two main groups—*akam* and *puram*. *Akam* deals with love and related aspects. *Puram* deals with valour, militarism and hero worship.

Tirukkural: *Pathinenkilkanakku* are 18 minor works in which the poems are shorter than any other literary works. **The most important among these is *Tirukkural* (also known as the *Kural*) by Tiruvalluvar.** It has 1330 rhyming Tamil couplets or *kurals* organised into 133 chapters. Each chapter has a specific subject ranging from 'ploughing a piece of land' to 'ruling a country'. *Tirukkural* is organised into three sections—*aram* (virtue), *porul* (realities of life) and *inbam* (pleasures experienced by a man and a woman in their relationship). The greatest value of *Tirukkural* is its universal simple content. It is considered a sacred book by the Tamils.

Archaeological sources

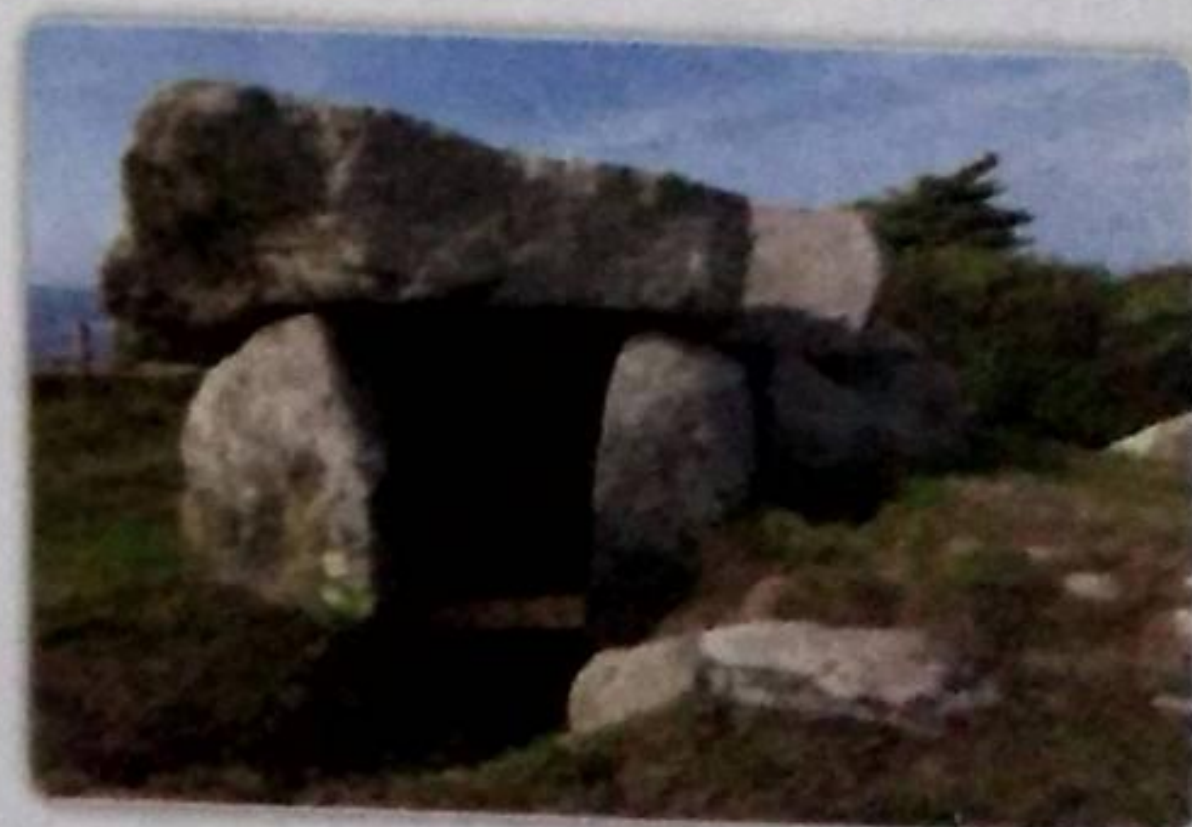
Various archaeological sources such as pottery, megaliths, shells, beads, urns, hero stones and inscriptions support the literary sources.

Review

1. What does *akam* and *puram* deal with?
2. Name the cities where the three Tamil Sangams were held.
3. Under the patronage of which dynasty did the Sangam Age flourish?

Points to Remember

- Tamil literature speaks of three Sangams.
- The corpus of Sangam literature includes *Tolkappiyam*, *Ettutogai*, *Pattuppattu*, *Pathinenkilkanakku* and the epics.
- *Tirukkural* is a classic Tamil Sangam literature authored by Tiruvalluvar.
- *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* are the two epics of Tamil literature.



▲ Megaliths

Megaliths: A megalith (*mega* means 'huge' and *lith* means 'stone' in Latin) is a large and usually rough stone used in prehistoric cultures as (a monument or building block.) (The megaliths not only mark the burial of the dead) but also help people remember where they had buried the dead.) Historians assess that the Sangam period is the last phase of the megalithic period in the Tamil history. Megaliths have been found in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Puducherry and Kerala.

Points to Remember

- Megaliths, hero stones, cave and pottery inscriptions are some of the archaeological sources of the Sangam Age.
- Megaliths were monuments designed and built to bury the dead. They are mostly found in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Kerala.

Since the nineteenth century an increasing number of megalithic burial sites were excavated. From these sites, we came to know a lot about their social customs and practices. The megalithic people of South India practised a mixed economy based on agro-pastoral production. These sites provided proofs which revealed the existence of a professional class of potters who were adept in making ceramics. Pottery was one of the important economic activities. However, hunting and gathering practices are also seen evident in the archaeological remains and paintings of that period.

Society

The Sangam literature gives us a clear and complete picture of the Sangam Age.

The castes

(The earliest phase of Sangam society, as described in the *Tolkappiyam*, was based on the five-fold classification of land — the hills, pastoral, agricultural, deserts and coastal. These ecological variations determined their occupations such as hunting, cultivation, pastoralism, fishing, diving and sailing.) The occupation further determined their social position.

In the beginning of the Sangam Age, the Tamil society was not classified on the basis of the Vedic caste system. The four Vedic *varnas* were distinctly of a later period. (The *varna* system was brought in by the immigrating Brahmins.) The earliest of the Sangam literature, (*Tolkappiyam*, refers to the four divisions prevalent in the Sangam society. They were the

Brahmins, kings, traders and farmers. This classification roughly corresponds to the Vedic social division but they ignored many others and they remained unclassified. (Only the Brahmins were the dvijas (twice born) who qualified for the sacred thread.) There are references to slaves who were known as adimai (one who lived at the feet of another) (The prisoners of war were reduced to slavery. Slave markets were also there.)

Position of women

The women like men, enjoyed certain freedom and went around the town freely. They participated in temple festivals as depicted in Sangam poems such as Kalittogai. However, the position of women was one of subordination to men. Though there are references to (women being educated and some of them even became poets with the best of education, this cannot be applied to the general mass.) They had no right to property. After the death of their husbands, women preferred living the life of a widow or performed sati, which was considered almost a divine act.

The worship of Kannagi or Pattini ('the chaste woman') was prevalent and became famous with Senaguttuvan's establishment and spreading of the cult to places like Malva in the North and Sri Lanka in the South.

Marriage

Marriage was prevalent but not much information is available on marriage during the Sangam Age. Tolkappiyam mentions eight forms of marriage which shows the Aryan influence. It is similar to the ones mention in the Dharmashastra. There are references to secret marriages, wooing and elopements as well besides a consented marriage by parents and society.

Dress, ornaments and fashion

People belonging to the higher social class wore dresses of fine muslin and silk. People generally wore a two piece garment. The men and women of the Sangam Age were fond of using oil, aromatic scents, coloured powders and sandal paste. (Ornaments were worn round the neck, arms and legs by both men and women.) Valuable ornaments of gold and precious stones were worn by the men and women of upper strata. The lower class wore bracelets made of conch-shell and necklaces made of coloured beads. Men had long hair. People were fond of flowers and women used them to decorate their hair.

Houses

People lived in two kinds of houses—mud houses and brick houses. The poor lived in thatched houses covered with grass or leaves of the coconut or palm. The rich people lived in well-built brick houses, which even had gopurams (a monumental tower, usually ornate, at the entrance of any temple found in South India). Silappadikaram mentions that these houses were decorated with beautiful artistic lamps.

Entertainment

The main sources of entertainment included dances, music, religious festivals, bull-fights, cock-fights, marble-game, hunting, dice-games and wrestling. Kuruntogai mentions children playing with toy-carts. Silappadikaram gives details about music and different kinds of musical instruments. Drums and flutes were sold in shops at Puhar and Madurai.

Food and drinks

The food consisted of rice, milk, butter, ghee, curd and honey. The people ate various kinds of sweets made with curd, jaggery, puffed rice, milk and ghee. Non-vegetarianism was equally popular. Spiced curry and rice is also mentioned in the Sangam texts. The Brahmins preferred vegetarian food and avoided alcoholic drinks.

Religious beliefs and rituals

Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism coexisted in the Tamil region during this period. The Shaivism and Vaishnavism forms of Hinduism were also well-known during this period. The four important deities, as mentioned in the Tolkappiyam, were Murugan, Tirumal, Indra and Varuna. Indra was worshipped as the rain god. The worship of Murugan, the second son of Shiva and Parvati, was also prevalent. Besides them, Lakshmi (the goddess of prosperity), Mayon (guardian of the forest region), Kaman (the god of love), the Moon-god, Sea-god and other gods were worshipped too.

Review

1. What were the gopurams?
2. How many divisions in the Sangam Age does Tolkappiyam talk about?
3. What kind of dresses did people generally wear during this age?

Answer the following :

1. Discuss the literary and archaeological sources to reconstruct the history of the Sangam Age.
2. Regarding the Sangam literature, discuss the following:
 - a) The Caste.
 - b) Position of women.
 - c) Dress, ornaments and fashion.
3. Discuss the entertainment, food habits and religious beliefs of the people of the Sangam Age.