

# Economic Condition During Sangam Age

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## Abstract

*Histonans, Scholar and writers have consistently striven to find a solution to the so called mysterious period in the History of Tamilaham, the Sangam. The attempts so far made to unravel the social, economic and cultural life of the Tamils by scholars have been confined to certain aspects of the 'Age'. There are numerous evidences for the sentimental and over drawn pictures, imbued with linguistic and communal chauvinism and equally unacceptable distortions of true facts, deliberate falsification and even unauthoritative conclusions. The means and methods applied by some of the scholars are neither scientific nor satisfactory; neither authoritative nor trustworthy. Prejudicial and patriotic feelings often cloud facts and figures and lead the historians to the extremes. It is held that the Tamils had the Sangam Age. By that very fact with coming of the Sangam Age, the history of the Tamils gets more shape and the obscure chronology to a certain extent becomes clear. For the Sangam Age we have evidences which have come down to us in the form of 'Sangam literature'.*

## Introduction

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## **Historicity of the Sangam**

However, the Sangam classics, comprising the extent literary works of the early Tamils, contain abundant data of historical value. They throw a flood of light on the political, and still more on the social and religious conditions of the early Tamils. But the determination of the chronology of the Sangam Age on the one hand and the sifting of the historical data from the vast mass of miscellaneous material on the other, is by no means easy. The origin of Sangam, the celebrated literary Academy, is itself shrouded in mystery.

Sangam is a Sanskrit word which means an 'association of the monks'. The word 'Sangam' has come down to Tamilaham during the penetration of the Buddhist philosophy and migration of the Buddhist monks. But P.T. Srinivasalyengar's suggestion that the Tamil Sangam was established on the model of Vajra-Nandi's Jain or Dravida Sangha of A.D. 470 at Madurai seem to be unacceptable. It is generally believed that the academy of the Tamil poets was established by the Pandyan kings and patronised by a succession of the king's of the Pandyan Kingdom. It is held that the three Sangams flourished at Then Madurai, Kapadapuram and the present Madurai on the banks of the river Vaigai respectively. A large number of Tamil poems said to have been composed by the members of that body of poets has come down to us and is collectively known as 'Sangam Literature'. The age in which these poets lived and wrote their literary works is called the Sangam Age.

## **The Number of Sangams**

The next question regarding the total number of the Sangams is also a point of dispute among scholars. Most of the scholars and historians agree that there was a Sangam in the present Madurai. They deny the views that are found in the commentary on Iraiyanar. A happorul regarding the existence of Three Sangams. A few Sangam Literature mention about the loss of the land South of Kanniyakumari. In the extreme South, the early Pandyas were said to have had their capital at Then Madurai. Ceylonese Chronicle, Mahavamsa refers to then Madurai. According to the chronicles 'Dakshina Madurai' does not mean the modern Madurai. According to traditions the Pandyan capital was shifted from then Madurai to Kapadapuram. Plini mentions the land beyond Kanniyakumari. Kalittogai and Silappadikaram have faint references to the submergence of the Pandyan territory. On the whole, it seems quite likely that Kapadapuram, was the second capital of the Pandyas. The third and the last seat of the Sangam, according to tradition and later literature, was Vada Madurai, popularly known as Madurai. The fantastic antiquity assigned to the Three Sangams

is by no means acceptable. Historians like K.A.N. Sastri accept the existence of only one Sangam, the last mentioned in the tradition.

### **Economic Condition**

As common to all societies of the ancient world the economy of the Sangam people was 'rural' in nature, yet self-sufficient. There was economic disparity in the country. The Sangam people were engaged in various professions to earn money. The wealthy, at least most of them, spent a part of their wealth on charity. In most cases, the chief motive force for charity was not sheer humanitarianism but a desire to earn "undying Pukal". The virtue of charity inculcated in the mind of the people benefited the rich as well as the poor - the former derived spiritual comfort and the latter obtained the material benefit. So riches and poverty came round and round by turn like the wheels of chariot. Contemporary writers pointed out that the misery of the poor people was the result of sin and not due to bad administration and mal-distribution of wealth.

### **Agriculture**

Agriculture was the basic but noble industry. It was a fundamental and esteemed profession. All kinds of people had to depend on agriculture. Valluvar in his Kural has paid tributes to the agriculturists (ulavar) for "they alone led a truly useful life, the rest being only parasites and sycophants". The cultivated land was abundant. The major rivers - Palar, Pennar, Kaviri, Vaigai and Tamraparni - irrigated the land. Tondaimandalam was mostly irrigated and the fertility of the land sprang up the economy of that region. The Chera country was irrigated by Periyar, Chola country by Kaviri and Pandyanadu by Vaigai respectively. The kings maintained big pools, wells and tadagams. Karikala spent much for irrigation, so he was called Karikalvalavan. Paddy was the chief agricultural product. Velalas were the people concerned with land. Superior Velalas owned them and inferior Velalas actually engaged themselves in tilling them. Tanjore was the granary of Tamilnadu.

### **Industry**

Although agriculture absorbed a majority of population, Sangam age did not fail to have advanced stage of industries and crafts. Spinning and weaving were the most important and widely practised crafts. Normally women were interested in weaving and spinning. Weaving was a specialised industry in certain very important places like Uraiyur and Madurai, which still continue to be leading centres of the handloom industry. Periplus mentioned the fineness

of Tamil textile, fabrics and we have abundant references in contemporary native literature about the beauty and fineness of the textile products.

The Porunaratrappadai mentions “beautiful cotton cloth so fine that the eye cannot follow the course of yarn and cloth bearing such designs as make it look like the slough of the snake. It is curious that most of these details continued to be true even now, and one can see such products of such design and make manufactured in the famous textile centers of Tamilaham even today. More over these cloths were exported to Ceylon, Burma, Malaya and other places.

Jewels and pearls were famous in this period. The kings crown and throne were, decorated with valuable pearls. Silappathikaram says that Pandya country was famous for pearls. This could be known from the Pandyan princess Kopperumdevi used Muthu, whereas Kannaki used Manikkam. Rope making, manufacture of leather sheaths (for war weapons) manufacture of bangles, making baskets out of wicker were other industries. The smithy was an important industrial 'factory' where weapons of war were forged and repaired. Carpentry was a very common industry and was practiced as a hereditary profession. The carpenter was engaged in assisting house building, and in building boats, canoes and ships and chariots. Making jaggery cakes out of the sugarcane juice, in rural factories was a popular occupation. Salt manufacture was the only other industry of the sea-coast which was largely practiced. The large number of fishermen living in coastal areas made fishing a regular industry. In view of the fairly extensive shipping of which there is mention, boat-building and other allied industries also must have flourished.

## **Trade**

Tamil literature of the Sangam period in corroboration with foreign contemporary sources informs us the high status of trading or commercial activities of the Tamils. Though internal trade of some sort or other must have been of older standing than foreign trade, we get glimpses of foreign trade even in the oldest Sangam texts. A community that manufactured a large variety of consumer and luxury goods was in a position to lead a brisk and commercial life. Hereditary crafts men pursued their profession at the ancestral work place. But there was no role as to one community being assigned to one particular profession. Nakkirar, the poet considered to be a Brahmin was engaged in the conch cutting industry. Poet Kannan

Puhundarayattanar was a palm-leaf (olai) seller; Sittalai Sattanar was a seller of millet and grains. Hence, trade and commerce occupied the central part of Sangam Economy.

### **Internal Trade**

Internal trade was not energetic for want of facilities and communications. Goods were carried from one place to another place where it was not available. Barter was the most prevalent system in internal trade. It means that goods were exchanged for goods. Paddy constituted the most commonly accepted medium of exchange especially in the more rural parts of the land. Well-purified white salt was sold for paddy. Paddy was sold by mentioning its price in terms of salt. Honey and roots were exchanged for fish, oil and arrack. Sugarcane and rice flakes were exchanged for venison (flesh of the deer) and toddy. In the Pandya land the prosperous house wife whose house was well stocked with white paddy into the vessel in which the wandering bard had brought the fish. It is noteworthy that the system of purchasing food stuffs, especially vegetables from street hawkers by paying for them in rice in paddy still continues in rural areas. A different type of barter which can be called 'deferred exchange' was known as Kuridirppai which means taking a loan of a fixed quantity of a commodity to be repaid as the same quantity of the same commodity at a later date. In view of the wide-prevalence of the system of barter, it may be supposed that coins were used for purposes of exchange mostly in the case of foreign trade.

There were two kinds of markets as there were two kinds of traders. 1) Nalangadi (the morning bazaar) 2) Allangadi or Andikkadai, (evening bazaar) were the two types found in cities like Puhar and Madurai. Many transactions took place in such markets. People of many countries speaking many languages crowded in the bazaar streets of Madurai. Maduraikkanchi, a Tamil poem gives a vivid picture of Madurai markets. The merchants functioned often in a body. Apart from the tendency to associate as 'guilds' and 'chambers of commerce' the wandering hawkers literally went about in large numbers together. In the Sangam age, 'Caravans' of traders used to go from place to place as a whole group and never even in small units for they were in mortal fear of highway robbers. Such merchant bodies were called Vanikachchattu. The merchants sold their goods by openly announcing the profit they were aiming at. It was believed that honest trade led to increased trade which meant increased wealth; integrity in trade was generally appreciated.

## **Foreign trade**

Tamilaham carried on an extensive trade with foreign countries from very early times. The great secret of her foreign trade is her possession of certain commodities which have already been in great demand in foreign markets. Pepper, ginger and rice among food products, sandal wood, ahil, cardamom, cinnamon and turmeric among stimulating spices; ivory and pearls for luxurious ornaments; gems like beryl and corundum, cotton and cotton fabrics for dress; monkeys, deer and peacocks among favourite domesticated animals, birds, tigers, elephants among the wilder animals were the commodities exported to the foreign countries. Number of ports like Kavirippumpattinam, Korkai, Musiri, Tondi, Puhar etc., served their purpose.

The most ancient trade contract was probably with the ancient land of the Hebrews. Bishop Caldwell observes “the oldest Dravidian word found in any written record in the world appears to be the word for peacock in the Hebrew text of the book of kings and chronicles in the list of the articles of merchandise, brought from Tarshish or Ophir in “Solomon ships”. The brilliant record of naval achievements of the Imperial Cholas of the later centuries were not mere accidents, but a continuation of an ancient native tradition. Ship building was a native industry in Tamilaham.

The ship was called Marakkalam as it was made of wood. From the small catamaran (Kattumaram) to big ocean-going ships with mast and sail, all kinds of boats were in use in the Tamilports. The chief ports had light-houses called Kalamkaraiilanguchudar ‘the bright light that beacons the ships’. Tamilaham imported from the Yavana land excellent wine. The expression Yavanarnan kalamtandatan kamalateral occurring in a stanza in Purananuru refers to this article of import; the expression has been interpreted in two ways taking Kalam to mean a ship or a wine cup’. The Yavanas exported to Tamilaham sugar candy also. Horses with a noble height came to Puhar by the sea.

Gold and silver coins were used both for external and internal trade, as it has been proved by the Archaeological excavations Vannakar was an officer who had the charge of checking the coins to find out whether it was minted by the government or not. Coins of the government could be easily recognised because of the dynastic symbols. Chera coins had Bow as their symbol, the Chola had Tiger and Pandya had Fish. The Pallava coins contain symbols like Nandi and Lion. The government had treasury in temples. We come to know that Madurai Minakshi Temple also had a treasury.

## Revenue and Finance

Accumulating wealth was considered a desirable pursuit especially for a king. A peculiar feature of the royal financial system was that while the subjects could be obliged to pay their taxes at the point of the sword, the king could not be compelled to spend his revenues on the people in any particular manner, i.e., while the king could demand, the subjects had to pay. Budgetary provisions regularising public revenue and public expenditure were therefore unknown. The royal expenditure was determined by the king himself. Some kings undertook public works of permanent importance. Irrigation work, channel system, supply of water to the wet fields must have been major concern of kings. Construction of temples and such other institutions of public importance was undertaken by kings who aspired fame. It was well-known that Senguttuvan undertook a series of military adventure to construct temple for Kannaki. The kings celebrated and patronised cultural activities. The distinction between private domestic royal expenditure and public expenditure was understood and how the royal revenues were spent could not be enquired into. In short there was no audit system. Public expenditure on Education, Health was almost absent.

In spite of the barter system in vogue, metallic currency was not known... Kanam and Pon were the gold coins used. Kasu was another coin in use. We get references of *Kanam* and *Ponin* in the poem *Paditruppattu* where poet Arisililar and poetess KakkaiPadiniyar are mentioned receiving presents in such coins. The Tamils used the word *ento* to denote numerals as well as counting. *Ma* and *Veli* were measures of land. *Ambanam* was a cubic measure. *Nali* and *Allaku* were small sized cubic measures. Gold was measured in *Tulam* which was also known as *Kain* in the Sangam age. *Kuppidu* was the popular unit of distance. Thus Agriculture, Industry and Trade flourished during the Sangam period. As common to all societies of the ancient world the economy of the Sangam people was predominantly rural in nature.

## Chronology of Sangam Works

Historians hold different opinions on the date and period of the Sangam works. There are theories which assign the period upto 15,000 B.C. to 30,000 B.C. Again all possible dates ranging from 300 B.C. to 1000 A.D. are assigned. Many of these theories are based upon incredible legends and Brahminical claims. Therefore evidences furnished by literature, inscriptions and foreign accounts and a scientific study of the language are to be depended upon for ascertaining the date and duration of the Sangam works. Among the different theories, three are to be examined, being of some historical relevance.



One theory is that the Sangam collections belonged to the fourth to fifth century A.D. This is the view of K.N.Sivaraja Pillai and S.Vaiyapuri Pillai. Their contention is that Samudra Gupta subdued Vishnu Gopa of Kanchi and Mantaraja of Kurala, who is equated with Mantaram Cheral Irumporai of Sangam Literature. But the difficulty is that Mantaraja of Kurala is traced to a ruling dynasty of the Vindhya region and not to the Kerala country. In fact the Gupta expedition did not cross the Vindhyas and did not reach South India. Therefore on the basis of Gupta invasion, the date of the *Sangam* works cannot be decided.

A second theory assigns the Sangam works to the sixth century A.D. According to N.P. Chakravarti the Brahmi inscriptions of the third and second centuries B.C. indicate that during that period Tamil was in its crude form and therefore the well developed Tamil of the Sangam classics could not have emerged before the sixth century A.D. But this theory is to be considered as incorrect if the regional variations in the development of scripts are taken into account. In Madurai country the southern variation, because of local conditions, reached an advanced state even before the fifth century A.D. If the Sangam works are brought to the Pallava period that is the sixth century A.D., their content sare to agree with those of the Pallava period. But this is not the case and hence this theory is not accepted.

In a third theory L.D. Swamikannu Pillai on the basis of astronomical data that are given in Silappadikaram and Paripadalascribes the Sangam to the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. V.Kanakasabai too holds the view that in the light of our present day knowledge of epigraphy and chronology the scene of the Madurai Sangam is to be shifted from the first century A.D. to the seventh and early part of the eighth century A.D. However, the political and religious conditions, as depicted in the Sangam works, do not agree with the contemporary situation in the Tamil Country of the seventh and eighth centuries. While the Sangam period was marked by religious peace, the seventh to eighth century was a period of conflict between the Saivites on one side and the Jains and the Buddhists on the other. Besides, the Sangam works make no reference to the Pallavas, who gained supremacy during this period.

Therefore this theory is untenable. Some of the western scholars particularly Caldwell and Burnell hold the view that there was no Tamil literature before the ninth century A.D. and hence the Sangam works should be assigned to a later date. But this view too is rejected on the ground that the social and political conditions that are depicted in these works are



different from those of the ninth century. A convincing theory is that the Sangam classics were composed during the early centuries of the Christian era. As Vincent A. Smith writes: "The Augustan Age of the Tamil literature may be placed in the first three centuries of the Christian era". K.A. NilakantaSastri supports this view, for he too has stated that the Sangam Literature belongs to the early centuries of the Christian era. This conclusion is based upon certain significant corroborations.

The most specific among them is the Senguttuvan-Gajabahu synchronism. In the Silappadikaram it is mentioned that the Chera ruler Senguttuvan in the 50<sup>th</sup> year of his reign consecrated the image of Kannakiina temple built at Vanchiand among these vernal rulers who attended the function was Gajabahu of Lanka. There were two Gajabahus, the second of the set ruled in the twelfth century but there was no great Chera ruler by that time. Therefore it must be the first Gajabahu. From the Mahavamsa it is found that Gajabahu I ruled over Lanka from 173 to 193 A.D. As some of the classics were the products of the Senguttuvanera, the Sangam age is to be identified with the same period. This is further strengthened by the reference in Silappadikaram to NurruvarKannar, who is identified with the Satakarnis of the Vakataka Dynasty, who ruled over the Deccan during the same period. 2) Further a comparative study of the language in the Sangam works and the Tevaram songs supports this view. The Tevaram belonged to the seventh century A.D.

The differences in the diction, idiom and prosody that are found in the two respective collections put the Sangam works centuries before the Tevaram. 3) Moreover, the data in the Velvikkudi Grant indicate that Kadungon, the Pandyan chief, reconquered the Madurai country from the Kalabras towards the close of the sixth century A.D. The Kalabras were in possession of the country for several generations and prior to that the Early Pandyas, who were the heroes of the Sangam literature, ruled over the land. This makes it clear that the Sangam collections belong to the first few centuries of the Christian Era. Added to these, there are striking coincidences of information on trade, towns and sea ports.

Western writers like Strabo, Pliny and Periplus and the Sangam poets refer to the trade between the Tamil Country and Europe of the age of Greek and Roman Empires. Roman coins that were minted in the early centuries of the Christian Era were discovered in the Tamil Country. In view of these striking evidences it is to be concluded that the Sangam collections belonged to the first three centuries of the Christian Era. The duration of the

Sangam period is calculated in two and a half centuries. This is made on the basis of the regnal years of different generations of rulers, particularly the Cheras and the Pandyas.

## Conclusion

The Sangam works suggest that the ancient Tamils made considerable progress to their socio-economic pursuits. They gave due importance to cultivation, irrigation and trade. The distinctions between man and man were not based on caste but on occupation and habitat. Learning and letters received due recognition. Yet social life was not free from anomalies. Despite the advantages that were presented by the sea and contacts with the East and West no considerable advances were made in sea faring and colonisation. The rulers were despots and they wasted the resources of the state in petty wars. The conflicts were marked by savage atrocities. While a select few wielded power and enjoyed pleasures of life, the vast majority of the people languished in tribalism and led a primitive and savage life.

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