

CC-1/GE-1: HISTORY OF INDIA FROM EARLIEST TIMES UP TO 300 CE

XI. THE SANGAM AGE: SANGAM LITERATURE, THE THREE EARLY KINGDOMS, SOCIETY & THE TAMIL LANGUAGE

All literary works are connected to the historical contexts in which they are produced and in which they circulate. The earliest literature of South India is represented by a group of texts in old Tamil, often collectively referred to as Sangam literature. A tradition recorded in post-7th century texts speaks of three Sangams or literary gatherings in ancient times. The first is supposed to have been held in Madurai for 4,440 years, the second at Kapatapuram for 3,700 years, and the third in Madurai for 1,850 years. Although the details of this legend obviously cannot be considered historical, the similarity of language and style within the Sangam corpus suggests the possibility that they were the product of some sort of literary gathering. The case for the historicity of at least the third Sangam is that some of the kings and poets associated with it are historical figures.

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 The style and certain historical references in the poems suggest that they were composed between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE.

There are two kinds of Sangam poems—akam and puram. Akam poems had love as their theme, while puram poems were mostly about war. The poems were modelled on the bardic songs of older times and were orally transmitted

for an indefinite period before they were written down. The anthologies include a total of 2,381 poems ascribed to 473 poets, 30 of whom were women. The poets came from cities and villages and had varied social and professional backgrounds. They included teachers, merchants, carpenters, astrologers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, soldiers, ministers, and kings. Due to their varied themes and authorship, Sangam poems offer a good idea of everyday life in the time when they were composed.

Of the several Tamil epics, two of the best known are the Silappadikaram and Manimekalai. The former is a little earlier than the latter, but both were composed in about the 5th–6th centuries CE.

The ancient Tamil of the Sangam poems is different from modern Tamil. The Tolkappiyam is the oldest surviving Tamil grammar; parts of it go back to the early centuries CE. Such grammatical texts tell us about the structure of ancient languages and they also contain incidental historical references to their time.

Languages of the Dravidian family- Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada and Tulu -are today largely spoken in south India. Among the Dravidian languages Tamil has the oldest literature, followed by Kannada.

REFLECTION OF SOCIETY FROM SANGAM TEXTS

Sangam texts suggest several stages of social evolution. The narrative texts are considered works of heroic poetry in which heroes are glorified and perpetual wars and cattle raids are frequently mentioned. They show that the early Tamil people were primarily pastoral. Traces of early megalithic life appear in the Sangam texts. "The earliest megalithic people seem to be primarily pastoralists, hunters, and fishermen, though they also produced rice. Hoes and sickles occur at many sites in peninsular India but not ploughshares. Other iron objects include wedges, flat celts, arrowheads, long swords and lances, spikes and spearheads, horse-bits, and the like. These tools were meant primarily for war

and hunting. This has some parallels in the Sangam texts which speak of perpetual war and cattle raids. The texts suggest that war booty was an important source of livelihood. They also state that when a hero dies, he is reduced to a piece of stone. This reminds us of the circles of stone that were raised over the graves of the megalithic people. This may have led to the later practice of raising hero stones called virarkal in honour of the heroes who had died fighting for kine and other things. It is likely that the earliest phase of social evolution reflected in the Sangam works relates to the early megalithic stage.

The narrative Sangam texts give some idea of the state format which the army consisted of groups of warriors, and the taxation system and judiciary arose in a rudimentary form. The texts also tell us about trade, merchants, craftsmen, and farmers. They speak of several towns such as Kanchi, Korkai, Madurai, Puhar, and Uraiyur. Of them, Puhar or Kaveripattanam was the most important. The Sangam references to towns and economic activities are corroborated by Greek and Roman accounts, and by the excavation of the Sangam sites.

By the second century BC, the megalithic people had moved from the upland into fertile river basins and reclaimed marshy deltaic areas. Under the stimulus of contact with the elements of material culture brought from the north to the extreme end of the peninsula by traders, conquerors, Jaina, Buddhist, and some brahmana missionaries, they began practising wet paddy cultivation, founded numerous villages and towns, and developed social classes. Cultural and economic contacts between the north and the deep south, known as Tamizhakam, became extremely important from the fourth century BC onwards.

FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF STATE AND CIVILIZATION

The route to the south, called the Dakshinapatha was valued by the northerner because the south supplied gold, pearls and various precious stones. The Pandya state was known to Megasthenese who lived in Pataliputra. The earlier Sangam texts were familiar with rivers Ganges and Son and also with Pataliputra, the capital of Magadhan empire. The Asokan inscription mention Cholas, Pandyas, Keralaputras, Satyaputras living on the borders of the empire.

THE THREE EARLY KINGDOMS

The southern end of the Indian peninsula situated south of the Krishna river was divided into three kingdoms: Chola, Pandya, and Chera or Kerala. The Pandyas are first mentioned by Megasthenes, who says that their kingdom was celebrated for pearls.

The Pandya territory occupied the southern most and the south-eastern portion of the Indian peninsula, and it roughly included the modern districts of Tirunelveli, Ramnad and Madurai in Tamil Nadu with its capital at Madurai. The Sangam literature mention one or two Pandya conquerors. However, this literature shows clearly that the state was wealthy and prosperous. The Pandya kings profited from trade with the Roman empire and sent ambassadors to the Roman emperor Augustus. The brahmanas enjoyed considerable influence, and the Pandya king performed Vedic sacrifices in the early centuries of the Christian era.

The Chola kingdom, which came to be called Cholamandalam (Coromandel), in early medieval times, was situated to the north-east of the territory of the Pandyas, between the Pennar and the Velar rivers. We have some idea of the political history of the Cholas from the Sangam texts. Their chief centre of political power lay at Uraiyu, a place famous for cotton trade. It seems that in

the mid-second century BC, a Chola king named Elara conquered Sri Lanka and ruled over it for nearly fifty years. A clearer history of the Cholas begins in the second century AD with their famous king Karikala. He founded Puhar and constructed 160 km of embankment along the Kaveri river. This was built with the labour of 12,000 slaves who were brought as captives from Sri Lanka. Puhar is coterminous with Kaveripattanam, the Chola capital. It was a great centre of trade and commerce, and excavations show that it had a large dock. One of the principal sources of the wealth of the Cholas was trade in cotton cloth. They maintained an efficient navy.

Under Karikalas successors Chola power rapidly declined. Their capital Kaveripattanam, was overwhelmed and destroyed. Their two neighbour powers, the Cheras and the Pandyas, expanded at the cost of Cholas. what remained of the Chola power was almost wiped out by the attacks or Pallavas from the north. From the fourth to the ninth century, the played only a marginal part in south Indian history.

The Chera or the Kerala country was situated to the west and north of the land of the Pandyas. It included the narrow strip of land between the sea and the mountains, and covered portions of both Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In the early centuries of the Christian era, the Chera state was as important as the states of the Cholas and Pandyas, and owed its position to trade with the Romans. The Romans set up two regimens at Muziris coterminous with Cranganore in the Chera state, to protect their interest. It is said that they also built there a temple of Augustus.

The history of the Cheras is a continuing battle with the Cholas and Although the Cheras killed the father of the Chola king Karikala, the Chera king also lost his life. Later, the two kingdoms temporarily became friends and concluded a matrimonial alliance. The Chera king next allied with the Pandya rulers against the Cholas, but the Cholas defeated the allies, and it is said that as the Chera

king was wounded in the back, he felt shamed and committed suicide.

According to the Chera poets, their greatest king was Senguttuvan, the Red or Good Chera. He routed his rivals and established his cousin securely on the throne. It is said that he invaded the north and crossed the Ganges. All this however seems an exaggeration. After the second century, Chera power declined, and we know nothing of its history until the eighth century.

The principal interest of the political history of these three kingdoms lies in the continuing wars they fought with one another and also with Sri Lanka.

Although these states were weakened by the wars, they greatly profited from their natural resources and foreign trade. They grew spices, especially pepper, which was in great demand in the Western world. Their elephants supplied ivory, which was highly valued in the West. The sea yielded pearls and their mines produced precious stones, and both these were exported to the West in substantial quantities. In addition, they produced muslin and silk. We hear of cotton cloth as thin as the slough of a snake. The early Tamil poems also mention the weaving of complex patterns on silk. Uraiyur was noted for its cotton trade. In ancient times, the Tamils traded with the Greek or Hellenistic kingdom of Egypt and Arabia, on the one hand, and with the Malay archipelago and China, on the other. As a result of trade, the words in Greek for rice, ginger, cinnamon, and several other articles were derived from Tamil. When Egypt became a Roman province and the monsoon was discovered at about the beginning of first century AD, this trade received great impetus. Thus, for the first two and a half centuries, southern kingdoms conducted a lucrative trade with the Romans. With the decline of this trade, these kingdoms began to decay.

SOCIETY

Income from trade, war booty, and agricultural produce enabled the king to maintain groups of professional warriors and also to pay the bards and priests who were largely brahmanas. The brahmanas first appear in the Tamil land in

the Sangam age. An ideal king was one who never hurt the brahmanas. Many brahmanas functioned as poets, and in this role they were generously rewarded by the king. The kshatriyas and vaishyas appear as regular varnas in the Sangam texts. The warrior class was an important element in the polity and society. The captain of army were invested with the title of enadi at a formal ceremony. However we have no clear idea about the vaishyas.

Civil and military offices were held under both the Cholas and Pandyas by vellalas or rich peasants . The ruling class was called arasar, and its members had marriage relations with the vellalas, who formed the fourth caste. They held the bulk of the land and thus constituted the cultivating class divided in to rich and poor. The rich did not plough the land themselves but employed labourers to undertake this. Agricultural operations were generally the task of members of the lowest class.

Some artisans were not differentiated from agricultural labourers. The pariyars were agricultural labourers who also worked with animal skins and used them as mats. Several outcastes and tribes suffered from extreme poverty and lived from hand to mouth. We notice sharp social inequalities in the Sangam age.

REFERENCE AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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