

3. SOCIETY, ECONOMY, RELIGION AND CULTURE OF THE SANGAM AGE

Learning Objectives:

1. To know the social life of the Sangam Tamils.
2. To know the life of the people in five different landscapes or Tinai.
3. To know the condition of women during the Sangam Age.
4. To know the economic life of the Sangam Tamils.
5. To understand the religion and culture of the Sangam Tamils.

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 literature as well as the archaeological findings reveal these developments.

Social Life:

In the Sangam Age, the Tamil people had a common language and culture. But, they lived in five different natural landscapes.

These natural landscapes or geographical regions were known as **Tinai**. The five **Tinai** referred to in the Sangam literature were **Kurinji, Mullai, Marudham, Neydal** and **Palai**. Each Tinai was geographically distinct from the other. Moreover, each of these regions had reflected their own social characteristics.

Kurinji:

The Kurinji Tinai refers to the hilly region. The people in this region were called **Vettuvār** and **Kuravār**. Hunting was their primary occupation. They also cultivated fruits and vegetables and gathered honey. They worshipped **Murugan** or **Seyon**.

Mullai:

It is a forest tract with green pastures. The people of this region domesticated animals. The people of the Mullai region were called as **Kovalar** or **Ayar**. Being shepherds, they produced dairy products like milk, curd and ghee. Their chief deity was **Thirumal** or **Mayon**.

Marudham:

The region Marudham refers to fertile and cultivable lands. Most of the people in this region were called as **Vellalars** because they practised agriculture. They cultivated paddy, sugar cane and a variety of fruits like mango, plantain and Jackfruit. Irrigation methods were also known to them. Their chief deity was **Indra** or the rain God.

Neydal:

Neydal was the coastal region. The people of this region were known as **Parathavar** or **Meenavar**. Fishing was their natural occupation. They were also famous sailors. A few people of this region produced and sold salt. They were called as **Umanar**. The God of the Neydal region was **Varunan** or the God of the sea.

Palai:

The term Palai refers to the desert region. But, there was no desert in the Tamil country. Therefore, it could be said that whenever there was drought due to failure of rains, that region was called as Palai. The people of this region were called as **Maravar** or **Kalvar**. They were forced to live as robbers due to poverty. Maravar were also known for their heroism. These people worshipped the Goddess **Kotravai** or **Kali**.

We have already studied about the pre-historic society in the Tamil country. The Sangam age was the continuation of the pre-historic period. As in the pre-historic period, the life of the people in the Sangam age had remained simple and natural. The Sangam Tamils had chosen their occupation according to their natural environment. Although they lived in five different regions, there was a close interaction between them. This interaction had resulted in the development of a common language and culture in the Tamil country.

Learn the importance of protecting the natural environment for healthy living.

Social Divisions:

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 organised on the basis of the Vedic caste system, namely Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. However, the earliest of the Sangam literature, Tolkappiyam refers to the four divisions prevalent in the Sangam society namely, **Anthanar**, **Arasar**, **Vaisiyar** 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 **Tudiyar**, **Panan**, and **Kadamban**. These divisions indicate the complex social structure prevalent in the Sangam Age.

Status of Women:

The Sangam literature describes the position of women in ancient Tamil society. In the Sangam Age, women were treated with special consideration. The natural feminine qualities such as **Achcham**, **Madam** and **Nanam** were insisted in the Sangam literature. Their most important virtue was chastity. The heroine of Silappathigaram, **Kannagi** had been hailed for her chastity and worshipped by the people. The women were given freedom to choose their life partners during the Sangam period. The concept of love had been elaborately discussed in **Agananuru**.

Women treated their husbands as equivalent to God during the Sangam period. They were not permitted to remarry and inherit property. **Sati** or the custom of self-immolation at the death of one's husband was not generally prevalent during this period. However, some women from the royal family indulged in the practice of Sati. According to the Sangam literature, a woman had to play different roles in the family such as a dutiful wife, responsible mother and an ideal hostess to guests. Women's education was also insisted during the Sangam Age. We come to know a few women poets like **Avvaiyar**, **Kakkai Padiniyar** and **Nachchellaiyar**, whose verses are found in the Sangam literature. Sangam women were also known for their courage. However, from the post-Sangam period, there was a decline in the status of women.

Food and Hospitality:

Rice was the staple food during the Sangam period. The food-habits varied among the people according to their economic status.

The rich had their feasts every day, while the poor took simple food. Chewing **betel leaves** was most common among the people. Offering **betel leaves** to guests had become a social formality. Hospitality was a special virtue of the Sangam Tamils. The Sangam literature describes how hosts had always been waiting to welcome guests.

Try to know the custom of hospitality prevalent in modern times.

Dress and Ornaments:

The Sangam Tamils paid more attention to their dress. It varied according to their status. The rich wore silk and fine cotton garments. The middle class people generally wore two pieces of clothes made of cotton. Women paid much attention to their hairstyle. They used flowers like Jasmine to decorate their plaits and tufts. Both men and women used perfumes made of sandal and flowers.

The Sangam literature refers to a variety of ornaments worn by both men and women. They were made of gold, silver, pearls and precious stones. Poor people used ornaments made of shells and beads.

Economic Life:

Generally, the Tamil society had enjoyed an affluent economy during the Sangam Age. Agriculture, industry, trade and commerce made the Sangam Tamils almost self-sufficient. Exports were also made to the other parts of the world.

Agriculture:

The chief occupation of the people was agriculture. Paddy was the main crop. Millet, grams and sugarcane were also

cultivated. Irrigation through rivers, tanks and wells was used for cultivation.

Occupation:

Weaving and spinning were the most important crafts of the Sangam period. **Uraiyur** and **Madurai** were the main centres for the manufacture of cotton fabrics. The weavers produced and exported fine cotton clothes. The word **Kalingam** refers to very nice garments. The Sangam literature refers to clothes, which were thinner than steam. Silk clothes were also produced in the Tamil country. Other craftsmen like the carpenter, blacksmith, goldsmith and potter had practised their respective occupations. Fishing and hunting had also remained as important occupation during this period.

Trade and Commerce:

In the beginning of the Sangam Age, the barter system of trade was followed. Generally, the people exchanged their commodities with their neighbours. For example, the people of Kurinji region exchanged honey with the people of Neydal region for getting fish and salt. Likewise, the Mullai people gave their milk products to Marudham people to get rice from them.

Later, when they began to use coins, trade picked up rapidly. Local markets came up and they were known as **Angadis**. Both Day Market (**Nalangadi**) and Evening Bazaar (**Allangadi**) existed in port towns. The PATTINAPPALAI refers to their existence at **Puhar**. Goods from distant places were brought to these markets. The expansion of trade led to the growth of towns. Moreover, export of goods to other countries had increased. (It will be described in the next chapter).

Religion:

We have already referred to the five Gods worshipped in the five different regions. In addition to these Gods, the Sangam Tamils worshipped their ancestors. They erected memorial stones called as **Nadukal**. They were also known as **Hero Stones** or **Virakkal**. Such stones were erected in memory of those who died in battles.

Try to understand the significance of the ancestral worship. This tradition is still in practice.

The Sangam people had also worshipped the natural objects. For example, the Sun, Moon, Earth, rivers and mountains became their objects of worship. Neem tree was considered sacred.

Cultural Life:

The Sangam Tamils enjoyed a high degree of cultural life. Their interests in education, literature, music, dance, drama and festivals have been described in the Sangam literature.

Education and Literature:

Education was common for all, men and women, rich and poor and for different communities. Parents attached importance to the education of their children. The Purananuru describes that it is the duty of the father to make his children learned.

“ It remains the duty of the father to make his children learned” - Purananuru.

The bulk of the Sangam literature written by about 500 poets indicates the importance given to education. The poets of the Sangam period played vital role in the social and culture life of the people.

Recreation:

The people of the Sangam Age had spent their time in excellent ways of recreations. Poetry, music, dance and drama were significant. The Sangam poets made the kings as well as the people through rendering beautiful verses. The bards made merry in the king's courts. The rulers and nobles patronized them with liberal donations. Hunting was another important recreation. The young and energetic took part in duels, while the old played indoor games like dice. Women and girl children had their own games to play and evinced much interest in swimming.

Fine Arts:

The Sangam Tamils had also established their greatness in fine arts. They developed the concept of **Muthamizh – Iyal, Isai** and **Natakam**. The Panars or bards were experts in music. They moved from place to place, singing bards in praise of kings and local chieftains. Later, the Tamils developed musical notes or swarams. The musical tune was known as **Pann**. Several musical instruments were also used. Shells, drums, flute and lutes were famous instruments. Karikalan had been hailed as **Ezhisai Vallavan**. The art of dancing was encouraged during the Sangam period. **Attam** and **Koothu** were performed during festivals. **Tholkaappiyam** refers to **Natakam** or Drama. The art of painting was also known to the Sangam Tamils. They celebrated several festivals. **Karthigai, Onam** and **Indra** festival were some of them. The Indra festival had been celebrated annually at Puhar. The dance and music had its religious connotation from the earliest times.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Pupil has learnt that the social life of the Sangam Tamils was based on the natural environment.
2. Understands the status of women in the Sangam age - their duties, different roles such as wife, mother and hostess. Realises that women play important role in the development of society.
3. Learnt that agriculture, industry and commerce were prevalent during the Sangam period.
4. Understands the religion and ancestral worship prevalent during the Sangam Age.
5. Learnt about the education, literature, music and dance during the Sangam period. Realises the responsibility of preserving such ancient arts - Koothu and Natakam.

SELF - EVALUATION**I. Say True or False:**

1. Hunting was the chief occupation of the people of the Kurinji region.
2. There were plenty of deserts in Tamil Nadu.
3. The Sangam women possessed the right to inherit property.
4. The custom of receiving guests was popular during the Sangam period.

II. Choose the Correct Answer:

1. Coastal region was known as
(a) Kurinji (b) Marudham (c) Neydal

2. Those who produced and sold salt were called as
(a) Paradhavar (b) Vellalar (c) Umanar
3. The book which refers to the trade in Puhar
(a) Pадhitrupaththu (b) Pattinappalai (c) Thirukkural
4. The chief God of Marudham region
(a) Varunan (b) Murugan (c) Thirumal

III. Fill in the Blanks:

1. The hilly region was known as ----- tinai.
2. The people of Palai region worshipped -----.
3. The guests were offered with ----- during the Sangam period.
4. ----- was known as evening bazaar.
5. ----- were known as Muttamil.

IV. Match the Following:

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Paradhavar | (a) Vettuvar |
| 2. Kurinji | (b) Poetess |
| 3. Nachchellaiyar | (c) Sangam Age worship |
| 4. Seyon | (d) Neydal |
| 5. Nadukal | (e) Mullai |

V. Answer briefly:

1. Mention the social divisions of the Sangam Age.
2. What were the five Tinai?
3. Mention a few women poets lived during the Sangam period.
4. Write about the dress and ornaments of the Sangam people.
5. Write a note on agriculture during the Sangam period.

6. What were the chief occupations of the Sangam people?
7. Write about the barter system of trade during the Sangam period.
8. Write a note on Nadukal worship.
9. What were the important festivals of the Sangam period?

VI. Answer in detail:

1. Describe the social life of the Sangam Tamils.
2. Explain the status of women during the Sangam Age.
3. Write about the economic life of the Sangam Tamils.
4. Describe the culture of the Sangam Age.

VII. Fill up the boxes with the help of your lesson:

<i>Tinai</i>	<i>Nature of the land</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Deity</i>
Kurinji			
Mullai			
Marudham			
Neydal			
Palai			

Practical Exercises

1. Learn from your teacher the details of the five Tinais.
2. Make models of five Tinais and exhibit in your classroom.
3. Write essays on the socio-economic and cultural life of the Sangam Tamils.
4. Learn about the ancient music instruments of Tamil Nadu.
5. Compose dance and drama based on the Sangam poems and enact them in school functions.