



# The Role Of Sangam Literature In Understanding The History Of Tamilakam

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**Abstract:** Sources are crucial in writing history and reconstructing past events. Three types of sources are available to reconstruct ancient Indian history: archaeological sources, literary sources, and foreign accounts. Sangam literature, originating in ancient Tamil Nadu, is the earliest known literary source to study the history of the Sangam age. The Sangam age is considered the “Golden Age” of the Tamils. Sangam literature includes poems and epics that provide information about the ancient Tamil society’s social, political, and religious conditions. The world-famous Tirukkural, written by Thiruvalluvar, is a work of the Sangam age. Sangam consists of a group of Tamil poets who flourished under the royal patronage of the “Three Crowned Kings”, the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas. This research paper aims to understand the significance of Sangam literature in Ancient South Indian history.

**Keywords:** Sangam literature, Tamilakam, Cilappatikaram, Ettuthokai, Tirukkural, Pattupattu, Manimekalai, Three Crowned Kings.

## Introduction

The term Tamilakam refers to the region where the ancient Tamil-speaking community lived in the southern part of India. This term originated from two old Tamil words, “Tamil” and “Akam” which translates to “Home of Tamil.” The Tamilakam region consists of the present-day Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. Sri Lanka was also included in the Tamilakam region; it was known as Eelam at that time. Tamilakam was ruled by three Tamil dynasties: the Cholas, the Cheras, and the Pandyas. The period during which literature, art, and architecture flourished in ancient South India is known as the Sangam period or Sangam age. This period spans from 300 BCE to 300 CE. The literature of this period is known as Sangam literature which is written in old Tamil. Aside from the archaeological evidence of ancient southern India, Sangam literature is the main literary source that provides information about the history of the kings, culture, religion, and society of these three dynasties.

## Poems in Sangam Literature

Sangam means a gathering, academy or meeting. According to Nakkirar’s account, there were three academies (Sangam). The first Sangam was situated in the southern Maturai, which lasted for 4,440 years and its members included gods and sages. The second Sangam was situated in Kapatapuram, which lasted for 3700 and included 3700 poets. Both the first and second academies works are gone only Agattiyam and Tolkappiyam, two grammar texts of the second Sangam survived. The third Sangam, situated in present-day Madurai lasted for 1850 years under the royal patronage of 49 kings. There were 473 poets in the Sangam age out of which 107 were unknown and 30 were women. These poets belonged to different places, social statuses and professions. Sangam Poems were of two types “Akam” and “Puram”. The Akam poems were of love theme and Puram poems were war-themed. The third Sangam consists of anthologies. The three most famous anthologies are Pattupattu (The Ten Idylls), Ettuthokai (The Eight Collection) and Padinenkilkanakku (The Eighteen Minor Didactic Poems). Other than these anthologies five major epics were also written in the Sangam age. They are Cilappatikaram, Manimekalai, Jivakachintamani, Valayapti and Kundalakesi. Out of these five epics, only the first three are available. These anthologies and epics throw light on the social, economic and religious conditions of the Tamil society.

## Ettuthokai (The Eight Collection) and Pattupattu (The Ten Idylls)

Ettuthokai and Pattupattu both belong to the Patinenmelkanakku (Eighteen Greater Works). Each poem has a different theme. Ettuthokai is a collection of eight poetic books, which are Narrinai, Kuruntokai, Ainkurunuru, Pattirrupattu, Paripatal, Kalittokai, Akananuru, and Purananuru. This collection consists of both akam and puram poems.

Pattupattu consists of ten poems: Pattinappalai, Perumpanattrupadai, Porunarattrupadai, Tirumugattrupadai, Nedunalvadai, Mullaipattu, Maturaikanchi, Kurincipattu, Malaipatukatam, and Sirupanattrupadai.

## The Twin Epics

The Cilappatikaram and Manimekalai are referred to as the twin Epics of Sangam literature. Epic is a long narrative poem which describes the glorious deeds of their national heroes. The Cilappatikaram (The Tale of an Anklet) was written by a Jain prince Ilango Adigal, the youngest brother of the famous Chera King Senguttuvan. The Manimekalai was written by Kulavanikan Seethalai Satana.

The Cilappatikaram consists of thirty cantos arranged in three books. These three books are named after the capital cities of the Chola, Chera and Pandya. The name of the first book is "Puhar" which is the capital city of the Chola kingdom. The second book is "Maturai" named after the capital of the Pandya kingdom and the third book is named after the capital of the Chera Kingdom "Vanci". Cilappatikaram is considered the Iliad of Tamil literature.

A summary of The Cilappatikaram, the story is set in Puhar the ancient port city and the capital of The Cholas. The story is about a happily married couple Kovalan and Kannagi, their happiness ends when Kovalan leaves Kannagi for a beautiful courtesan named Madhavi. He eventually comes back to Kannagi as he thinks Madhavi is in love with someone else and she also thinks that Kovalan lost interest in her. As a dedicated wife Kannagi accepted him back and they both left Puhar for Maturai, the capital of Pandya kingdom. They decide to restart their life by selling one of Kannagi's anklets since Kovalan lost everything he had. They go to Maturai with a Jain nun Kavunti. After reaching the capital city of Pandya kingdom Kovalan sets out to sell his wife's anklet when he walks out a humped bull appears before him which is considered a bad omen but Kovalan doesn't notice it and goes to the goldsmith to sell the anklet. The goldsmith examined the anklet rushed to the king and told him that Kovalan was the one who stole the queen's anklet. In anger king orders to execute Kovalan. Without proper investigation, the king ordered the execution of Kovalan and this led to his hamartia. The actual culprit was the goldsmith and he was relieved that he was safe as Kovalan is blamed for the theft. Learning about her husband's death Kannagi rushes to the palace asking the king for an explanation. She accused the king of murdering her husband but the king said it was his duty to execute the thief. Kannagi proves her husband's innocence by breaking open her other anklet and showing them that her anklet contains jewels and the queen's anklet contains pearls. This proved Kovalan's innocence and the king's mistake of not properly investigating. The Pandya king Nedunchelivan accepts his mistake and dies of guilt he is followed by his wife. Kannagi in rage curses Maturai and the city goes into flames. Kannagi moves to Chera kingdom where she goes to heaven with her husband Kovalan. The Chera king Senguttuvan ordered to carve an idol of Kannagi using stones from the Himalayas. Kannagi is a symbol of a loyal and ideal wife.

The Manimekalai is the sequel to The Cilappatikaram. This epic consists of thirty cantos and a preamble. It is considered an anti-love poem which is named after the protagonist of this epic. The protagonist Manimekalai is the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi who are the main characters in The Cilappatikaram. This story is about a Chola Prince Udayakumara who was madly in love with Manimekalai but she wasn't interested in him as she wanted to become a Buddhist nun unlike her mother Madhavi, who was a courtesan. Manimekalai wanted to feed the poor and join the Buddhist sangha. This epic has a strong Buddhist influence.

## Significance of Sangam literature

The Women poet's contribution to Sangam literature shows that they were well educated and education wasn't restricted to the women of that period. Ettuthokai consists of 2,371 poems. The notable poets in this collection are Kapilar, Nakkirar, and Avvaiyar. The Purananuru, a part of Ettuthokai, includes poems about widowhood and the difficulties faced by widows. There are ten poems in pattupattu out of which Two poems are written by Uruttiran Kannanar. He wrote Pattinappalai and Perumpanattrupadai. Pattinappalai is a long poem on the Chola capital Kaveripattinam and the Chola king Karikala. This poem gives information about King Karikala and his achievements along with the details of the industry and commerce of that time. Perumpanattrupadai is about Tondaiman Ilandiraiyan, ruler of Kanchipuram, he was the contemporary of The Chola king Karikala. Another poem which mentions the Chola king Karikala is Porunarattrupadai, this poem was composed by Mudattamakanniar. Nakkirar also wrote two poems, Tirumugattrupadai which is about Lord Muruga (Kartikeya) and Nedunalvadai is about the Pandya king Nedunchelivan. The poem Nedunalvadai explains in detail the apartments of women in Pandya King Nedunchelivan's palace. The other two poems composed in praise of the Pandya king Nedunchelivan are Mullaipattu and Maturaikanchi. Maduraikanchi, written by Mankuti Marutanar, who is believed to be King Nedunchelivan's court poet, depicts city life and the religions practised by the people of Maturai, the Pandya Kingdom's capital. Malaipatukatam, composed by Perunkunrur Perunkaicikanar, is about the chieftain Nannan and his court, and also describes the mountainous regions—malai in Tamil meaning "mountains." Kurincipattu is a poem that explores premarital love among people from hilly regions. Mullaipattu, Malaipatukatam, and Kurincipattu all portray forests, mountains, and hills, providing valuable information on the geography of ancient Tamil kingdoms.

Tirukkural or Kural is the most famous work of the Padinenkilkanakku. It was written by Thiruvalluvar. This masterpiece work is considered as the “Bible of the Tamil. Tirukkural is written in three parts. The name of the first part is Aram, the second is Porul and the third part is Inbam. Tirukkural is a book about morals and ethics, this book is considered the most important text for Tamil literature and the people of Tamil Nadu.

The Cilappatikaram and Manimekalai are both folklore epics. The Cilappatikaram features the merchant class Kannagi and Kovalan, showcasing the prosperity of the city during the Sangam age. The epic also mentions Hindu gods and goddesses, such as Lord Muruga, Goddess Lakshmi, and the God of wealth Kubera. The Jain nun accompanying Kannagi and Kovalan also demonstrates the practice of Jainism in ancient times. Manimekalai, the sequel to Cilappatikaram, is a story about a girl who is a dancer like her mother Madhavi and wants to be a Buddhist nun. The story is about her spiritual journey rejecting all the material happiness. This epic provides information about the religious conditions of Tamil society, highlighting the religious rivalry between Jainism and Buddhism. The epic also describes funeral rites and festivals practised in ancient Tamil society. The appearance of a humped bull when Kovalan went out to sell the anklet, which is considered a bad omen and later the death of Kovalan shows that Tamils believed in superstitions. Both the epics are very important from a religious point of view. Tiruttakkatevar, a Tamil Jain poet, wrote the epic Civakacintamani (also known as Jivakacintamani). The story revolves around a young man named Jivaka, who lives with his eight queens after regaining his father’s kingdom. After leading a pleasurable life for many years, he eventually renounces the throne, entrusting it to his son and becomes a Jain monk. This epic reflects Jain's kingship and traditions. Jivakacintamani is also referred to as the “Mana Nul” (Book of Marriages).

## Conclusion

This research reveals that Sangam literature is not just a collection of poems but also the most important source of valuable information about the history, culture, religion, and society of the ancient Tamilakam. The region, ruled by “Three Crowned Kings”, was rich in literature, art, and culture. Sangam literature provides valuable information about the Chola, Cheras, and Pandya kingdoms, and this information is supported by archaeological evidence making it a vital part of ancient South Indian history. The Sangam age declined after the invasion of the Kalabhra tribe. The beliefs and customs of the people during the Sangam age continue to survive and exist today. The gods and goddesses worshipped in those days are still worshipped now. Even today Kannagi is often worshipped as a deity in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Sri Lanka. Sangam literature shows that Jainism and Buddhism not only thrived in northern India but were also practised in the south. The main themes of Sangam literature include nature, love, war and the life of Tamil people. Sangam literature is a very important source for understanding the Tamil Civilization. With the contribution of these poets, we can now learn a lot about the ancient Tamil civilization. Many texts are lost but still, we can reconstruct many events of the past through the existing texts.

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