UNIT 7  SANGAM LITERARY TRADITION*

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7.0 OBJECTIVES
After reading this Unit, you will understand:
- how the Sangam classical poems are organised,
- the chronology of the various texts,
- what kind of historical consciousness is revealed through the Sangam poems, and
- the significant historical accounts that Sangam poems narrate.

7.1 INTRODUCTION
For the study of past, literature plays a very significant role as it marks the beginning of ‘history’ in a narrow sense. The history of the Tamil region, encompassing the modern day Tamil Nadu and Kerala, in the early historical period can be reconstructed through literary sources known as Sangam literature, epigraphical sources and archaeology. In this Unit we will focus on the literary sources. This Unit deals not only with the reconstruction of history as gleaned from the Sangam literature but also with the perceptions of poets on the past and their historical consciousness and the legitimacy for the rulers they praised. This Unit analyses the historical consciousness in the Sangam period also called as classical period as construed by Sangam poems.

7.2 SANGAM LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION
Sangam literature refers to a corpus of early Tamil literary works which were passed down as oral tradition and dated to the early centuries of the Common Era. The word Sangam (or an academy) is a term first found in the medieval texts and

* Dr. S.B. Darsana, PG and Research Department of History, Holy Cross College, Tiruchirappalli
assigned to Tamil works which were compiled in an academy. According to Nakkrinar who wrote a commentary on Iraiyanar Akaporul, a medieval work of 8th century CE, there were three Sangams. All the Sangams or academies of poets were patronised by the Pandya rulers. The first Sangam took place at Ten Madurai (ten means South) which was engulfed by sea. The academy had 4449 poets and lasted for 4440 years. The names of the poets include the legendary names of deities of Lord Shiva, Lord Muruga, Lord Kubera and sage Agasthya. The second Sangam took place at Kapatapuram that lasted for 3700 years with 3700 poets. Both Ten Madurai and Kapatapuram were engulfed by sea according to legends. The works produced during these two Sangams were lost due to the vagaries of time.

The third Sangam lasted for 1830 years patronised by 49 Pandya kings. The present works are extant from third Sangam which include Tolkappiyam (ancient Tamil Grammatical work) Ettu tokai (Eight anthologies – A collection of eight literary works namely Natrinai, Kuruntokai, Inkarunuru, Patitruppathu, Paripadal, Kalittokai, Akananuru and Puramamuru), and Pattu pattu (ten long poems such as Tirumurugaatruppadai, Porunaratruppadai, Sirupaanaatruppadai, Perumppaanaatruppadai, Mullaippattu, Maduraikanchi, Nedunalvaadai, Kurinjipaatu, Pattinapalai, and Malaipadukadam).

An academy of poets lasting for more than nine thousand years, as presented in the later texts, is an improbable occurrence. Though the tradition regarding the three Sangams is perhaps a later day phenomenon, assigning a hoary past for the literature itself is a method of increasing the importance of the textual tradition its importance in the contemporary political-social milieu. The Sangam poems are considered as the outpourings of the bards and poets with true emotions, certain reality and a certain degree of exaggerations.

The poems were originally transmitted as oral tradition and then they were codified in the later period. Fixing the chronology of the various works of the corpus is a difficult task. The composition of poems and the oral tradition probably started around 3rd century BCE. The redaction and codification of the oral literature into anthologies took place around 8th century CE. It is difficult to assign a fixed date for the academy as different works belonged to different time scale.

The themes of the songs can be classified into two main genres—Akam and Puram. The Akam poems deal with the inner life of the people such as love life, and marriage, while Puram deals with outer life such as war. The concept of tinai mentioned in the Sangam literature belong to both the genre.

The concept of tinai in Sangam literature indicates both the landscape as well as the love or war situations as the case may be. In Akam they are classified into fivefold landscapes where the inner life of the hero and heroine is discussed in five different stages. Kurinji is the mountainous landscape or tinai that is associated with the union of lovers, Mullai or the pastoral land is associated with the scenario of the lady waiting for her love; Marutam or the riverine zone is connected to the infidelity of the hero, Neytal or the coastal zone is associated with anxiety and separation and Palai or the dry arid zone is associated with the many hardships as well as separation of lovers. These ecozones also have their own flora, fauna, time, deities, occupation, and season. The poems of a specific ecozone or tinai should adhere to other conditions of that landscape. In these akatinai poems, the names of the main personae (hero, heroine, their friends, and the foster mother are the main characters) are not revealed. However the names of the kings and chieftains along with mythical and historical events find place in these poems.
In *Puram*, the *tinai* concept is associated with the outer life, consisting of warfare, morality and values in life. The stages of warfare are narrated as *tinais*. Each *tinai* is characterised by a flower used in the different stages of warfare. *Vetchi tinai* marks the beginning of warfare with cattle lifting. *Vanchi tinai* deals with the preparation of war, while *Uzhinai tinai* describes the siege. *Tumpai tinai* is associated with the real battle and *Vakai tinai* deals with the victory in the battle. The *Puram* songs refer to the names of the characters mainly the kings, chieftains and battlefields. A few poems are philosophical in nature emphasising on the impermanence of life.

**Check Your Progress-1**

1) Discuss in detail about the Sangam literature.

2) How is the *tinai* concept articulated in the Sangam literature?

3) Name the three Sangams and their tentative periodisation.

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**7.3 HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND HISTORICAL TRADITION IN SANGAM LITERATURE**

The Indian society is known for its historical heritage, and Tamil region is also not an exception. The Tamils have preserved the stories related to their heritage and history till today for many centuries. There still is a practice of giving a hoary past to the ancient events based only on literary evidence. The historical and archaeological investigations undertaken are used to provide an extended antiquity to the culture of the Tamils.

The Sangam literature with its varied themes show strong evidence of historical collective memory. The collective memory of the past in the form of historical tradition finds place in the poems that directly or indirectly reflect the same for contemporary audience. The memory is selective and definitely not the whole essence of past is percolating to the narratives of the contemporary society. Only the events that the society remembers or want the future to remember are given importance.

Elements of historical antecedents, and contemporary narratives of historical information are found in both the genres of the classical poems. *Tolkappiyam*, the extant ancient Tamil grammar work, refers to the previous works 240 times without referring to the names of the works thus indicating that there is a precedent and set
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rules before the codification of grammar rules.

Though the Sangam works are considered as the outpourings of the bards who had sung the praise of the worldly activities of the kings or the love situations (Puram and Akam), they have intentionally or unintentionally recorded the historical events that had happened in the past or the episodes of their contemporary times. The past events along with the contemporary cultural narratives can be discerned from the poems. The contemporary narratives take precedence over the recording of the past event. These two components of historical consciousness are discussed in this Unit.

A) Description of the historical past, wherein the genealogy of the kings, reference to past events such as invasion, Vedic sacrifices, mythical ancestry for the kings are discussed.

B) Historical narratives that give information about the developments and events as noticed by the bards, minstrels and poets.

These narratives are usually interwoven in the poems directly in case of Puram songs and indirectly in case of Akam songs.

7.3.1 Description of the Past

The Sangam poems, while describing the love or war situations, nonchalantly insert the details of the bygone era in a poetic manner. While describing the past, the genealogy, lineage, itihasa-purana traditions, history from other regions are discussed.

Genealogy of the kings

The Sangam poems sporadically referred to the genealogy of kings. The three major kings, namely, the Cheras, Cholas the Pandyas are usually mentioned with their ancestry. One of the eight anthologies Patitrupathu details the Chera history with epilogues added in the later period, probably in the early medieval period.

There are ‘ten tens’ (ten poems in ten divisions) in the poem, each division describing a Chera King. The first ten and the last ten are found missing and we have no information about the names of the first and the last rulers mentioned in Patitrupathu. The second ten describes about the valour of the king Imayavaramban Neducheralathan, son of Utiyan Cheralathan and Venmal Nallini. He was said to have affixed the Chera emblem of bow on the Himalayas and took war booty by defeating his enemies. He brought enormous wealth from the enemies and redistributed to his subjects in his capital Vanchi. He was credited with defeating the Kadambas who lived in island and cut the totem tree. The second ten was written by Kumattur Kannanar, who received 500 villages and a part of income of the king as a gift from the King Imayavaramban.

The third ten was written by the poet Palai kauthamanar in praise of Palyanai Selkezhukuttuvan, who was the brother of Imayavaramban Neducheralathan. The epilogue narrates the story of the poet wanting to reach the heaven and requesting the king to help him perform the ten sacrifices for gods. At the end of the tenth sacrifice, the poet Kauthamanar and his wife reached heaven. The king was credited with the victory over the fort of Akappa in the region of Umbarkadu.

The fourth ten was written by Kappiyatru Kappiyanar on the king Kalankai Kanni
Narmudi Cheral and he was gifted with ‘forty hundred’ gold coins and a part of the kingdom to rule. Kalankai Kanni Narmudi Cheral was the son of Imayavaramban and his queen Paduman Devi. His famous victory was against the king Nannan of Puzhi region at the battle of Vaakai Parantalai.

The fifth ten praised the Chera King Kadal Pirakottiya Senkuttuvan and it was written by Paranar who was gifted with the revenue from the place of Umbarkadu. He was the son of Imayavaramban Neducheralathan by a Chola princess. He was credited with defeating the kings who ruled between the Himalayas and Kumari, obviously an exaggerated account. He defeated nine Chola princes in the battle of Neri Vayil. The sixth ten was written by Kaakaipadiniyar Nachchellaiyar on the Chera King Adukotpattu Cheralathan. The lady poet was said to have received hundreds and thousands of gold coins, and the region which can be covered by eyesight from the hilltop. Adukpattu Cheralathan was the son of Cheralathan, a king belonged to the Chera lineage of the Kutanadu, and his queen Devi, who was the daughter of Velaavi Komaan. He was said to have brought back the goats to Tondi, a Chera port on the west coast that have been stolen from his kingdom to Dandakaranya. He had a title vaanavaramban indicating sky is the limit for his power.

The seventh ten was written by poet Kapilar on Selvakadungo Vaazhiyadan. Kapilar, for his ten songs on the king was gifted with hundreds and thousands of gold coins and the region covered by the eyesight of the poet atop a hill. More than for his military valour, the king was praised for his devotion to Lord Vishnu (called as Mayavan) to whom he donated the village of Okanthur which supplied good quality rice for Vedic Sacrifice.

The eighth ten was for the king Perumcheral Irumporai by the poet Arisil Kizhar who received nine hundred and thousands of gold coins along with the right to rule the king’s kingdom. However, the poet returned the right to rule to the king. He defeated Athiyaman of Tagadur region along with the Cholas and the Pandyas. The ninth ten was written by Perumkunrur Kizhar in praise of the King Kudakko Ilancheral Irumporai and received thirty two thousand gold coins. The king was the son of Kutta nadu lord Irumporai and queen Venmaal Antuvanchellai. He defeated the Chola, Pandya and Vichchi kings. He ruled from the capital city of Vanchi which was guarded by demons with power (Bhootam).

By narrating the genealogy of the Cheras, Patitrupathu gives a poetic description of the rule of the Chera kings with sparsely sprinkled historical facts. It is indeed difficult to discern the historical authenticity of these poems. Poetic exaggeration should be given its place in this genealogical work as poets vied for king’s favours. It may not be plausible for all the poets to sing in praise of all the kings who belonged to different periods. The poems could have been commissioned by a particular king at a particular time and compiled into one. The reference to the Brahmanas, Brahmadeyas, Vedic sacrifices points out to the influence from northern part of Tamil region. The epilogues or the patikams, the later compositions of the Patitrupathu records both the past history in the form of genealogy and contemporary history in the form of kings’ valour and conquests. Through the poems, the memories of the past are redefined and retransmitted to a new generation.

**Lineage**

Lineage is a term denoting a clan or tribe tracing a common ancestry. In due course of time for various socio-political reasons, a few clan members (probably
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Apart from the genealogy, the lineage of the heroes (both in Akam and Puram genre) is portrayed so as to give a legitimisation to the character. Various phrases such as ‘noble, clan, scion of great family (Uravon, marugan, thondral), inherited ancient traditions, and descendant of great family’ are used to indicate the great lineage of the kings and heroes (Purananuru 24, 27, 32, 58, 159, 356, 399, Akananuru 352).

The three kings are portrayed as kings of great descent. A person’s lineage is considered as the essence of the king’s greatness. At times, the lineage is used not only to praise the king but also to point out mistakes as known from a Puranamuru song (43). A Puranamuru poem (no. 43) praises the Chola King Karikala’s lineage by describing the greatness of his ancestors such as Sibi who gave his flesh to save a pigeon. The story of Sibi is found both in Buddha Jataka stories as well as in Mahabharata. The poet also questions his lineage whether he truly belonged to the great family of the Cholas as he had committed wrongdoing against a Brahmans poet. But he forgives the king in the song and finally praises him.

While describing the greatness of a Velir ruler of Thuvarai (identified with Dwarasamudra of Hoysalas in Karnataka), his ancestry for 49 generations was praised (Purananuru 201), probably indicating seven generations seven times to specify ancient lineage. The city of Tuvarai is also identified with Dwaraka situated on the western coast of Gujarat.

Even in the matrimonial alliance, lineage of the woman and man are considered important and there are references in the classical poems that matrimonial alliance is not possible with a person of no famous lineage (Purananuru 345, 353).

Ithihasa-Purana Traditions

The Sangam literature provides information about various legends associated with the Vedic religion. This indicates that the Tamil poets were aware of the developments that took place outside their sphere in northern part of the country. It is to be remembered that some of the collections in Sangam works are dated to as late as medieval period (till 12th century), such as, Kalittokai and Tirumurugatrupadai by a few scholars.

Though the fivefold landscapes of ancient Tamils have their own deities such as Seyyon (Lord Muruga/Subramanya) for mountainous Kurinji region, Maayon (Lord Vishnu) for pastoral Mullai region, Vendan (Lord Indra) for riverine Marutam zone, Lord Varuna for the coastal zone of Neytal and Kotravai (Goddess Durga) for the dry zone of Palai, the poems sporadically mention about Lord Siva, and Lord Vishnu in invocatory verses (Purananuru 1 and Akananuru 1). There are references to Shiva as Ardhanarisiwara (Purananuru 1) and Tripurantaka (Kalittokai 1). It is to be noted that the invocatory verses of these collections are written by Perumdevanar, who wrote Mahabharatha epic in Tamil and he was believed to be the contemporary of the Pallava King Nandivarma of 9th century CE.

Ramayana and Mahabharata, the two great Sanskrit epics of India found mention in a few Sangam songs indicating people’s knowledge about these legendary epics from northern part of India. The legends associated with the Vedic Gods too find mention in the poems. Reference to the serving of food by a Chera king to the armies of five Pandavas who have horses with blinkers and the hundred Kauravas
who wore golden garland till the Pandavas annihilated the Kauravas is mentioned in *Puranamurru* (2). Though the legend of Bharata war and the period of the Sangam Cheras cannot be contemporaneous to each other, it can be assumed that the legend of *Mahabharata* was in vogue and the Chera king could have offered rice offerings in memory of his ancestors who probably participated in the all India war as observed by a few Tamil scholars. The *Perumpaanatrappadai* (415-417) refers to the great war between the two fifties (hundred Kauravas) and the Pandavas with great chariots. The poem equates the valour of the king of Kanchipuram Ilamthiraiyan with that of the Pandavas.

The story of Duryodhana building a lac house for the Pandavas and trying to burn them down and the Pandavas escaping from the fire with the help of Bhima, the son of the wind god (*Kalittokai* 25) finds reference. Akkrur is referred to as Akkuran, who fought against the hundred Kauravas in the *Mahabharata* war (*Patirupathupathu* 14:5-7). The killing of Duryodana by Bhima by hitting him on his thigh is referred to in *Kalittokai* (52). *Sirupaanatrappadai* refers to the treatise on cooking of Bhima, the brother of Arjuna who destroyed the Kandava vana (238-241).

There is a reference to Lord Rama while planning for the expedition to Sri Lanka against Ravana making the birds to keep quiet (*Puranamurru* 70). While getting gold ornaments from the Chola King Ilamchet chenni as gifts, the relatives and friends of the poet Uun podhi Pasukudaiyar started wearing the jewels in wrong places due to excitement of getting the gifts. This was equated by the poet with that of the monkeys wearing the jewels thrown by Sita while she was being abducted by Ravana (*Puranamurru* 378).

A *Puranamurru* song (56) describes the Vedic deities such as Yama, Balarama, Krishna and Subramanya and equates them with the courageous qualities of the Pandya king Ilavantikai Thunjiya nanmaran. Another song (*Puranamurru*58) points out that the Chola and Pandya kings are similar to the forms of fair skinned Balarama and dark skinned Krishna. The dark skinned Lord Vishnu as Trivikrama measuring the three worlds finds mention in *Perumpaanatrappadai* (29-30). The same poem describes Brahma emerging from the naval lotus of Lord Vishnu (402). The legend of Krishna stealing the clothes of Gopikas and handed them the dresses made of leaves from the trees on the banks of the river Yamuna is found in *Akanamurru* 59. The *Kalittokai* also refers to the episode of Krishna killing of the demon who came in the form of a horse sent by Kamsa (*Kalittokai* 103). A festival conducted on the day of Lord Vishnu’s birth star Tiruvonam finds mention in *Maduraikanchi* (591).

Ravana lifting Kailasa, the abode of Lord Siva is described in *Kalittokai* (38). The political treatises written by Guru Brihaspathi and Sukracharya found their place too (*Kalittokai* 99). The same poem also describes the form of Shiva as Kalaantaka, where Lord Siva killed Yama, the Lord of death. Lord Vishnu measuring the three worlds (*Kalittokai* 124), Brahma creating the world after the deluge (*Kali*), and the form of Dakshinamurthy (*Kalittokai* 133) indicate the influence of Vedic stories on Tamil literature.

The Puranic story of Indra deceiving Rishi Gautama to covet Akalya is mentioned in *Paripatal* (19/50-52). *Paripatal* highlights the glory of Lord Vishnu and Lord Muruga, though the work can be dated to later period.
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Conduct of Vedic Rituals

The Tamil literature mentions about the Vedic sacrifices that came into vogue due to contact with northern part of India and the migration of the priestly class of Brahmanas to South India. The Chera king Palyanai Selkelukuttuvan is mentioned as conducting Vedic sacrifices and that the smoke from these sacrifices touched the sky (Patiitrupathi 3:21). The names of the Pandya king Pal yaanai yaga salai mudukudumi peruvazhuthi and a Chola king Rajasuyam vetta perunarkilli indicate the importance the kings had given towards the Vedic sacrifices. This could be probably due to the migration of ideologies from the north and for building up ritualistic control and legitimisation of the power they had.

In Maduraikanchi, king Neducheliyan was advised by the poet to conduct sacrifices in Madurai like that of his ancestor Palsalai mudukudumi (759-760). An Akananuru poem (13) refers to the sacrifice conducted by the chieftain of Kodai region, Panni. Puranamuru (6,9,15, 361) refers to the Vedic sacrifices along with the Brahmanas who performed them.

Recording the Regions outside Tamil Region

The Sangam literature sporadically referred to the kings and kingdoms outside the realm of Tamil regime. It shows that the ancient people were aware of the existence of such kingdoms and places and it got recorded in the poems. Through memories they are stored and restored through poems.

Though the Tamil rulers held sway over the Tamil region, they were aware of the entire country of Bharatavarsha. Puranamuru 3 describes the extent of the region of the Pandya King Palyagasalai Mudukudumi Peruvazhuthi as Himalayas in north, Kumari in South and sea on the west and eastern sides. River Ganga is referred to in Pattinapalai (190), Perumpaanatruppadai (429-433), Natrinai (7) with the description ranging from the river falling from heaven, river emerging from the place where the gods reside, river difficult to cross, and the river entering into sea.

The Himalayas is also found mentioned in the classical poems. A Puranamuru song 132 refers to the existence of Himalayas in the north and the kingdom of Ays in the south as reason for restoring the balance in the world. The cataracts found in the Himalayan region is mentioned in Puranamuru 369. The Natrinai refers to the sea on the low lying region and the mighty Himalayas in the elevated region. These depictions probably indicate that early Tamil poets either had first-hand knowledge of the regions as far as Himalayas or they had collected information about these far away regions from the traders or pilgrims and immortalised them in their poems.

The Northern Kings

The Sangam literature apart from giving information on the important rulers who ruled over Tamil region namely the Pandyas (the oldest ruling dynasty in Tamil country ruling the southern part of Tamil Nadu), the Cheras (rulers of roughly the modern day Kerala), and the Cholas (rulers of central Tamil Nadu), it also describes the rulers from northern part. Interestingly the inscriptions of Asoka refer to the Padas (Pandyas), Chodas (Cholas), Keralaputras (Cheras) and Satyaputras as southern neighbours. The Tamil region had maintained trade relations with its northern neighbours.
The tribes such as Aruvars, Oliyar, Vatakars who ruled over the northern part of Tamil country in present day Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are mentioned in the classical poems. The wars waged by three major chieftains of Tamil country with the chieftains in the border areas where they speak different languages other than Tamil are described in the poems.

The heroes going out in search of wealth leaving behind their loved ones is the common theme in Akananuru songs. In Akananuru poem (251) while describing about a hero, the friend consoles the heroine that the hero would not be tempted even by the wealth of the Nandas to stay back and would come soon.

In another instance, the wealth of the Nandas is again mentioned. Akananuru 265 refers to the city of Pataliputra, the capital city where the Nandas met and hid the treasures under the river Ganges.

The reference about the Mauryas, whose chariots blunted the rocky surface indicate the past history as recorded in the Sangam literature. The references to the chariots of the Mauryas with their iron wheels blunting the rocky surface on the border areas (Akananuru 69) point out that the Mauryas were helping the Kosars against the king of Mokur (Akananuru 251). The Puram songs describe about the superior quality of the chariots of the Mauryas adorned with white parasols and flags (Purananuru 175).

The Akananuru 281 describes the invasion of the Mauryan army into the southern part with the Vatukar in the front. As the hero of the poem crosses the border area to amass wealth, the heroine tells her friend that the hero crossed the border where the Mauryan chariots rolled in the path cut from the rocks, to invade southern parts supported by the Vatukars in the front.

Apart from the Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras who are referred to as Ventars, there are many chieftains who assumed significance due to their valour, or their just rule and the treatment of poets and bards. The Sangam literature hails seven chieftains as great benefactors who donated various things to both the birds and jasmine creeper as well as to the bards. The Sangam poems glorifies the munificent benevolence of seven kings namely Pari, Kari, Ori, Pegan, Ay, Athiyaman, and Nalli, Their legends and munificence are repeated in more than one place (Purananuru 158, Sirupaanatruppadai 18-115) and their greatness is immortalised in the legends and poems.

The poetess Auvaiyar while singing the valour of the chieftain Athiyaman of Tagadur records the fact that his great ancestors performed the sacrifices and brought the sugarcane cultivation to Tamil country (Purananuru 99). The belief that Athiyaman’s ancestors brought sugarcane to Tamil country from foreign land (Purananuru 392) is prevalent in the later period too as noted by William Logan in Malabar Manual.

The Puram songs usually describe the ancestor of the hero and sometimes the genealogy culminates to the mythological ancestry. The hero of Perumpaanatruppadai is mentioned as the descendant of Tondaiman and finally as the descendant of Lord Vishnu, a practice that continued in the medieval period as known from the inscriptions where both the political and mythical ancestry of the Kings are mentioned starting from the Pallavas in Tamil country. It has been noted that there are more than thirty instances of ancestry being mentioned in the songs.
Check Your Progress-2

1) ‘Sangam literature preserves the historical consciousness through the recording of past events.’ Justify the statement.

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2) Mention the nature of the performance of the Vedic rituals represented in the Sangam literature.

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3) Illustrate the presence of *itihasa-Purana* tradition in the Sangam literature?

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4) How are the regions represented in the Sangam literature?

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7.3.2 Historical Narratives

Sangam literary works are used primarily as the source for reconstructing the early historic period which is contemporaneous to that.

Similar to Herodotus *Histories*, the Sangam works deal with the different aspects of life during the early historic period thereby leaving the historical legacy of the bygone era. The literature gives narratives of historical wars that were fought between the various rulers of Sangam era.

**Historical Narratives of Kings and Kingdoms**

The *Akam* and *Puram* songs in eight anthologies discusses about a few historical events that have taken place. They are all individual and short poems. In the ten long poems or *Pathuppattu*, there are a few works that deal exclusively with one particular king. These songs are narrative in nature and lengthy. The poems range from smallest *Mullaipattu* (103 lines) to the longest *Maduraikanchi* (782 lines). A bard after receiving bountiful gifts from a king guide another bard to the same king by giving explanation about routes and landscape to reach the kingdom. This is known as *Aatruppadai* (literally means guiding). There are five *Aatruppadai* poems in the ten long poems. Four of them (*Porunaratruppadai, Perumpanaatruppadai, Sirupanaatruppadai, Malaipadukadam* or *Koothaatruppadai*) deal with guidance to the bards to reach a king while one of them is the guide to reach the God (*Tirumurugaatruppadai*). *Pattinapalai*, and *Maduraikanchi* provide valuable information about the kings and kingdoms. A few are discussed below.
Karikala, the Chola King was the hero of two poems of ten long poems, namely *Porunaratruppadai* and *Pattinapalai*. *Pattinapalai*, written by Kadiyalur Uriuthiran Kannanar gives a detailed description of the port city of Kaveripumpattinam, where the river Kaveri meets the sea. The port city was buzzing with trade activities and ships plying with imports and exports. It gives details about the goods in the following lines that highlight the flourishing trade.

Himalayaz sends gems and gold
While Kuda hills, the Sandal wood
And Akhil; pearls from the south seas come
Red coral from the eastern sea
The Ganges and the Kaveri bring
Their yield; Ceylon provides its food
And Burma, manufacturers rare

The poem describes a king called Tirumavalavan, usually identified with Karikala. He is portrayed as a young tiger cub who defeated many rulers such as Oliyar, Aruvalar, Kudavar, Poduvar, Irungovel, Thennavan, Vadavar. Apart from these, he was credited with making the Chola country more verdant and greener by digging more tanks. He also made many towns by destroying the forest lands so as to expand the Chola country. He is credited with building a bund for the river Kaveri known as Kallanai (stone dam).

The *Porunaratruppadai* written by Mudathama Kanniyar is in praise of King Karikala, which describes his warfare at Venni (identified with modern day Kovil Venni at Thiruvarur district). As it mentions only the earlier warfare of Karikala, this is considered as earlier work than *Pattinapalai*. Another *Aatruppadai* work called *Perumpaanatruppadai* written by Kadiyalur Uruthiran Kannanar describes the valour and generosity of Tondaiman Ilanthirayan of Kanchipuram. The poet guides another poet by describing the landscape one crosses to reach the king and it throws light on various landscape of Tamil country.

The Sangam poets describe various routes that they follow to reach various kingdoms to sing the praise of chieftains for getting gifts. The *Aatruppadai* literature especially describes many towns and villages in different landscape setting a bard crosses to reach the king. The king of Oymanadu Nalliyakodan is praised in *Sirupaanatruppadai* written by Nathathanar. Interestingly it talks about Vanchi, the capital city of the Cheras, Madurai, the capital city of the Pandyas, and Uranthai, the capital city of the Cholas. The Chera King is praised as one who affixed his bow symbol on the Himalayas (*Sirupaanatruppadai* 48-49). The city of Madurai is referred to as the city where Tamil flourishes. The bard describes various places while traversing the route to his kingdom. The cities of Aamur, Velur, Eyirpattinam, Mavilangai are described. These places are identified with those at northern part of Tamil Nadu.

The seven famous benevolent kings of Sangam age are recorded in this poem along with their deeds and Nalliyakodan is praised as superior to all of them in munificence.

*Maduraikanachi* is written in praise of the Pandya king Neducheliyan. The poem beautifully depicts the landscape of Madurai with its tall walls, fortifications, moat, wide roads, places of worship and people who indulged in various types of occupations. The poem states that the King Neducheliyan of ancient illustrious
lineage defeated his enemies at Talaialankanam and captured the port city at Saliyur. He had ruled over Korkai, a port city under his control. Even the minute detail like the king wearing starched cotton cloth is mentioned in the poem (720-721).

**Battlefields**

The literature gives a vivid account of the battlefields and the horror of the wars. The references to wars are found both in Akam and Puram songs. While describing the valour of the hero who went to battle, the Akam poems elaborately explain the enemy forces, the battle field and the final victory. The heroine is assured that he would reach home sooner. In Puram songs the kings are praised openly about the various victories that they had attained. Here, three important battles are described to give an idea about the description of warfare in classical poems.

In the battle of Venni Parantalai, the young Chola king Karikala was said to have defeated two kings and eleven chieftains. Akananuru 246 describes that the war drums were lying in a corner when courageous Karikala defeated all the kings. The Akananuru 55 attests to the Venni battlefield where the Chera king who was injured in the back committing suicide by facing the northern side holding a sword as getting injured at the back was considered as a shameful act. A poetess while addressing Karikala actually praises the Chera king as a greater person for committing suicide (Akananuru 66).

Another battle associated with Karikala Chola was Vagaiparantalai where he defeated nine rulers who left their royal umbrellas and fled the battle scene (Akananuru 125). The Porunaratruppadai equates young Karikala defeating the two kings (the Chera and the Pandya king) with a lion’s cub killing a huge elephant in the first attempt (139-46). Probably this battle was a continuation of battle of Venni. Through these battles Karikala strengthened his sway over other kings.

Another important battle field that finds mention is the battle of Aalankanam. The Pandya king Seliyan fought with seven rulers namely the Chera, Chola, chieftains Tithiyan, Elini, Erumaiyuran, Irunkovenman and Porunan. The young king on knowing the invasion composed a poem wherein he said if he did not defeat the enemies and seize their parasols, he may be cursed by his people by calling him as an evil king (Purananuru 72). Interestingly the battlefield scene is witnessed by a poet who records it saying that Seliyan is entering the battlefield like an elephant and he was faced by many soldiers. The poet concludes that the battle would end soon and only a few will escape (Purananuru 79).

The king Seliyan killed all of them in the battle field within a day and captured the white parasols of the enemy kings (Purananuru 25,76, Akananuru 36). A poet (Purananuru 76) on hearing the events at battle records the victory as something which was never heard of.

**Recording the Live Events**

Most of the poems describe the past events and a few songs narrate the happenings that are recorded by the poets. A poet of Puranamur song (46) slams the Chola king for planning to kill two young sons of the defeated ruler by making elephants trampling upon them. The poet praises the king as the descendant of Sibi, who had given his flesh to save the life of a pigeon and at the same time tells him the innocence of children and leaves the option to him to take desired action.
The daughters of a chieftain Pari, who was killed in the battlefield by the kings lament that in the last full moon day their father and his kingdom were there while in this full moon day their father is killed and the kingdom was seized (Puranamuru 112).

Poet Kapilar who identifies himself as a Brahman takes the responsibility of the two daughters of Pari. He approaches a few chieftains to accept the hands of the girls and addresses them in songs (Puranamuru 200-202). A poetess writes that she came to know about the severe wound King Evvi incurred in the morning and she could not believe it. She prays that the news should be false (Puranamuru 233).

The Sangam poets not only mention about the political history of the past and their contemporary periods but also the socio-economic conditions of the people. The references to fivefold landscape, the people of landscape, their occupation, music tradition, time, birds, seasons, water source, flora and fauna are found in abundance in Sangam poems providing valuable information about the social conditions that existed during the classical period.

The economic conditions such as internal trade, external trade with Rome and other countries (attested by foreign literary works such as Periplus Maris Erythraei, Ptolemy’s work), the production processes, various occupations, barter system are mentioned in the poems. The heap of pepper kept in the port city of Cheras, Muziris is exchanged for gold from Rome brought from Sea (Akanamuru 149, Puranamuru 343).

Check Your Progress-3
1) How are the historical narratives recorded in the Sangam literature?

2) Describe the details of the understanding of the battlefields as mentioned in the Sangam literature.

3) How are the live events depicted in the Sangam literature?

7.4 COMPOSITION AND CODIFICATION: HISTORY IN THE MAKING

The Sangam poets and their compositions cannot be graded with modern scale of historical consciousness. The classical poems are sung in different contexts, at different times and at different spatial locations. The poems were codified and redacted in medieval period.

The word Sangam was used by Vajranandi for Jaina sangha. It was only in the eight century, Iraiyanar Akapporul, said to be written by Lord Siva himself that
the works were codified into the present format. The random poems were collected, codified and colophones were added by a few people before Perutevanar compiled them and added invocatory verses for some collections. The oral traditions get recorded in the later period and the poems were classified based on the theme and style of poem.

7.5 AUTHENTICATING THE PAST: HISTORICITY OF SANGAM AGE

The Sangam works and the rulers of the Sangam Age find their place in the works of contemporary and later period. Interestingly Ramayana refers to the city of Kavata known for its pearls as ruled by the Pandyas.

Kautilya’s Arthashastra refers to the pearl from Pandya Kavata. The Asokan rock edicts (XIII) refers to the Cholas, Cheras, Pandyas and Satyaputras as the southern neighbours. The Satyaputra is identified with Athiyaman dynasty of Tagadur region (modern day Dharmapuri region in the western part of Tamil Nadu), based on the Tamil Brahmi inscription found at Jambai. The inscription dated to approximately first century CE reads ‘Satyaputho Adhiya nedumanambi eetha paali’. It records that Satyaputra Athiyaman donated a stone bed for a Jain monk. The Asokan inscription can be taken as a tool to prove the historicity of Sangam poems.

The Hathigumpha inscription of king Kharavela mentions about the king’s victory against the Dramira confedecary that was in force for 113 years. It also narrates that the Pandya king paid obeisance to Kharavela by bringing pearls and other gems along with horses and elephants.

The Pugalur inscription written in Tamil Brahmi script dated to 2nd century CE mentions three kings of Chera lineage. It refers to Ko aadhan Sellirumporai, his son Perunkadunko and his son Ilankadunko, who donated a Jain bed. These three rulers are mentioned as the seventh, eighth and ninth kings in the Sangam poem Patitrupathu.

The Velvikudi copper plates of Neduncadayan (9th Century CE) records the grant of Velvikudi village to Narkorran, a Brahmana who performed Vedic sacrifice by the king’s ancestor Palyaga mudukudumi Peruvazhuthi, a Pandya king of Sangam Age. This could be the earliest reference to the Brahmadeya in Tamil region. However the Kalabhras conquered the region and the grant of land become null and void. With the rise of the Pandyas again under Kadunkon, the Kalabhras were defeated. During the third regnal year of the Pandya King Nedunjadayan, a Brahmana who was the descendant of Narkorran approached the king to return the grant to him. The king redistributed the village to the village headman as well as to fifty Brahmanas. The Velvikudi copper plates provide the continuity to the historical event and thereby authenticating the literary references.

Nakkiran was the one who wrote commentary for Iraiyanar Akapporul. The work narrates that the songs were orally transmitted over ten generations till the time of one Nilakantan of Muciri, who can be dated to 8th century CE.

We have epigraphic references for the Sangam age as known from the Erukkankuti inscription at Ramanathapuram dated to 829 CE. The inscription refers to the Sangam academy bench on which the calibre of Tamil works is weighed and the ancestors of one Ettichattan is mentioned as one who adorned the Sangam bench.
The Cinnamanur and Talavaypuram inscriptions of 10th and 11th centuries CE respectively talk about the Sangam academy at Madurai patronised by the Pandya kings. The Pandya empire which came into power with the defeat of Kalabhara ruler and the rise of king Kadungon, probably used the Sangam label for legitimisation of their rule by reclaiming their ancestry.

Foreign Sources for Sangam Age

The Sangam age is known for its prosperous economic relations with the Roman world. The Sangam poems refers to the ships sailed by the *Yavanas* (the foreigners) which brought gold and took pepper from Tamil coastal lands (*Akananuru* 149). The finding of pepper in Berenice in Egypt attest to this poetic description of the pepper trade. A Tamil Brahmī inscription in a potsherd with the name of Kotrapooman indicates the involvement of merchants of Tamil region in the trade network with Egypt and Rome.

The fact that the coastal towns were bustling with goods meant for import and export is attested both in the Sangam poems as well as in archaeological contexts. The port site of Quseir al-Qadhim (on the Red Sea; Qus of the Arab geographers and Myos Hormos of the Romans) yielded Tamil Brahmī inscriptions with names of Saathan and Kanan, further strengthening the information given in the Sangam poems about trade with foreign countries.

The places mentioned in the Sangam literature finds reference in Greco-Roman literature such as Strabo’s *Geography*, *Periplus of Erythrean Sea*, Pliny’s *Natural History*, Ptolemy’s *Geography* and *Peutinger Table*. For example, the place such as Veerai Munthurai (identified with Arikamedu-Virampattinam) is referred to as Poduke in foreign literature. The port city of the Pandya’s Korkai is referred to as Colchi and Kolkhai. Uraiyur, the capital of the Cholas, is identified with Arargu.

The trade with the Romans is known through many excavated archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu and Kerala such as Arikamedu, Alagankulam, Korkai, Kaveripumpattinam, and Pattanam. Thus, attesting to the historical facts mentioned in the Sangam literature.

To conclude, what we have are the poems sung by bards and poets who recorded both the past and the contemporary events as known to them, passed from one generation to another, added with new works and colophones by medieval poets who remembered certain historical context of the poems (where there is no evidence, they created), commentaries were added and codified into select anthologies or works, preserved in various places of Tamil country and finally published by the efforts of U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, thus covering a very vast period of tradition of corpus formation from probably second/first century BCE to 19th century CE.

Though the chronology of the poems is caught in the web of additions, interpolations, omissions, the content and the history of Sangam poems advertently or inadvertently recorded certain events of the past which throw light on the history of Tamils two thousand three hundred to one thousand two hundred years ago.

7.6 LEGACY BEHIND THE HISTORICAL TRADITIONS

The historical consciousness of the Tamil poets who wrote poems preserves the past events in a collective memory. The tracing of one’s past and keeping the
legacy in individual as well as social memory play a significant role in the creation of historical consciousness. There was definitely an interplay between the past memory and present usage of the memory for legitimacy. However it is also imperative to understand why certain aspects of the past are preserved and entrenched in historical consciousness of the people and why some were not given importance. Whose discretion or decision was it to include or exclude certain events of the past? Why only a few aspects are passed on from one generation to another? Why the poets of the Sangam age narrated certain past events? What was the intention? Can the poems be classified as sudden emotional outpourings of poets trying to please the chieftains? Why the mythical stories were interwoven in some common expression of ideas?

The answer depends upon the power and resources that one has at their disposal. The historical consciousness or the collective memory gives identity to a set of powerful people who have mobilised resources for their own benefit. Over a period of time, probably the collective memory becomes embedded in the past narratives and finds place in the contemporary and later day historical traditions.

The myths and historical memory of the past that make the historical consciousness of a society were probably used by the poets in the Sangam period as per the needs of their patrons who needed legitimacy for their rule and power. The historical tradition along with the historical narratives form a part of history that gets glorified in the literature. The Sangam literature with its diversified content not only brought to light the past historical tradition that existed before the compilation of the poems but also created a new historical narrative that formed the basis of history of the Tamil region.

**Check Your Progress-4**

1) Can it be justified to call Sangam literature a history in the making?

2) Mention the historical consciousness present in the Sangam literature?

3) What foreign references pertaining to the presence of foreigners are represented in the Sangam literature?

4) Can the Sangam poems be classified as poetry meant to please chieftains?
5) Why were the mystical stories in the Sangam literature are interwoven with common expression of ideas?

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7.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit, you have read about the Sangam literature which with its Akam and Puram themes describe the past events and the contemporary events. The songs provide not only the source for the reconstruction of early historic Tamil country, but also recorded the events that happened in the past. The past history of ancient Tamils along with the contemporary events got recorded in the oral traditions and passed on from one generation to another. These poems are composed not to record the historical events, but to express the emotions of Akam and Puram contexts. The historical events are interwoven in the texts casually and ultimately we have a collection of poems that provide clue to the historical consciousness of the past that continues even in the present.

7.8 KEYWORDS

Cheras
Cheras (c. second century BCE-c. third century CE) were among the three major powers (muventar) of Early Historic Tamilakam region. Their major centres of power were at Karur (Tamilnadu) and Muziris and Thondi (Kerala)

Cholas
Early Cholas ruled over the kingdom of Tamilnadu during the pre and post Sangam period (c. 600 BCE-300 CE). Their early capitals were Urayur/Uraiyur (Tiruchirapalli) and Kaveripattinam. Mention of the early Chola, Chera and Pandayas is made in the Ashokan inscriptions (second and thirteenth rock edits). Karikala Chola was the most prominent of the early Cholas who is referred to in a number of Sangam poetic compositions

Pandyas
The capital of the early Pandyan kingdom was Kornai, Thoothukudi, later during the reign of Nedunjelian it moved to Koodal (Madurai). Sangam literary works Mathuraiikkanchi and Shilapatikaram mention about the early Pandyas. The area of influence of the early Pandyas was between Travancore in the west to Vellaru river in the north; while the east and the southern boundaries were flanked by the sea coast. Early Pandyas and Korkai (prominent maritime centre) are mentioned in the Greek accounts of Pliny the Elder, Strabo and Ptolemy. Pandyan country was also known for its pearl fishery
7.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1
1) See Section 7.2
2) See Section 7.2
3) See Section 7.2

Check Your Progress-2
1) See Section 7.3
2) See Sub-section 7.3.1
3) See Sub-section 7.3.1
4) See Sub-section 7.3.1

Check Your Progress-3
1) See Sub-section 7.3.2
2) See Sub-section 7.3.2
3) See Sub-section 7.3.2

Check Your Progress-4
1) See Section 7.4
2) See Section 7.5
3) See Section 7.5
4) See Section 7.6
5) See Section 7.6

7.10 SUGGESTED READINGS


7.11 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

Classical Tamil Literature - Atikal’s Cilappatikaram
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGlZnCr1sUU

Early Tamil Society literature, epigraphy and archaeology
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvcp_bD2rjY

Sangam Age
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuyF-t96yNY

Understanding Tholkappiyam
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWg7bRgTWTo

Tholkappiyar: Tholkappiyam
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mwDcGdKztg