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CASTE SYSTEM IN ANCIENT TAMIL NADU AS REFLECTED IN SANGAM LITERATURE

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Abstract:

Sangam period (TamilCankakala paruvam) is the period in the history of ancient southern India (known as the Tamilakam) spanning from 3rd century BCE to 4th century CE. It is named after the famous Sangam academies of poets and scholars centered in the city of Madurai.

The Tamil Sangams were assemblies of Tamil scholars and poets that, according to traditional Tamil accounts, occurred in the remote past. Some scholars believe that these assemblies were originally known as Koo-:a/ or gathering. (1,2,3,) Three assemblies are described. The legend has it that the first two of which were held in cities since "taken by the sea", and the third of which was held during the 5th century BC in the present-day city of Madurai

KEYWORDS:

Literature , Reflected , Ancient , Cademies .

INTRODUCTION

The Sangam period extended from roughly 300 BC to 300 AD, when the earliest extant works of Tamil literature were created (also known as Sangam literature).⁴ However, the name sangam and the associated legends probably derive from a much later period.⁵

Whilst the accounts of first two Sangams are generally rejected as a historical, some modern scholars, such as Kamil Zvelebil,⁶ find a kernel of truth in them, suggesting that they may be based on one or more actual historical assemblies. Others reject the entire notion as a infactual.⁷ Nevertheless, legends of the Sangams played a significant role in inspiring political, social, and literary movements in Tamil Nadu in the early 20th century.

According southern Indian legends, there were three Sangam periods, namely Head Sangam, Middle Sangam and Last Sangam period. Historians use the term Sangam period to refer the last of these, the first two being legendary. So it is also called Last Sangam period (Tamil: ka-:aiccanka paruvam), or Third Sangam period (Tamil: mon-:am canka paruvam). ⁸The Sangam literature is thought to have been produced in three Sangam academies of each period. The evidence on the early history of the southern India consists of the epigraphs of the region, the Sangam literature, and archaeological data.

Sangam	Place of Organisation	Chairman	Kingdom	Books
First	[Madurai	[Agastaya Pandya	[No hooks survived	
Second	Kapatp uram	1 Earlier- Agastaya Later- Tolkappiyar (One of the disciples of Agastaya)	Pan dya	Tolkappiu m (author - Tolkappiya r)
Third	Madur ai	Nakkirar	Pan dya	covers entire corpus of Sangam Literature

In Old Tamil language, the term Tamilakam is referred to (he whole of the ancient Tamil-speaking areas as distinct from the many kingdoms that existed within its boundaries,⁹ corresponding roughly to the area known as southern India today, including the territories of the present-day Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Laccadives, parts of Andhra Pradesh and some parts of Karnataka, as well as Sri Lanka and the Maldives.¹¹⁰⁻¹¹⁻¹²¹

The Sangam Literature consists of two thousand three hundred and seventy one poems varying from small stanzas of three lines to stanzas of forty lines. The literature of the Third Sangam comprises the Ten Idylls (Pattuppattu) and the Eight Anthologies (Ettutthohai). Akananaru, Purananaru, Silapadhikaram, and Thirukkural are the notable works of this period. These literary works provide very valuable information on the social, economic and political life of the people living in Tamil Nadu in the early centuries.¹³

SOCIAL ORDER OR CASTE SYSTEM IN SANGAM LITERATURE

According to the Tolkappiyam, the ancient Tamil social order was much like any other society: priesit, merchants, fanners and kings.¹⁴ While this may seem like the caste system, it was not. The society was much less rigid, and there were no organized 'untouchables' like the Sudra. The Purananuru anthology's much quoted verse says, 'everywhere is my home, and all are my kindred'. In the following kural, Thiruvalluvar shows the rationale and logic behind Dravidian culture:

He who ploughs and eats, truly he lives; all others, they beg of him and follow him. — Kural 1033
Theory of division of mankind into four varnas or groups of castes such as Brahman, Kshatrya, Vaisya and Sudra was wholly foreign to the Southern Dravidians. Caste was non-existent. Until the rediscovery and publication of the ancient Sangam poems in 1880s, Tirukkural was considered the oldest extant Tamil text, composed before northern influences were said to have produced, as some people may term it, rigid caste inequality, priestly domination and ritualised superstition. The value of the Tirukkural was not that it railed against these practices, which were yet to consolidate, but that it presents an ethical system devoid of them.¹⁵

The Caste Practices during Sangam Age

The ancient Tamil land was divided into five types- Kirundi, Mullai, Marutam, Neithal and Palai. The people were divided into five different clans ("kudis") based on their profession. They were; 16 Mallars-the farmers.

Malavars- the hill people who gather hill products, and the traders. Nagars- people in charge of border security, who guarded the city walls and distant fortresses. Kadambaras- people who thrive on forests. Thiraiyars- the seafarers.

All the five kudis constituted a typical settlement, which was called an "uru".

Later each clan spread across the land, formed individual settlements of their own and concentrated into towns, cities and countries. Thus the Mallars settled in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, while the Malavars came to live in Kerala, western Tamil Nadu, eastern Andhra Pradesh and southern Sri Lanka. The Nagars inhabited southern and eastern Tamil Nadu, and northern Sri Lanka, while the Kadambaras settled in central Tamil Nadu first and later moved to western Karnataka. The Thiraiyars inhabited throughout the coastal regions. Later various sub sects were formed based on more specific professions in each of the five landscapes (Kurinji, Mullai, Marutam, Neithal and Palai) they were 17

Poruppas (the soldiers), Verpans (the leaders of the tribe or weaponists), Silambans (the masters of martial arts or the arts of fighting), Kuravar (the hunters and the gatherers, the people of foothills) and Kanavars (the people of the mountainous forests) in Kurinji.

Kurumporai Nadan-kizhaththis (the landlords of the small towns amidst the forests in the valleys), Thonral-manaivi (the ministers and other noble couples), Idaiyars (the milkmaids and their families), Aiyars (the cattle-rearers) in Mullai.

Mallar or Pallar (the farmers and warriors), Vendans (Chera, Chola and Pandya kings were called as "Vendans"), Urans (small landlords), Magizhnans (successful small scale farmers), Uzhavars (the farm workers), Kadaiyars (the merchants) in Marutham.

Saerppans (the seafood vendors and traders), Pulampans (the vegetarians who thrive on coconut and palm products), Parathars or Paravas (people who lived near the seas-the rulers, sea warriors, merchants and the pirates),

Nulaiyars (the wealthy people who both do fishing and grow palm farms) and Alavars (the salt cultivators) in Neithal. Palai is a dry land. The people who lived here were Eyinars and Eyitriyars. Their work was robbery.

Thus throughout the Sangam period extended from roughly 300 BC to 300 AD, when the earliest extant works of Tamil literature were created the ancient Tamil social order was much like any other society: priests, merchants, farmers and kings this may seem like the caste system, it was not. The society was much less rigid, and there were no organized 'untouchables' like the Sudra.

The theory of four varnas such as Brahman, Kshatrya, Vaisya and Sudra was totally foreign to the Southern Dravidians. Caste was non-existent. The people were divided into five different clans ("kudis") based on their profession. They were Mallars- the farmers, Malavars- the hill people who gather hill products, and the traders, Nagars- people in charge of border security, who guarded the city walls and distant fortresses, Kadambaras- people who thrive on forests and Thiraiyars- the seafarers. Later various sub sects were formed based on more specific professions in each of the five landscapes (Kurinji, Mullai, Marutam, Neithal and Palai). But the division of society into groups based on birth and untouchability were not existent in ancient Tamil Nadu during the Sangam Age.

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