

## **Cultural History Of Sangam Age**

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### **Introduction:**

Tamilnadu is a popular state with a great past and great tradition. The culture of ancient Tamilagam grew on a firm faith that nothing remains except truth. It prepared the people to face brutal foreign invasions with calm and composure. Culture expresses itself through language and art, through philosophy and religion, through social habits and customs and through the political institutions and economic organizations. In the age of Sangam the Tamil culture had taken into its fold the entire nature. Thus culture is the totality of the experiences of the various aspects of life in society and is all embracing. Culture is like the eye of the camera through which the character of the society is focused and seen.

### **Religion:**

The harmony of man and nature was its basic characteristics. The five geographical divisions of land as *Kurinji*, *Mullai*, *Marudam*, *Neidaland Palai* had a life pattern according to their nature. Each of the geographical division had a deity associated with them as Murugan (Seyon), Thirumal (Mayon), Indira (Vendan), Vanman and Kotravai respectively.<sup>1</sup> The Vedic religion had become more popular in Tamil Nadu after the age of Sangam. The epics and puranas were able to exert their influence very much on the Tamil culture. Gods worshipped multiplied and they were correlated. For example Murugan the deity attached to *Kurinji* became the son of Siva and Uma became the consort of Siva. Vinayaka was introduced as the brother of Muruga. Kalitthogai which is a later work among the eight anthologies refers to deities like Vishnu, Balarama, Lakshmi and Vinayaka.<sup>2</sup> A very significant change during the period was the advent of both Saivism and Vaishnavism which sowed the seeds of Bhakti movement. Some of the early Alvars and Karaikkal Ammayar the saint devoted to Saivism lived in this period. The terms *Kottam*, *Niyamam* and *Nagaram* that are referred in the literature indicate the existence of temples.

**Deities**

In the Tamil tradition Indira was the deity adopted from the Vedic religion and was associated with the fertile *Marudam* land. Indira, the lord of the devas is represented with *vajrayuda*. This deity was highly honoured in Tamil culture and the festival *Indira vizha* was conducted for the God of fertility.<sup>3</sup> The temple raised for Indira was called Vajrakottam. The deity so much associated with the Tamil culture had slowly disappeared and now Indira occupies the east as one among the *ashtabalas* in temples. Murugan is the prime deity of the Tamil people from the age of Sangam. Murugan is depicted as the son of Siva and Uma. A sculptural representation of Muruga is found in this age. Muruga is depicted with six faces and twelve hands. He wears ornaments like *kadaka* and chains. He has the flag staff with the cock as emblem and is called *Chevarkodiyon*. His *ayudas* were *vel* and sword. His temple was called Velkottam.<sup>4</sup>

His consort Valli is depicted to be with him and his *vahana* was peacock. Skandapurana tradition of the divine origin of Muruga from Saravanapoygai and He being brought up by the six *Kartigai* ladies finds a place in literature. *Kartigai* festival is associated with Muruga and is celebrated from the Sangam period. Worship of Siva or *Rudra* has a very early existence. Siva represents the cosmic energy and has no origin and end. He is described as '*pirava yakkai udaiya eraivari*' that is one who is free from birth as well as death. Muruga is identified as *Alamarchelvan pudalvari*.<sup>5</sup> From this it is understood the concept of Dakshinamurthi was existing. Siva is depicted with three eyes and the third eye at the forehead of Siva stores all the power within him. Vinayaka was known but was not a popular deity during this period. Thirumal who is the deity of the forested *Mullai* land is identified with Mahavishnu in this period. Vishnu is the Saviour of the people and protects them at the time of distress. Since protecting the subjects was considered as the prime duty of the king he was often compared with lord Vishnu. Some of the incarnations of Vishnu like Varaha, Vamana and Narasimha are referred in Paripadal. *Kanida* is the emblem in the flag staff of

Vishnu. From this it is understood that the concept of incarnations was ahead existing towards the end of the Sangam period. This concept was becoming more popular in this age and there are a lot of references in the literature. Krishna's deeds in that *avatara* like stealing butter kept in *uri*, teasing the *gopikas*, showing the world in his mouth, hiding the Sun with his hand are the themes of the folk dance of Idaiyar community.<sup>6</sup> Vishnu temples were known as *Neelamani Nediyan* koil and *Manivannan kottam*. Vishnu favoured *tuzhasi* garland. It is interesting to note that Tiruvarangam finds a mention in the literature which denotes the early existence of this temple which had become a popular pilgrimage centre today in Tamil Nadu. The lord of Tiruvenkatam as described in the *Silappadikaram* hold *sa chakra* and a *sankit* in the right and left hands respectively and wears *apuvadai* (dress made of flowers) and his chest is adorned by a beautiful and rich mala. Vishnu in the yoga posture at Tiruvananthapuram is also mentioned in *Silappadikaram*.<sup>7</sup>

### **Pathini Cult**

A woman who was extraordinarily virtuous and free from blemishes was elevated to a position of a demi-god. This sort of deification of a woman and raising a temple in her honour is found in the third and the final section of *Silappadikaram*, which has approximately thousand lines. Madurapathi the *kaval deivam* of Madurai could not save the city from the wrath of Kannagi and the thematic expression is that Kannagi was so powerful by her virtues. The practice of raising hero stones to a fallen hero in the battlefield and worshipping it was in vogue in the age of Sangam itself.<sup>8</sup> This habit was very popular during this period. The inscriptions at Chengam and Dharmapuri areas are mostly about the conflict among the minor chieftains in the border areas. Polytheism had become the order of the time and there were many gods. This led to the construction of temples to house the gods. The kings and the affluent section of the society never hesitated to spend a part of the wealth or income to construct a temple or to make an endowment to a temple. The Thevaram trio Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar and also Tirumangai Alwar had composed verses in praise of the king.

**Festivals:**

The festivals were mostly associated with religion. They are the occasions when the people had a get-together at ease and pleasure. The festivals like Kartigai, Tiruvonam, Tiruvadirai, Tai Pongal and Kaman Vilavu were celebrated in the age of Sangam. These festivals continued to be celebrated in the age after Sangam and even now the practice exists. Indira Vizha was the most popular festival of the period which was celebrated for twenty-eight days in Puhar.<sup>9</sup> It was conducted in honour of Indira, the lord of *Marudam* land. The epics *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* describe the festival at length. The tradition is that on the suggestion of saint Agastya the festival was organized by Chembian with the consent of Devendra.

The Cholas followed his line and organized this festival without a break. The festival was conducted in the month of *Chithirai* and also on star *Chithirai*. Puhar wore a festive look during the occasion. The huge *murasu* of Vajrakottam the abode of Indira was carried on at the back of a tusker and was beaten to announce the commencement of the festival. The flag staff with the symbol of *Iravatham* was erected in front of the temple and Ashtamangalas were placed at that time.<sup>10</sup> The holy water of the river Kaviri which is the sign of prosperity was carried in the golden pitchers and *abhisheka* was done for Indira by Arasakumarar and Barathakumarar. Though the festival was conducted invoking Indira, all the deities from Siva to Chadukkabhutam were offered special worship. The concept of religious harmony was promoted by such acts. In the streets and underneath the trees, new sand was spread out after removing the old one. The houses looked highly decorative with flowers hanging on the pillars on the *Vedika*. The festival was an occasion for entertaining people with dances of different types and music. From the monarch to the mendicant everybody participated in the festival which included Samayakanakkar, princes of royal family, the big business group, royal officials like *Aimperumkulu* and *Enperayam* and also the foreigners who had come and settled in Puhar.<sup>11</sup> *Silappadikaram* gives a very big list of shops in Puhar which were exhibiting various types of articles for sale in the *Nalangadis*. Hence if the festival is not

conducted the city of Puhar would be swallowed by the bhutam. According to a reference in Manimekalai, Puhar was submerged in sea when this festival was not conducted. So a mythological belief had become a reality. During the festival, people generally prayed for the well being of the king. Indira represented fertility and prosperity and hence they invoked Indira for the welfare of the people and the state.

### **Art and Architecture**

The rich literary sources of the Sangam period provide rich information about the secular and religious architecture of the period. In the age of Sangam the socio-economic status of the individuals decided the type of building. The poor people lived in thatched houses called Kurumbai made of grasses like *kusa*, *darbai* and *ugam*. The affluent section of the society constructed houses according to their needs and social status. They were known as Valamanai and Nagar. Palaces with fortifications were built for royal families. The architects who were called Noolari Pulavar consulted the available text on architecture while undertaking constructions.<sup>12</sup> The earliest form of religious architecture was a simple cell with a wooden plank that was installed inside. The cell was called Podiyil and the plank was worshipped as Kantu. From the name *Podiyil* it is understood that it was a common place where the people met for religious purpose. The deities were painted on the wall and worshipped. This simple building had brick wall and wooden roof. The increase in the number of devotees who visited the temple from distant places necessitated the construction of halls in front of the Sanctum. Some of the halls were plastered with stucco and occasionally decorated with pearls and precious gems. Development of different cults caused an increase in the number of temples and alteration in the placement of deities. The stucco figures served as presiding deities in the Sanctum. The contact between the temple and the society was strengthened by increasing temple activities like rituals, religious discourses and festivals. This further expanded the structure of the temple. An increase in the number of buildings both secular and religious is witnessed in the period between AD 300 and 600.<sup>13</sup> A very

important development in the town planning of the period. Puhar is described in *Silappadikaram* as a well planned city.

### **Madakkoil**

Temple is referred as Devakulam in the epigraph and the literature of the period. An enormous increase in the number of religious buildings is noted in the post Sangam period. Temples are referred as Kottam, Niyamam and Koilin the literature. The construction techniques and materials were almost the same for both the secular and the religious architecture. The period from A.D 300 to 600 was a land mark in the field of architecture. A new concept in the construction of structural temples was introduced by Kochenganan in the style of Madakkoil.<sup>14</sup> It was also called as Perunthirukkoil. In this style the Vimana was constructed on an empty Tala. This tala was raised to a considerable height. In some cases this talahad components like adhishtana, bitti and roof and even niches on the wall. The madakkoil at Nallur is a good example for this type of a structure. Through the literary sources it is understood that nearly seventy such temples were built by Kochenganan in the Thanjavur-Kumbakonam belt. These temples would have been constructed on a raised empty tala to protect them from torrential rains which would result in flood situation. These temples would have been constructed out of brick, mud and mortar. Hence they are liable to be affected by natural calamities. This made the king to raise the vimana on an empty tala. Granite was not in use in the construction of the temple in those days and materials used were perishable. These temples are popularly known as *Yanai Yera Koil*. This idea was formed based on a mythology associated with the life of Kochenganan who is included among the sixty three nayanmars. An upsurge in the religious consciousness in the society resulted in the rise of many temples. Both Saivism and Vaishnavism received due patronage inspite of the dominance exercised by heterodox religions.<sup>15</sup>

### **Dance and Music**

Dance and music which were existing more in the form of folk arts in the Sangam age underwent an astonishing change in the period between AD300 and 600. Dance had almost

become a profession and was performed on the stage based on certain norms. *Silappadikaram* is a magnificent treatise on dance and music and has relevance to the artists of any age. Arrangerru Kathai, Kadaladu Kathai, Vettuvavari, Ayechchiyar Kuravai and Kunrakkuravai of *Silappadikaram* store a lot of very rich information about dance. While describing about the dance performance of Madavi, *Silappadikaram* gives the details about the art of dance and music, dance teachers, musicians both vocal and instrumentalists, performance stage, make-up and other details. Manimekalai also has references about dance and music.<sup>16</sup> Dance required an austere training and practice before the performance on the stage. There were teachers called adalasan who were engaged to train the children in dance. Learning started at the age of five on an auspicious day and an auspicious time. The learning process went on for a period of seven years. The teacher would have witnessed the progress of the disciple and accordingly the performance was done. All these details are found in the Arangetru Kadai of *Silappadikaram*. The teachers were expected to have a basic interest in dance and music and should have an aesthetic sense in general. In those days prostitutes performed dance to entertain the royal household and the affluent section of the society. It is understood that there was Nattiyannul which was guiding the teachers in training the students in dance. *Silappadikaram* has a vivid description about the qualifications of the teacher who trained the disciple in this art. These teachers had to be well versed in all aspects of dance, the texts and treatises on dance and music. They should be accomplished in the science of music and should possess knowledge on the methods of playing musical instruments. The teachers themselves should be performers. Dance as an art should be accompanied by music which is inextricably connected with dance.

### **Music**

Music as an art is associated with dance and naturally it also found a marvelous growth in this period. The term Kotti meant tala in music. There is a reference in Tirikadugam that music set on tala beat alone is worthy of hearing. This shows the development of science of music in this age. There were composers of music and musicians

who were able to give heart rendering music through their melodious voice. Music was handed down from generation to generation through the centuries only in oral tradition. The performers of nattuvangam that is the group who sing and play instruments have an important role in the performance of dance on the stage.<sup>17</sup> The impression that is formed over the performance of a danseuse is highly depended on the theme chosen and the musicians and instrumentalists who do nattuvangam. There is no way of knowing precisely about the musical scales used in ancient Tamilagam except through treatises on music and the living tradition of the hymnal music for example the folk music. *Silappadikaram* is the most important source of information on the art of music. A number of musical scales are mentioned in it. *Silappadikaram* contains the description of certain pans. Music is introduced in *Silappadikaram* only when there is a relevance to the story. Most of the references to music are found in the Arangerru Kadai dealing with the debut of the danseuse, *Kanalvari* and Aichiyar Kuravai.<sup>18</sup> In the Arangerrukadi the qualifications of the vocal musician, Yaazh player, flutist, drummer and dance teacher are narrated. The musical instruments that were used at the debut are mentioned. The technique of playing stringed instruments like Yaazh is mentioned in *Kanalvari*. In other chapters also there are references about music. Music was everywhere and in everything in Tamilnadu. The cultivators while ploughing the land were in the habit of singing a particular type of song that had suited the occasion. Mugavai pattu was sung while measuring the grams in the field. There is a wide gap of several centuries between the date of *Silappadikaram* and that of the commentaries of Arumpada Urai and Adiyarkkunallar. There is no way of dating the treatises mentioned in them. Some of the pans mentioned in *Silappadikaram* would have been earlier too.<sup>19</sup> Despite these limitations the commentaries on *Silappadikaram* throw a beam of light which brightens up the past. Tamil Nadu had never failed in encouraging artists belonging to other regions even in those days. Dancers with their female pairs from Konganam and Kamataka were in the Court of the king to entertain the royal household. Both Kongana Kuttan and Kamataka Kuttan and their viralis (female pair) had dressed and performed according to their tradition.

## **Paintings**

Painting was also existing as an art. The walls and roofs of the houses of affluent section of the society were painted. Palaces of the king had paintings. Paintings were found on the temple walls. Kandiipavai mentioned in Manimekalai is a painted figure. Manimekalai refers to the existence of a treatise on painting called Oviachenool. The kol or brush used for painting was called Vattigai. The chitra mandapa mentioned in Manimekalai was constructed with the guidance of expertise from Yavana, Avanti and Magada and as the name denotes the mandapa had beautiful paintings.<sup>20</sup>

**Literature**

The age that had been labelled as the dark age by many scholars owns a very rich literature that was ever produced by Tamilnadu with the exception of the Sangam literature. This wonderful growth of literary tradition had helped to bring out the age to light from the scales of darkness. Tirukkural and the epics *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* are the wonderful creations of the age. The evolution of didactic poems that were compiled as Pathinenmekanaku literature belonged to this age. The Kalabhra invasion had set in a situation of anarchy and many values of life were disappearing. In such circumstances the philosophers would play a vital role in society through their thoughts and ideas that were expressed in writing.<sup>21</sup> Tirukkural of Tiruvalluvar is a world renowned didactic literature of the time which deals with the three aspects of life that are ethical materialistic and worldliness. As a literature that concentrates on ethical values in life it has the credit of being translated into many languages both Indian and foreign.

The other Kilkanaku works are Naladiyar, Nanmanikkadigai, Eniyavai Narpadu, Inna narpadu, Kalavazhinarpadu, Karnarpadu, Aintinai Aimpadu, Aintinai elupadu, Tinaimozhi eimpadu, Tinaimalainurriaimbadu, Tirikadugam, Acharakkovai, Pazhamozhinanuru, Sirupanchamulam, Mudumozhi Kanchi, Yeladi and Kaiimilai. Scholars are of opinion that many of them are Jain works.<sup>22</sup> Among the seventeen works, Kalavazhi Narpadu is different and is an eulogy on Kochenganan. It is about the exploits of the king with an elaborate description of war scenes. Kalavazhi Narpadu of Poigayar should have given an impetus for the rise of Parani literature in the later period for example the Kalingattupparani of Jayamkondar. The age takes the pride of owning the grand epics *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* which are the sources for building the socio-cultural history of the period. But for these two works the history of the period would have been lost. Though *Silappadikaram* exalts Jain religion the other cults that were in vogue had been given due place in the epic. This is known through the chapters that are dealing with Vettuvavari, Aichiyar Kuravai and Kunrakkuravai. In the chapter Indira vizhavu Urar eduttakadai a list of

the temples of different deities worshipped in Tamilagam is given. Manimekalai is a Buddhist work. There is an opinion that the work would have been written under the patronage and influence of the successors of the Kalabhakula Buddhist king Achchyuta Vikkanta. Tirumular who wrote his Tirumantiram in over 3000 verses was hailing from the Chola country. Karaikkal Ammayar had composed four works which are found in theeleventh Tirumarai of Saiva canons. They are Arpuda Tiruvantadi, Tiruvirattai Manimalai and two Mutta Padigams on Tim Alan gadu. This Arpuda Tiruvantadi consists of 101 verses and is an expression of the intense devotion of ammayar towards Siva Buddha datta, a Buddhist scholar was living in the Chola country in the early years of 5th century.<sup>23</sup> He was the author of Buddhist works Buddhavamsaddakada, Abhidaimnavatara, Vinayavinichchiyam, Uttaiavinichehayam, Rugarupanibagam and Jibalankaram in Palilanguage. He was staying in the Buddhist monasteries at Kavirippumpattinam, Uraiur, Budhamangalam and Kancheepuram. He was patronised by Kalabhra ruler Achchyuta Vikkanta.

**Conclusion:**

The king was considered as the representative of God on earth and he ruled by divine right. His will was law. The theory of kingship and the dharma to be followed by him are conceptualized in Tirukkural. Pathini cult is a new concept that has developed during the age. The performance of marriage became ritualistic and purohita played an important role in conducting marriage. Trade and commerce became active in this period. The merchant community due to their wealth were able to enjoy a respectable position in the society. Nalangadi, the day market and the Allangadi, the evening market did brisk business. Education and learning were given prime importance and the Tamil society has never failed to recognize the learned. Knowledge of Vedas was given importance and learning them was a part of education. Both secular and religious architecture found growth. The age created an epoch concerning the progress of fine arts like music and dance. From the folk dance of the Sangam age, dance as an art had been perfected and had become highly professional in this period.

**END NOTES**

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