

SANGAM LITERATURE AND LATER TAMIL WORKS

The earliest literature of South India is represented by a group of texts in old Tamil, often collectively referred to as Sangam literature. A tradition recorded in post-7th century texts speaks of three Sangams or literary gatherings in ancient times. The first is supposed to have been held in Madurai for 4,440 years, the second at Kapatapuram for 3,700 years, and the third in Madurai for 1,850 years. Although the details of this legend obviously cannot be considered historical, the similarity of language and style within the Sangam corpus suggests the possibility that they were the product of some sort of literary gathering. The case for the historicity of at least the third Sangam is that some of the kings and poets associated with it are historical figures. On the other hand, there is a possibility that the legend of the Sangams may have been based on a very different event—the establishment of the Jaina sangha in Madurai in about the 5th century. In view of the controversy surrounding the tradition of the three Sangams, some scholars prefer to use the term 'early classical Tamil literature' rather than 'San-gam literature'.

The Sangam corpus includes six of the eight anthologies of poems included in the *Ettutokai* (The Eight Collections), and nine of the ten *pattus* (songs) of the *Pattuppattu* (The Ten Songs). The style and certain historical references in the poems suggest that they were composed between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE. They were compiled into anthologies in about the mid-8th century. A few centuries later, these anthologies were collected into the super-anthologies (i.e., anthologies of anthologies) called the *Ettutokai* and the *Pattuppattu*. The earliest parts of the first two books of the *Tolkappiyam* can also be included in Sangam literature. The *Tolkappiyam* is essentially a work on grammar, but it also includes a discussion of phonology, semantics, syntax, and literary conventions.

There are two kinds of Sangam poems—*akam* and *puram*. *Akam* poems had love as their theme, while *puram* poems were mostly about war. A. K. Ramanujan (1999) describes *puram* poetry as 'public poetry' which dealt with all kinds of themes other than love, such as good and evil, community and kingdom. The poems were modelled on the bardic songs of older times and were orally transmitted for an indefinite period before they were written down. The anthologies include a total of 2,381 poems ascribed to 473 poets, 30 of whom were women. The poets came from cities and villages and had varied social and professional backgrounds. They included teachers, merchants, carpenters, astrologers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, soldiers, ministers, and kings. Due to their varied themes and authorship, Sangam poems offer a good idea of everyday life in the time when they were composed.

A number of Tamil didactic works were written in the post-5th century period. The most famous of these is Tiruvalluvar's *Tirukkural*, a work on ethics, polity, and love (5th-6th centuries). Of the several Tamil epics, two of the best known are the *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai*. The former is a little earlier than the latter, but both were composed in about the 5th-6th centuries CE.

Early medieval Tamil literature includes the inspired and intense devotional poetry of the Vaishnava saints (*Alvars*) and Shaiva saints (*Nayanars* or *Nayanmars*) and their hagiographies. Vaishnava poetry took off with the compositions of *Peyalvar*, *Puttalvar*, and *Poikailvar*. In the 10th century, *Nathamuni* collected the *Alvar* hymns into the canon known as the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*. The *Alvarvaipavam* is a sacred biography of the Vaishnava saints. Shaiva devotional literature began with the compositions of *Tirumular* and *Karaikal Ammaiyar*. The hymns of the *Nayanmar* saints were compiled in the 10th century by *Nambi Andar Nambi* and this compilation formed the core of the Shaiva canon, the *Tirumurai*. *Nambi* also wrote a work called the *Tiruttondar Tiruvan-tati* about the saints. In the 12th century, the accounts of the Shaiva saints were collected in a text called the *Periyapuranam*. All these texts provide valuable insights into the religious and social history of early medieval South India.

New genres of Tamil poetry emerged in early medieval times, many in praise of kings and gods. The Kalampakams were poetic compositions in which the last line, word, foot, or syllable of the preceding poem formed the beginning of the succeeding one. Kovai were poems in which the verses are arranged in a thematic sequence. Compositions in this genre included: the Pantikkovai, a 6th/7th century work written in honour of the Pandya king Netumaran; Manikkavachakar's Tirukkovaiyar (9th century) in praise of the god Shiva; and Poyyamolip Pulavar's Tanchaivanan Kovai (13th century) about Tanchaivanan, a minister and general of a Pandya king. Ula literature comprised songs in praise of gods, sung when the image of the deity was taken out in procession. Tutu poetry consisted of poems in which a message is delivered to a god, lover, or someone else. The moral aphorisms and sayings of Awaiyar (9th/10th century), the second of three poet-esses by this name, are still popular among Tamil-speaking people today.

Of the many Tamil renderings of the Rama legend, the most famous is Kamban's Iramavataram. Tamil versions of the Mahabharata story were also written, of which some fragments survive. Several Tamil lexicons and grammatical works belong to the early medieval period.