

Tamil Literature

Tamil literature **goes back to the Sangam Era**, named after the assembly (sangam) of poets.

Sangam Period

- The period roughly between the 3rd century B.C. and 3rd century A.D. in South India (the area lying to the south of river Krishna and Tungabhadra) is known as Sangam Period.
- It has been named after the Sangam academies held during that period that flourished under the royal patronage of the Pandya kings of Madurai.
- At the sangams, eminent scholars assembled and functioned as the board of censors and the choicest literature was rendered in the nature of anthologies.
- These literary works were the earliest specimens of Dravidian literature.
- South India, during the Sangam Age, was ruled by three dynasties-the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas.

Three Sangams

According to the Tamil legends, there were three Sangams (Academy of Tamil poets) held in the ancient South India popularly called Muchchangam.

- The First Sangam, is believed to be held at Madurai, attended by gods and legendary sages. No literary work of this Sangam is available.
- The Second Sangam was held at Kapadapuram, only Tolkappiyam survives from this.
- The Third Sangam was also held at Madurai. A few of these Tamil literary works have survived and are a useful source to reconstruct the history of the Sangam period.

Sangam Literature

The Sangam literature includes Tolkappiyam, Ettutogai, Pattuppattu, Pathinenkilkanakku, and two epics named – Silappathikaram and Manimegalai.

- **Tolkappiyam:** It was authored by Tolkappiyar and is considered the earliest of Tamil literary work.
 - Though it is a work on Tamil grammar, it also provides insights on the political and socio-economic conditions of the time.
 - It is a unique work on grammar and poetics, in its three parts of nine sections each, deals with Ezhuttu(letter), Col (word) and Porul (subject matter).
 - Almost all levels of the human language from the spoken to the most poetic lie within the purview of Tolkappiyar's analysis as he treats in exquisitely poetic and epigrammatic statements on phonology, morphology, syntax, rhetoric, prosody and poetics.
- **Ettutogai (Eight Anthologies):** It consists of eight works – Aingurunooru, Narrinai, Aganaooru, Purananooru, Kuruntogai, Kalittogai, Paripadal and Padirrupattu.

- **Pattuppattu (Ten Idylls):** It consists of ten works – Thirumurugarruppadai, Porunararruppadai, Sirupanarruppadai, Perumpanarruppadai, Mullaippattu, Nedunalvada, Maduraikkanji, Kurinjippattu, Pattinappalai and Malaipadukadam.
- **Pathinenkilkanakku:** It contains eighteen works about ethics and morals.
 - The most important among these works is **Tirukkural authored by Thiruvalluvar**, the tamil great poet and philosopher.
- **Tamil Epics:** The two epics **Silappathikaram** is written by **Elango Adigal** and **Manimegalai** by **Sittalai Sattanar**.
 - They also provide valuable details about the Sangam society and polity.

Medieval Tamil literature

- The medieval period, spanning from the 11th and 13th centuries, was one of harmony amongst Tamil people. Avvaiyar, a female poet whose name translates to ‘respectable woman’, created poems during this era that continue to be taught in Tamil schools today. Avvaiyar is one of the most crucial poets of Tamil history, as her poems appeal to children. Her well-known poem, Aathichoodi, demonstrates to children how to live a life full of moral genuineness with the use of the Tamil alphabet.

Vijayanagar and Nayak period

- The Vijayanagar and Nayak period, reigning from approximately 1300 to 1650 C.E., was a period in Tamil history where the Tamil country would be affected by an invasion, and ultimately conquered. As a result, the rise of the Vijayanagar kingdom and Nayak governance came about. Exemplary works in Tamil literature were still produced in this era. For example, Thiruppugazh by Arunagirinathar.

Thiruppugazh

- Thiruppugazh, created in the 15th century, is a work of religious songs praising Lord Murugan. The background behind Arunagirinathar’s reason for writing Thiruppugazh is quite intriguing. According to Arunagirinathar, Lord Murugan saved him when he was going to end his life at a temple. Ultimately, this reformed his life. Consequently, Arunagirinathar decides to make devotional songs to thank Lord Murugan for saving him.
- This period demonstrated the devotionality to religion prominently, especially with the use of literature. As seen throughout this article, the Hindu religion is prominently valued among Tamil people.

The modern era of Tamil literature

- The late 18th to 19th centuries brought the Modern era in Tamil literature. This gave us the works of Subramanya Bharathi, who was a writer and an important member in terms of social reform. Bharathi was very influential, both with his literature and activism.
- Bharathi’s work is often cited as the inspiration for modern Tamil literature. His work is said to involve both modernist and classical techniques. Additionally, his poems

show how outspoken he was about social issues, and often display rebellious remarks. Bharathi covered a variety of topics in his works, from children's songs to praising those fighting for India's independence.

Here is Bharathi's commentary on the Indian caste system:

There is no caste system.

It is a sin to divide people on caste basis.

The ones who are really of a superior class are the ones
excelling in being just, wise, educated and loving.

The rise of Tamil novels

- The modern era of Tamil literature was accompanied by a rise in novels. Ramanichandaran would contribute to this rising trend with the composition of modern romance novels in the 20th century. She is currently the best-selling author in Tamil literature, with 178 novels written.
- Ramanichandran's focus on romance novels does not include the idea of caste systems, which is a common controversy within South Asia because the caste system is still used to this day.
- One of her famous books, Kanney Kanmaniey, illustrates Madura and her lover, Sathyan. Madura's brother loses money while betting on horses, causing her and her brother to work at Sathyan's hotel. Sathyan unknowingly believes that Madura betrayed him and ends up marrying another woman, but his wife ends up dying. Conflicted with revenge and undying love, Sathyan is confused about how to act towards Madura. In sum, the story follows Sathyan's journey of love and figuring out his feelings towards Madura.
- As a result, these types of stories are very popular among Tamil women because it allows them to live through these stories.

Cultural and linguistic significance in anthropology

- Tamil, being one of the oldest recorded languages in linguistic history, has a diverse library of literature. With commentaries on ethics and struggles, to songs depicting the beauty of nature before the rise of demolition of the environment, Tamil literature gives us a deep insight into the values of South Asian culture.
- Some of these values are still appraised today. In retrospect, the Tamil people were seemingly advanced in terms of thought and transcribing it into literature.
- The exploration of this language allows for a better understanding of the Tamil culture and its customs.
- In addition, there is linguistic significance when looking at the history of Tamil literature as well. Though most, if not all, literature from the 6th Century BCE does not remain today, it is still evident that the Tamil people took time to record their thoughts.