

LITERATURE (TAMIL)

A. Sangam Literature

The Sangam literature is the oldest part of the Tamil literature marking the beginning of the historical age in the south India. It's origin is shrouded in myths and legends but historically it can be placed during the early Christian centuries. It is also believed that the Sangam literature reflects some aspects even the megalithic life of the south but on the whole the megalithic people are supposed to be part of prehistoric cultures (the cultures scripts and literary traditions).

The sangam literature consists of six of the eight anthologies of poem included in the ' Ettutokai' (the eight collections) and nine of the ten pattus (songs) of the 'Pattuppattu' (the ten songs). It was a poetic creation of some assemblies of Tamil poets , known as the Sangamas, which are said to have been held in the cities like Madurai and Kaptapuram. These assemblies , three in number, were patronised by the Pandya rulers of Madurai. But , quite ironically, the maximum number of references are related to the Cheras. These assemblies have been given a mythical past which is generally not believed as a historical fact.

The first assembly was presided over by the legendary sage Agastya who is supposed to be the first Brahman who reached the South. The works of the first assembly are now not available. The only surviving work of the second sangama is 'Tolkappiyam' by Tolkappiyar who was also the president of the second Sangama. The 'Tolkappiyam' is regarded as the oldest work on Tamil grammar. The extant parts of the Sangam literature are supposed to be the works of the third Sangama presided over by Nakkirar.

Unlike the Vedic literature which is religious and divine the Sangam literature is secular and is attributed to human agencies. It consists only of poetry and prose parts have not been found. It is mainly based on the themes like love and war . Love based poems are called Agam/ Akam whereas the poems dealing with war related themes are known as Puram. It contains both narrative/ descriptive parts and normative/ didactic parts known as 'Melkanaku' and 'Kilkanaku' respectively.

B. The Tamil Epics

The Silappadikaram(the Song of the Anklet)

Written by Ilango Adigal (Ilankovatikal), the epic is based on the story of Kannagi(Kannaki) and her husband Kovalan. When kovalan is wrongly punished and executed on the charges of theft, his wife proves him innocent. She came to be worshipped as an ideal wife as part of the 'Pattini cult'.

The Manimeklai (the Jewel belt)

A sequel to the Silappadikaram by Sattanar narrating the story of Manimeklai , the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi (a courtesan with whom kovalan had an illicit relationship). She overcomes all the worldly temptations and joins Buddhist sangha .

Both the epics are essentially secular but depicts the influence of heterodox sects like Jainism and Buddhism respectively. They also throw light on the emerging social norms and the ideological and moral climate of the time.

C. Tamil Ramayan

Entitled as 'Iramavataram' it was written by Kambar in the 12 century .it is popularly known as the 'Kambramayan'.

D.Tamil Bhakti literature.

It mainly consists of the compilation of the songs of the Tamil bhakti saints expressing love , surrender , and devotion towards gods Vishnu and Shiva. The songs of the vaishnavite traditions composed by the Vaishnava saints known as Alvars have been compiled as 'Prabandham' (Nalayira Divya Prabandham'). This compilation was made by Nathamuni the first Vaishnava Acharya. A biographical work ' Alvarvaipavam' deals with the life of Vaishnava saints. The songs of the Shaivite traditions composed by the Shaiva saints known as Nayanars have been compiled as 'Thevaram' forming the core of the Shaiva canon 'Tirumurai'. This compilation was made by Nambi Andar Nambi. In the 12th century a text called the ' Periyapuranam' collected the accounts of the Shaiva saints. These works throw light on the religious and social history of the early medieval south India.