

## CHAPTER 5

# The Sangam Age

### SYLLABUS

#### The Sangam Age

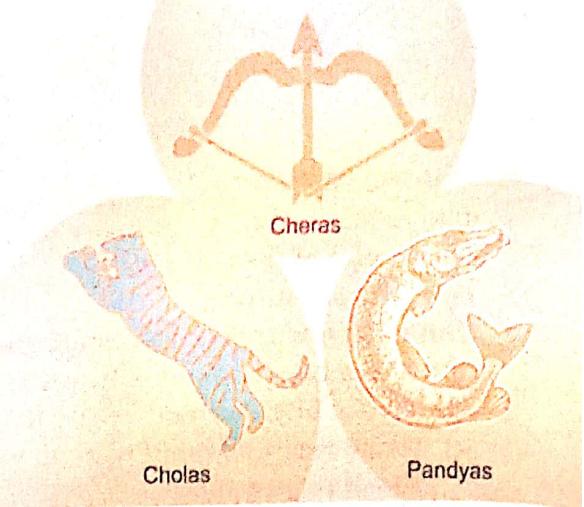
Sources: *Tirukkural* and *Megaliths*.

A brief study of society and economy.

The Sangam Age is considered a landmark in the history of South India. The word 'Sangam' is the Tamil form of the Sanskrit 'Sangha' which means an assembly or an association. Thus, the Sangam Age refers to the period when bulk of Tamil literature was composed by a body of Tamil scholars and poets in three successive literary gatherings called *Sangam*. Hence, *Sangam* refers to the gatherings of poets and bards. These took place between first century BC and second century AD in the kingdom of Pandyas. These texts were called *Sangam* because they are believed to have been composed and compiled in assemblies of poets that were held in the city of Madurai.

It is believed that the first *Sangam* was attended by Gods and legendary sages including Sage Agastya, but all its works have perished. The second *Sangam*, attended by several poets, produced a large mass of literature, but only *Tolkappiyam* by Tolkappiar (the oldest book of Tamil grammar) has survived. The third *Sangam*, attended by many poets, produced vast literature of which only a fraction has survived. It is this fraction which constitutes the extant body of *Sangam* literature.

The three kingdoms of Cheras, Pandyas and Cholas were always at war with one another. Their wars and heroic deeds form the themes of Sangam literature. According to these descriptions, Cheras had finally asserted their supremacy over the other two kingdoms.

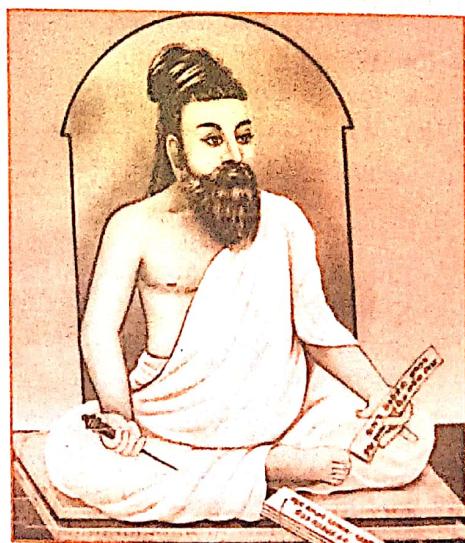


### SOURCES

The primary sources of information about the Sangam Age include the following:

1. **Tirukkural:** It is one of the most celebrated works of the eighteen minor works (*Patinenkilkanakku*) of the Sangam literature, written by *Tiruvalluvar*, Tamil poet and philosopher. *Tirukkural* (or *Kural*) is considered as a compound of the teachings of Dharamashastra, the Arthashastra and the Kamasutra. It comprises a series of brief metrical proverbs on many aspects of life and religion. It is a collection of Tamil couplets organised into 133 chapters. Each chapter has a specific subject ranging from "ploughing a piece of land" to "ruling a country". It preaches simplicity and truth throughout its verses.

The 133 chapters are grouped into three sections: (a) *Aram* (righteousness); (b) *Porul* (wealth); and (c) *Inbam* or *Kamam* (pleasure). While



Thiruvalluvar

*Aram* and *Inbam* discuss about ethical living in private life, *Porul* deals with public affairs.

Besides these, Tamil literature comprises five epics, namely *Jivakachintamani*, *Manimekalai*, *Silappadikaram*, *Valayapathi* and *Kuntalakeshi*. Apart from the story and literature, these epics are a vast treasure of information about music and dance; administration and grandeur of Kings of the era.

**2. Megaliths:** Megaliths are box-like structures erected with the stone slabs, resting on each other without any mortar. Sometimes there was an opening cut into one of the sides. These acted either as burial sites or commemorative memorials.

While some megaliths can be seen on the surface, some others are often found underground. Stone circles or boulders placed on the surface probably served as signposts to find the burial site, so that people could return to the same place whenever they wanted to. Some megaliths contain more than one skeleton. This indicates that people belonging to the same family were buried in the same place though at different time periods. These are also known as *memorial stones*. These megaliths contained not only skeletons of the buried people, but also contained grave goods including pottery and iron objects. These goods provide a useful insight about the life of people during the Sangam Age.

For example, the number of agricultural tools compared to those meant for fishing and hunting are less, so it can be concluded that the megalithic people initially did not practice an advanced type of agriculture. From the grave goods, religious beliefs of the megalithic people can also be inferred. For example, the presence



Megalith Burial

of tridents in the graves, show their faith in Lord Shiva.

Renowned historian, Champakalakshmi has identified the Sangam Age with the last phase of the megalithic culture in the Tamil region. She has substantiated her viewpoint by correlating the velir settlements known from literature with the megalithic sites of the far south. This includes a subsistence base consisting of agriculture, cattle rearing and fishing, the use of iron, and a period in which warfare and weapons were important.

## TAMIL KINGDOMS

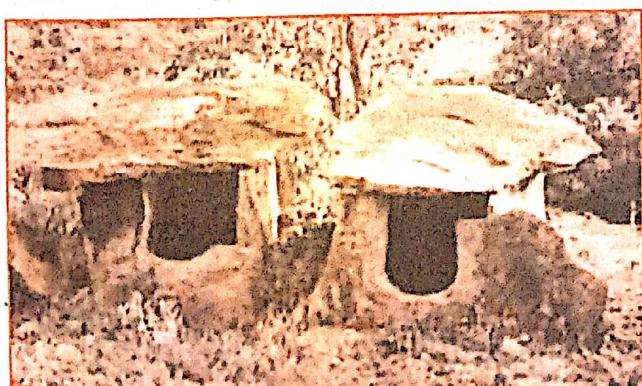
The Sangam poems mention the term '*muvendar*', which is a Tamil word meaning three chiefs and was used for the heads of three ruling families, namely Chera, Chola and Pandya in the Tamil country during the Sangam Age. In addition to these three kingdoms, there were local chieftains.

### CHERA KINGDOM

The territory of the Sangam Cheras mostly comprised the present state of Kerala.

The Chera kings of the Sangam Age were known by many titles such as *Vanavar*, *Villavar* and *Malaiyar*. There were two important lines of Chera Kings. The first one started from *Udiyan Cheralathan* and the second from *Irumporai*. The kings belonging to these two lines ruled the Chera kingdom. Their capital was *Vanji* and their chief port was *Thondi*. Their symbol on the flag was bow and arrow.

Cheran Senguttuvan was the most popular king of the Sangam Cheras. The Sangam works, *Padiruppattu* and *Ahananuru* provide a lot of information about him. His brother Illango



Megaliths

Vadigal composed the Tamil Epic, *Silappadikaram* which, besides the story of Kannagi and Kovalan, tells about how Senguttuvan defeated a number of rulers to bring a stone from the Himalayas to build a temple dedicated to Kannagi. Senguttuvan led an expedition up to the Himalayas. He crossed the river Ganges and defeated his enemies. He reached the Himalayas and hoisted the Chera flag. Pattini cult, that is the worship of Kannagi as the ideal wife, was started by him. It is said that he brought a stone from the Himalayas to carve a statue of Kannagi and built a temple for her.

*Padirrupattu* and other Sangam literature give a long list of Chera kings. The most popular among them were Cheralathan, Peruncheral Irumporai and Kanaikkal Irumporai.

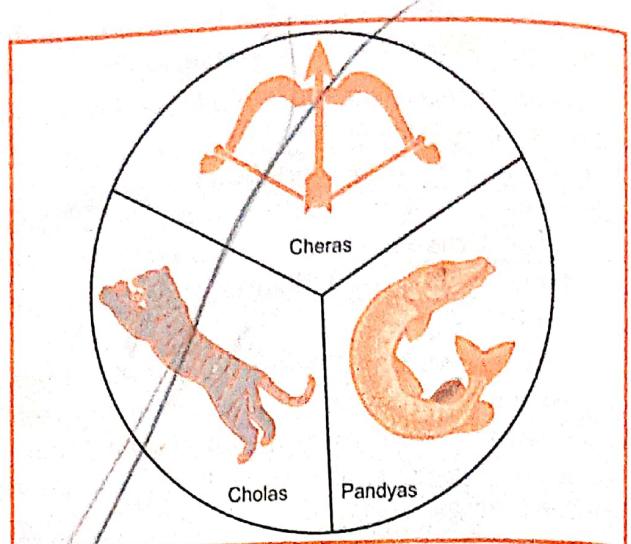
#### CHOLA KINGDOM

The kingdom of the Sangam Cholas comprised the present Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli districts.

The Chola kingdom is referred to in the Sangam literature as Chonadu, Kaveri Nadu, Kaveri Soozh Nadu, Neer Nadu and Punal Nadu. These names indicate the rich water resources of the Chola country. The river Kaveri that flowed through the Chola kingdom, made its soil fertile. The capital of the Sangam Cholas was Uraiyur. Their second capital was Kaveripoompattinam. It was also the chief port of the Sangam Cholas. Their symbol was tiger. The Sangam literature mentions a number of Chola kings. They had surnames like Killi, Valavan, Senni and Cholan.

The most popular among the Sangam Cholas was Karikalan. The Sangam literature gives useful information about Karikalan. Even in his young age, he proved his extraordinary ability of settling the disputes in his kingdom. He was a great warrior. He defeated the Chera and the Pandya kings at Venni. In another battle, Karikalan defeated a confederacy of nine princes. He extended his kingdom beyond Kanchipuram.

Karikalan had become popular for the development activities in his kingdom. He had encouraged the growth of agriculture as well as commerce. He had built the dam called *Kallanai* across the river Kaveri. Its water was used for irrigation. Karikalan had fortified the port-city



Emblems of Three Tamil Kingdoms

Kaveripoompattinam or Puhar and made it his capital, which flourished as a great centre for trade. Merchants from foreign countries visited Puhar. Karikalan was generous towards Tamil poets and patronised them.

#### PANDYAN KINGDOM

The extent of the Pandyan kingdom during the Sangam Age comprised the present districts of Madurai, Tirunelveli and Ramanathapuram. The Pandya kings were known as *Maran*, *Valudhi* and *Chezhiyan*. Their capital was Madurai and their chief port was *Korkai*. Their symbol was fish. The Pandyan kings earned name and fame for their patronage to the Tamil Sangam. It can be said that their capital Madurai had remained the capital of Tamil language and literature.

The Sangam literature provides a long list of Pandya kings. Some of them had become popular. Mudhukudumi Peruvazhthi performed many sacrifices to celebrate his victories. Ariyappadaikadantha Neduncheliyan was a famous Pandyan ruler. He gave death sentence to the hero of *Silappadikaram*, Kovalan, by mistake. Another important ruler was Thalaiyalanganathu Nedunchezhiyan. He defeated the combined forces of Chera, Chola and other local chieftains at a place called Thalaiyalanganam. He patronised a number of Tamil poets including Mangudi Maruthanar.

The Pandya rule ceased along with that of the Cheras and Cholas in the third century AD.

## LOCAL CHIEFTAINS

Apart from the three Tamil kingdoms, a number of local chieftains ruled in different parts of Tamil Nadu. They were known as *Velirs*. The Sangam literature furnishes lot of information about them. The most famous among the Velirs were called *Seven Patrons* or *Kadaiyelu Vallalgal*. They were Pari, Ori, Malayan, Elini, Pegan, Aay and Nalli.

The local chieftains had extended patronage to the Tamil poets. In turn, these poets hailed them for their generosity. They had extended their help to resolve disputes between the rulers. For example, Avvaiyan played the role of a diplomat in the court of Adhiyaman. Another Sangam poet, Kapilar had taken care of Pari's daughters after his death. These local chieftains made generous donations to the poets, bards and their consorts. Like the Chera, Chola and Pandya rulers, the local chieftains also played a significant role in the political, social and cultural domains during the Sangam Age.

## SOCIETY

The Sangam literature gives a true picture of the society in the Sangam Age.

## SOCIAL CLASSES

The Sangam literature speaks of many tribes and also refers to the traditional castes. This means that the caste divisions and the tribal arrangement existed side by side. However, the distinction in Tamil Sangam society was primarily based upon the division between the high born and the low born, differentiating the Brahmanas and their patrons from the common men. Though the beginnings of caste system can be made out within the Brahmana households, the larger society remained casteless. The *Tolkappiyam* has mentioned four castes, namely, Brahmanas, kings, traders and farmers, ignoring most of the other names of the people. These references in the *Tolkappiyam* obviously show influence of the Sanskritic social ideal.

The Brahmanas during the Sangam Age were a respectable and learned community. They performed their caste duties scrupulously. They served the king occasionally as judicial officers and always as priests and astrologers. They were attached to the land and were proud of their country and their mother tongue.

It seems that trade was common to both the Vaishyas and Vellalars. The Vaishyas were assigned the duties of learning, performing sacrifice, making gifts, agriculture, protection of cows and trade.

Vellalars were landed aristocrats, who cultivated the wetlands during the Sangam Age. They had close associations and held high positions of office with the three main dynasties, Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas. They also carried out trade. So the two communities were known by the profession in which they were engaged. The ordinary ploughmen were known as *uzhavar* and the landless labourers were known as *kadasiyar* and *adimai*.

The most relevant socio-economic aspect of the anthologies is their concept of *tinai* according to which the land was divided. The whole area consisted of five *tinais* or divisions viz., hilly backwoods (*kurinji*), parched zones (*palai*), pastoral tract (*mullai*), wet land (*marutam*) and littoral land (*neital*).

The poems in the anthologies describe the mode of human adaption in each *tinai* and the various social groups there:

- The inhabitants of the hilly areas were hunters and gatherers.
- In the parched zone, the inhabitants lived by plunder and cattle lifting.
- In the pastoral tract, the inhabitants subsisted on shifting agriculture and animal husbandry.
- Wet land was inhabited by people subsisting on plough agriculture.
- And finally, the littoral land was inhabited by those dependent on fishing and salt extraction.

Besides the above mentioned social groups, there are references to some full-time craftsmen such as goldsmiths, blacksmiths and potters in the poems.

## FOOD AND DRESS

Grain, meat and fish formed the chief articles of food, with vegetables, milk and milk products. Grain was husked in hollows made in the ground, and converted into flakes (*aval*). Appam (*apupa*) or rice-cake soaked in milk was a luxury. The cooked fish with piping hot curry was equally valued.

Clothing comprised two pieces of cloth. Women in high society used corsets and hair paste. Ornaments were worn by both sexes. The children wore a necklace of tiger teeth.

### ENTERTAINMENT

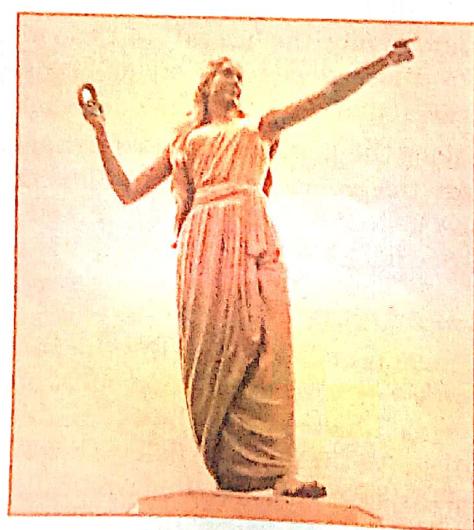
The Sangam Age people made use of different modes of entertainment during their leisure time. Music and dance filled a good part of the spare time of men and women. In the villages, cock-fighting and goat-fighting were popular. Gambling was practised widely. Wrestling was a common form of sport enjoyed by the youth though at times it led to the death of one of the contestants. Children played various games.

### POSITION OF WOMEN

The status of women in Sangam society was not equal to that of men. The Sangam society consisted of different kinds of women. There were married women who had settled down as dutiful housewives looking after their husbands and children. There were female ascetics belonging to Buddhist or Jain tradition like *Kaundi Adigal* and *Manimegalai*. There were a large number of courtesans.

However, women enjoyed freedom of movement in society and the number of women poets of the age is a proof that the women were provided with good education.

The worship of *Kannagi* or *Pattini* ('the Chaste Lady') was perhaps a very early institution and was an extension of the worship of the Goddess of Chastity. But this seems to have become popular



Statue of Kannagi

with the Chera ruler Senaguttuvan's worship of Kannagi and it spread to distant places like Sri Lanka in the South and Malwa in the North.

### MARRIAGE

There is little information about the institution of marriage during the Sangam Age. Later works like the *Tolkappiyam* and the *Kalaviyal* say that the Aryans introduced the rituals and ceremonies of marriage (*karanam*). These works refer to the eight forms of marriage known to the Sanskrit Dharmashastras and show great ingenuity in fitting them into framework of the Tamil scheme.

### ECONOMY

The economy during the Sangam Age was simple and self-sufficient. The people were industrious and they believed in living well by earning wealth.

The Sangam literature points to the existence of both the wealthy and the poor in society. The wealthy people included the kings and those who surrounded them. The poor were either the farm and casual labourers or the wandering minstrels. The division of social groups into the rich and the poor was accepted as natural as poverty was considered the result of the past actions of men.

### AGRICULTURE

Agriculture was the main occupation. The main crop was rice, while other crops included cotton, ragi, sugarcane, pepper, ginger, cardamom, turmeric, cinnamon, different varieties of fruits, etc. Construction of embankments and canals for irrigation was undertaken by the state.

Chera country was noted for its jackfruit, pepper and turmeric. In the Chola country a piece of land yielded much paddy. Many rural activities like the cultivation of ragi and sugarcane, the making of sugar from the cane, and the harvesting and drying of grain are described in the Sangam poems in detail.

### OTHER OCCUPATIONS

Next to agriculture, spinning and weaving were the most widely practised crafts. Spinning and weaving of cotton, and perhaps also of silk, had attained a high degree of perfection. Spinning was the part-time occupation of women. The weaving of complex patterns on cloth and silk



Construction of mobile and electricity towers as well as mining

and unauthorised

excavations pose a threat to the existence of ancient structures. The most prominent is the 'pillared dolmen' of the megalithic era, found at Mallayagaripalle, nestling on a hillock between Chandragiri and Dornakambala, 20 km from Tirupati. The structure locally referred to as 'Pandava Gullu' or 'Pandavula Banda' in memory of the Pandavas, is estimated to be 2,500 years old. The site escaped damage by a whisker as villagers, supported by anthropologists, intervened and got granite mining activity stopped.

There is another endangered megalith monument in Palem village near Kallur, which resembles a bull's horn. Called locally as 'Devara Yedhu', the site has suffered repeated damage due to clandestine excavation by treasure hunters. Also, an electric post was fixed very close to the site, which is indicative of official apathy.

Yet another type of a megalithic burial site is the 'stone circle', where the tomb is surrounded by round stones arranged in a circle. One such site in Venkatapuram, 15km east of Tirupati near Karakambadi, is damaged due to the installation of a mobile tower.

How can we ensure the safety of our monuments and artifacts from scourge of modernisation?

is often mentioned in literature and Uraiur was a major centre of cotton trade. The poems mention cotton cloth as thin as the skin of the snake or a cloud of steam, so finely woven that the eye could not follow the course of the thread. Scissors and needles were known. In addition to cotton and silk, cloth made of wood fibre was also used by the priestly class. Dyeing was a widespread ancillary industry to weaving.

**Trade**  
The Sangam literature is full of details regarding the commercial activities of the people. Trade, both internal and foreign was well organised and briskly carried on throughout the period. Internal trade was brisk, caravans of merchants with carts and pack-animals carried their merchandise from place to place.

Most of the trade was carried on by barter. Paddy constituted the most commonly accepted medium of exchange, specially in the rural areas. Salt was sold for paddy. Paddy was sold by mentioning its price in terms of salt. Honey and roots were exchanged for fish oil. There were established markets, called angadi in the bigger towns. Elsewhere, hawkers carried goods to the houses of the people.

There was an extensive trade with foreign countries. According to the Sangam literature, the Tamil land had certain commodities which were in great demand in foreign markets. These included pepper, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, turmeric, ivory products, pearls, precious stones. The main imports included horses, gold and glass.

The port cities were the centres of foreign trade. Big ships entered the port of Puhar bringing in precious merchandise from overseas. The family of the rich merchants lived on the upper floors, while the lower ones were set apart for business. Saliyur in the Pandya country and Bandar in Chera are counted among the most important ports in the poems.

The *Periplus of the Red Sea* that describes navigation and trade of the Roman empire gives information on the trade between India and the Roman empire. It mentions the ports of Naura (Cannanore), Tyndis (identified with Pomani) and Muziris (Cranganore), as of leading importance on the west coast.

The *Periplus* also mentions Uraiur. All the pearls from the coast were sent to Uraiur and exported. It notes further that a great quantity of muslin was made in the region of Andhra.

The gold and silver coins from the Roman empire found in the interior of the Tamil land indicate the extent of the trade.

## EXERCISES

### I. Multiple-Choice Questions

A. Choose the correct answers to the questions from the given options.

1. The word 'Sangam', literally means:  
(a) Association      (b) Involvement      (c) Opposite      (d) Kingdom
2. Tirukkural is a collection of Tamil couplets organised into \_\_\_\_\_ chapters.  
(a) 134      (b) 133      (c) 113      (d) 143
3. What are the box-like structures erected with the stone slabs, resting on each other without any mortar called?  
(a) Megaliths      (b) Tirukkural      (c) Couplets      (d) Malaiyar
4. The Tirukkural had three sections, namely  
(a) Aram, Porul and Inbam  
(b) Vanavar, Malaiyar and Udiyan  
(c) Tolkappiyam, Tirukkural and Tiruvalluvar  
(d) None of the above.
5. How are Megaliths or memorial stones a source of information?  
(a) Information about religious beliefs  
(b) Information about tools and implements  
(c) Information about life of people  
(d) All of the above.
6. Which of the following is not a sobriquet for Chera kings?  
(a) Vanavar      (b) Villavar      (c) Malaiyar      (d) Udiyan
7. Which of the following is incorrect?  
(a) Chera Kingdom : bow and arrow  
(b) Chola Kingdom : Tiger  
(c) Pandya kingdom : crocodile  
(d) Pandya kingdom : fish
8. The names referring to the Sangam Chola kingdom indicate  
(a) Powerful kings      (b) Rich water resources  
(c) Overseas trade      (d) All of the above.
9. Karikalan was the most popular Sangam Chola ruler because  
(a) he was a great warrior and diplomat  
(b) he fortified his capital making it a trade-centre  
(c) he encouraged growth of agriculture and commerce  
(d) All of the above.
10. The Velirs extended patronage to poets who acted as  
(a) administrative agents      (b) diplomats and caretakers  
(c) patrons of other arts      (d) All of the above.
11. Referring to the Sangam society which of the following is incorrect?  
(a) Uzhavar : ordinary ploughmen      (b) Vellalars : landed aristocrats  
(c) Adimai : priests      (d) Kadasiyar : landless labourers

B. Read the two statements given below and select the option that shows the correct relationship between (A) and (B).

1. (A) Tamil literature comprises five epics, besides the Tirukkural.

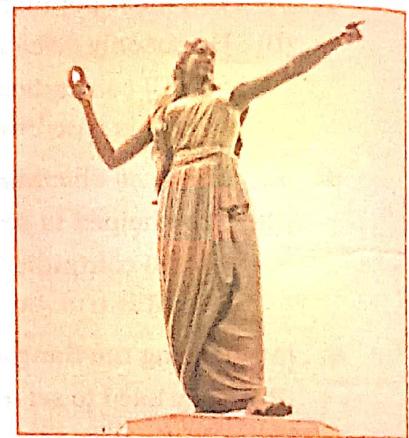
- (B) Megaliths acted as burial sites or commemorative memorials.  
(a) (B) contradicts (A)  
(c) (A) is true but (B) is false
2. (A) The capital of the Cheras was Vanji and their chief port was Thondi.  
(B) Their symbol on the flag was tiger.  
(a) (B) contradicts (A)  
(c) (A) is true but (B) is false
3. (A) The Chola Kingdom was rich in water resources.  
(B) The river Kaveri flowed through the Chola Kingdom.  
(a) (B) contradicts (A)  
(c) (A) is true but (B) is false
4. (A) The most popular rulers of the Sangam Cholas was Karikalan, who was a great warrior.  
(B) He not only defeated the Cheras and the Pandya Kings but also a confederacy of nine princes.  
(a) (B) contradicts (A)  
(c) (A) is true but (B) is false
5. (A) The local chieftains who ruled in different parts of Tamil Nadu were called Velirs.  
(B) They helped to resolve the disputes among the rulers.  
(a) (B) contradicts (A)  
(c) (A) is true but (B) is false
6. (A) During the Sangam Age, the Brahmans were a respectable and learned community.  
(B) They used to serve the kings as priests and astrologers and occasionally as judicial officers.  
(a) (B) contradicts (A)  
(c) (A) is true but (B) is false
7. (A) During the Sangam Age, the inhabitants of parched zone used to live by plunder and cattle lifting.  
(B) The inhabitants of the hilly areas subsisted on shifting agriculture and animal husbandry.  
(a) (B) contradicts (A)  
(c) (A) is true but (B) is false
8. (A) During the Sangam Age, paddy constituted the most commonly accepted medium of exchange.  
(B) Paddy was sold by mentioning its price in terms of salt.  
(a) (B) contradicts (A)  
(c) (A) is true but (B) is false
9. (A) There was an extensive trade with the foreign countries during the Sangam Age.  
(B) The gold and silver coins from the Roman Empire found in the interior of Tamil land indicate the extent of foreign trade.  
(a) (B) contradicts (A)  
(c) (A) is true but (B) is false
10. (A) During the Sangam Age, there were female ascetics belonging to Buddhist or Jain tradition.  
(B) The status of women in the Sangam Age was equal to that of men.  
(a) (B) contradicts (A)  
(c) (A) is true but (B) is false

## II. Short Answer Questions

1. Who was the author of Tirukkural? Name the three sections into which the chapters of Tirukkural are categorised.
2. What are Megaliths? Why are they so called?
3. Name any four divisions (*tinais*) mentioned in the Sangam literature.
4. Who were the Vellalars during the Sangam Age?
5. Name the main crops grown during the Sangam Period.
6. Name one centre of cotton trade and the products exported to foreign countries during the Sangam Age.
7. Name the social divisions of this period and the occupations associated with each one of them.

## III. Structured Questions

1. With reference to the picture given alongside, answer the following:
- Identify the lady whose statue this picture is. Why was the lady revered?
  - What was the position of women during the Sangam Age?
  - What does the Tolkappiyam say about ways of living of the people during the Sangam age?
2. With reference to the Sangam Age, answer the following questions:
- State why the Sangam Age is so called.
  - Name the three kingdoms along with their capitals that existed during the Sangam Age.
  - Describe the achievements of Chera ruler, Senguttuvan; and Chola ruler, Karikalan.
3. With reference to the economy during the Sangam Age, answer the following questions:
- What was the main occupation of the people and the activities associated with it?
  - Explain the organisation of internal trade.
  - Explain the extent and significance of external trade.



## IV. Thinking Skills

- How was the society in the Sangam Age different from that in the Vedic Age?
- Imagine you are transported in the Sangam Age by a time-machine. Describe the position of women, as seen by you.
- Find out structures similar to megaliths or commemorative memorials in other civilisations of the world. List the similarities and dissimilarities between the megaliths and these structures.
- Read the plot of the two epics — *Sillapadikaram* and *Manimekalai*. Compare and contrast the women characters in these two epics with those of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

