

## Ancient History South India

The ancient history of southern India, which includes the Sangam Age, the three kingdoms of Chola, Chera and Pandya, and Sangam Literature are very important topics for the [IAS exam](#). In this article, you will read a comprehensive note on the ancient history of South India including the social, political and religious life of people under the three kingdoms.

### Ancient History - South India

#### (From megalithic to the state polities of Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas)

The beginning of the historical period is marked by the settlements of large scale rural communities which practised agriculture with the help of iron implements, the formation of the state system, the rise of social classes, use of writing, beginnings of written literature, use of metal money and so on. However, all these phenomena did not emerge in a linear fashion in southern India, especially at the tip of the peninsula with the Kaveri delta as the nuclear zone, until about the 2nd century BCE. The Neolithic phase of south India which was marked by the use of polished stone axe and blade tools was succeeded by the **Megalithic phase** (around 1200 BCE - 300 BCE).

- The upper portions of the peninsula were inhabited by people who were called the **Megalith builders**.
- They are not known from their actual settlements which are rare but from their graves.
- These graves are called megaliths because they were encircled by big/mega stone pieces and were in most cases located outside the settlement area.
- They contain not only skeletons of the people who were buried but also pottery, iron objects and grains.
- Black and red ware pottery has been found buried in these megaliths.
- The first iron objects from south India which include arrowheads, spearheads, tridents (associated with Shiva), hoes, sickles, etc. have been excavated from these megaliths.
- The number of agricultural tools found at megalithic sites is lesser in comparison to tools meant for hunting and fighting implying that the megalithic people did not practise an advanced type of agriculture.
- The megalithic people produced paddy and ragi, and it seems that the cultivated land was very limited and generally they did not settle on the plains or low lands.
- The megaliths are found in all upland areas of the peninsula but their concentration is more in eastern Andhra and in Tamil Nadu.

The Cholas, Pandyas and the Keralaputras (Cheras) mentioned in the Ashokan inscriptions probably belonged to the last phase of Megalithic culture.

Chera, Chola, Pandya

### The early three kingdoms - The Pandyas, the Cholas and the Cheras

The southern end of the Indian peninsula situated south of the Krishna river was divided into three kingdoms - Chola, Pandya and Chera (or Kerala).

| Kingdom  | Capital          | Emblem | Premium Port                  |
|--|------------------|--------|-------------------------------|
| The Pandyas:<br><br>Covers modern Tirunelveli, Madurai, Ramnad districts and south Travancore. | Madurai          | Fish   | Korkai                        |
| The Cholas:<br><br>Covers modern Tanjore and Tiruchirappalli districts of Tamil Nadu.          | Uraiyur          | Tiger  | Puhar (modern Kaveripattanam) |
| The Cheras:<br><br>Covers mostly the Kerala coast.   | Vanji<br>Karuvur | Bow    | Tondi and Muchiri             |

#### *Pandyas*

The Pandya territory occupied the southernmost and the south-eastern portion of the Indian Peninsula. The Pandyas are first mentioned by Megasthenes, wherein he refers to a Pandya kingdom celebrated for pearls and ruled by a woman, suggesting that the Pandya society was matriarchal.

- The Sangam literature mentions Pandya rulers and describes the kingdom as wealthy and prosperous. The Pandya kings benefited from the trade with the Roman empire and even sent embassies to the Roman emperor Augustus.
- The Brahmanas enjoyed considerable influence and the Pandya kings performed Vedic sacrifices.
- Nediyon, Palshalai Mudukudumi were the early Pandyan kings and the other prominent kings are discussed below.

#### **Nedunjeliyan I**

It is believed that he died of remorse due to his tragic role (as he ordered the execution) in the death of Kovalan, the hero and the husband of Kannagi from the epic Silappadikaram.

#### **Nedunjeliyan II**

- He is considered to be an important Pandya ruler, as he acquired territories from other chieftains.
- He defeated a confederacy of Cheras, Cholas and five other chieftains in the battle of Talaiyalanganam.
- In Mangulam, two Tamil Brahmi inscriptions pertaining to the 2nd century BCE mention that a subordinate and relative of Nedunjeliyan presented gifts to Jaina monks.
- A first century BCE inscription from Alagarmalai mentions a person named Katumara Natan who was either a Pandyan prince or subordinate.

### *Cholas*

The Chola kingdom was called Cholamandalam or Coromandel and was situated to the north-east of the territory of the Pandyas, between the Pennar and the Velar rivers. Their chief centre of political power and capital Uraiyyur was famous for cotton trade. It seems that in the middle of the 2nd century BCE, a Chola king named Elara conquered Sri Lanka and ruled over it for nearly 50 years. The Cholas also maintained an efficient navy. The main source of wealth of the Cholas was their trade in cotton cloth. Some of the important Chola kings of the era are talked about below.

### **Karikala**

- One of the famous Chola kings who founded Puhar (identified with Kaveripattanam) which was a great centre of trade and commerce and had a large dock.
- Karikala constructed 160 km of embankment along the Kaveri river, which was built with a labour of 12,000 slaves brought as captives from Sri Lanka.
- He defeated a confederacy of Pandyas, Cheras and other allies at the battle of Venni. In Sangam literature, it is mentioned that eleven rulers lost their drums in the field (royal drum was an important insignia of royal power).
- The major victory at Vahaipparandalai was credited to his cap, in which several chieftains lost their umbrellas (according to Sangam literature).

### **Tondaiman Ilandiraiyan**

- He is considered to be another important Chola ruler who was either an independent ruler or a subordinate to Karikala.
- He was a gifted poet and in one of his poems, he says that in order to rule well, a king should possess a strong personal character.

Under Karikala's successors, the Chola empire rapidly declined. The two neighbouring powers - the Pandyas and the Cheras expanded at the cost of the Cholas. Later, the Pallavas from the north wrested a lot of their territories. From the 4th to 9th century CE, the Cholas played only a marginal role in south Indian history.

### *Cheras*

The Chera or the Kerala country was situated to the west and north of the land of the Pandyas. It included the narrow strip of land between the sea and the mountains and covered a portion of modern Kerala state. It was an important and prosperous kingdom owing to its trade with the Romans. The Romans set up two regiments at Muziris (near modern Kochi) to protect their interests and also built there a temple of Augustus.

### **Udiyanjeral**

- Earliest known Chera king.

### **Nedunjeral Adan**

- He is considered to be one of the prominent kings of the Chera dynasty, who probably defeated seven crowned kings and also won the title of ‘adhiraja’.
- He fought a war against the Cholas and in this war both the principal adversaries (the Chola king and Nedunjeral) lost their lives.
- One of his sons is also described as an ‘adhiraja’ who was victorious against Anji (a chieftain of Tagadur).

### **Senguttuvan**

- He was the son of Nedunjeral Adan and according to Chera poets, was their greatest king. He was also known as the Red Chera or Good Chera.
- Silappadikaram (post-Sangam text) describes his military conquest against Vayalur in the land of Nannan and capture of the Kodukur fortress in Kongu country.
- It is said that he invaded the north and crossed the Ganga.

### **Kudakko Ilanjeral Irumporai**

- He is believed to be one of the last Chera kings (as is mentioned in the Sangam literature) and had won wars against the Cholas and the Pandyas.

After the 2nd century CE, the Chera power declined and not much is known of their history till the 8th century CE.

The main interest of the political history of the above three kingdoms lies in the continuous wars they fought with one another and also with Sri Lanka. The kingdoms were immensely rich in spices, ivory, pearls, precious stones, muslin, silk, etc.

## Sangam Literature

## (3rd century BCE - 3rd century CE)

The Sangam age refers to that period in the early history of south India when a large number of poems in Tamil were composed by a number of authors. The term “Sangam” refers to an assembly or meeting together of Tamil poets. According to Tamil legends, there were three Sangams held in ancient south India popularly called **Muchchangam**, under the royal patronage of the Pandya kings of Madurai. The poems were orally transmitted for an indefinite period before they were finally written down by poets who came from both cities and villages, and had various social and professional backgrounds.

- The first Sangam is believed to be held at Madurai, under the chairmanship of Agastya. No literary work of this Sangam is available.
- The second Sangam was held at Kapatapuram, under Agastya and Tolkappiyar - disciple of Agastya, who compiled the authoritative book on Tamil grammar, **Tolkappiyam**.
- The third Sangam was presided over by Nakkirar at Madurai. Most of the surviving literature is from the third Sangam and provides a useful source to reconstruct the history of the Sangam period.
- **The Sangam literature consists of six of the eight anthologies of poems in the Ettutokai (The eight anthologies) and nine of the ten pattus (songs) of the Pattuppattu (The ten songs).**
- The historical references in the poems suggest that this literature was mostly composed between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE.
- Around the mid 8th century, they were compiled into anthologies, which were further collected into the super-anthologies - the Ettutokai and the Pattuppattu.
- It is important to mention that the anthologies consist of a total of 1281 poems attributed to 473 poets, out of whom 30 poets were women.
- **The Sangam literature also includes Tolkappiyam authored by Tolkappiyar and is considered the earliest of Tamil literary works.** Though it is a work on Tamil grammar, it also provides insights into the political and socio-economic conditions of the time.
- Poems within Sangam literature were composed on two broader themes of akam (love) and puram (based on war and included public poetry such as poems on good and evil, community and kingdom).
- The most important feature of Sangam literature is that it gives a clear picture of the contemporary society and culture of Tamilakam and also reveals its peaceful and harmonious relationship with the northern (Aryan) culture.
- **Sangam literature can be divided into two groups - narrative and didactic.**
  - The **narrative texts are called Melkannakku** - 18 major works consisting of eight anthologies and ten idylls. These are considered to be the works of heroic poetry in which heroes are glorified and perpetual wars and cattle raids are frequently mentioned.

- The **didactic texts are called Kilkkanakku** - consisting of 18 minor works.
  - Tiruvalluvar's Tirukkural is an important example of Tamil didactic work, which is a famous work on ethics, philosophy, polity and love, and is considered the fifth Veda of Tamil Nadu.
  - Tamil epics - Silappadikaram and Manimekalai are also didactic texts (kilkanakku).
    - These didactic texts were written in the period between the 5th and 6th centuries.
    - Silappadikaram deals with the love story of Kovalan, who prefers a courtesan Madhavi of Kaveripattnam to his noble wedded wife Kannagi.
    - Manimekalai is a sequel to Silappadikaram and is called the 'Odyssey of Tamil poetry', which deals with the adventures of the daughter born of the union of Kovalan and Madhavi and her subsequent conversion to Buddhism.

## Administration and Social Life in the Three Early Kingdoms

### The Economy in the Sangam Age

- Tolkappiyam refers to the five-fold division of lands called Tinais in the whole of Tamilakam.
  - These were Kurinji (hilly tracks), Mullai (pastoral), Palai (arid zone), Marudam (agricultural land) and Neital (sea coast).
  - These land divisions were based on their economic resources.
  - The people in different tinais had their own mode of subsistence. For example, in Kurinji it was hunting and gathering, in Mullai people practised animal husbandry, in Palai people could hardly produce anything, so they took to raiding and plundering, in Marudam it was agriculture and in Neital people practised fishing and salt making.
- Agriculture was the main occupation and the chief crops were rice, cotton, ragi, sugarcane, pepper, ginger, turmeric, cardamom, cinnamon, etc.
  - This region is devoid of perennial rivers, so the agricultural activities were facilitated by building tanks and dams.
  - The Chola king, Karikala of the Sangam Age, is credited with constructing a dam on the Kaveri river, which is considered to be the earliest dam in the country.
  - Spinning, weaving, ship-building, carpentry, making of ivory products were some of the handicrafts which were widely practised.
- Trade, both inland and foreign, was well established.
  - The economy of all the three kingdoms flourished due to large scale local and long-distance trade.
  - This helped in the emergence of important towns and craft centres.

- Muziris on the south-west coast was the important port of the Cheras and the Roman ships laden with gold used to land at this port and take along consignments of pepper.
- The capital city of the Pandyas, Madurai, was an important centre of textile and ivory making.
- Korkai - an important Pandya port was famous for its pearls.
- The capital city of the Cholas - Uraiyyur was a grand city with huge buildings.
- Kaveripattinam or Puhar was the main Chola port.
- The market places (called avanam), roads and highways were maintained and guarded to prevent robbery and smuggling.
- The flourishing **trade with the Romans** was the most important feature of the Sangam economy.
  - The author of “Periplus of the Erythrean sea”, gives the most valuable account of the trade between India and the Roman empire.
  - Pliny, a Roman writer, in his book “Natural History”, complains that the Roman empire was drained of gold on account of her trade with India.
  - Indian items of export to Romans were spices, perfumes, jewels, ivory and fine textiles (muslin), several precious and semi-precious stones like diamond, sapphire, carnelian, pearls, sandalwood, iron, etc.
  - Against these items of export, Romans exported gold and silver to India which is authenticated by the recovery of large numbers of Roman gold coins in south India.
  - The western traders also brought tin, lead, corals and slave girls to the subcontinent.
- A landmark in the development of communications was the discovery of the monsoon winds by the Greek sailor Hippatus, around 46 - 47 CE.
  - This led to an increase in the number of sea voyages for trading purposes.
  - Important ports of India on the western coast were Muziris, Bharukachchha (Broach), Sopara, and Kalyana.
  - Through the Red Sea, ships from these ports sailed to the Roman empire.
  - The important ports on the eastern coast of India were Tamralipti (West Bengal), Arikamedu (Tamil Nadu coast).
- The chief source of states' income was land revenue while a customs duty was levied on foreign trades. Tributes paid by feudatories and war booty (arai) constituted a considerable part of royal resources.

To know the [political history of the Sangam Period](#), aspirants can follow the linked article.

## Social Structure and Organisation

- The Tamil Brahmi inscriptions mention the kings as Ko and the chieftains as Ko or Kon. The Brahmanas first appeared in Tamil land in the Sangam age. Many Brahmanas functioned as poets and were generously rewarded by the king. The Tamil Brahmanas took meat and wine. The concept of varna was known in the Sangam age but social classes were not marked by acute caste distinctions in the early Sangam period (caste distinctions became prominent in the later stage). The most relevant basis of stratification was Kuti (clan-based descent groups) where there was no restriction on inter-dining and social interactions among Kuti groups. The ruling caste was called the arasar, and its members had marriage relations with the vellalas (rich peasants) who constituted the fourth class. The vellalas held the bulk of the land and employed labourers (Kadaiiyar - lowest class) to do the manual farm work. There were sharp inequalities in the age of Sangam - the rich lived in houses of brick and mortar while the poor lived in mud houses.
- The class of warriors was an important element in polity and society. Captains of the army were given the title “enadi” at a formal ceremony. The state had a rudimentary army which consisted of chariots drawn by oxen, elephants, cavalry and infantry. Elephants played an important part in wars and the horses were imported by sea into the kingdom. The memorial stones called “nadukul” or “virukkal” were very significant in the Sangam period and were erected in honour of those who died while fighting.
- In the domain of religion, the Sangam period witnessed peaceful and close interactions between north India and south Indian traditions. The kings performed Vedic sacrifices. A Pandya ruler named Mudukudomi took the title Palshalai, as he had many sacrificial halls. The people mainly worshipped a deity called Murugan, who was also called Subramaniya. There are also references to the presence of Buddhists and Jainas in the Tamil region. The Brahmanas also popularized the worship of Vishnu, Indra and Shiva in south India.
- The megalithic practice of providing for the dead continued in this age and cremation was also introduced.
- As many poems were contributed by the women poets to the corpus of Sangam literature, it testifies the belief that women were educated and also respected in the Sangam age. However, there is also mention about the sati being practised in Tamil society and it was called “tippayadal”. Sangam poems also mention “Chevilitta” who were like foster mothers and had a close association with the family members.