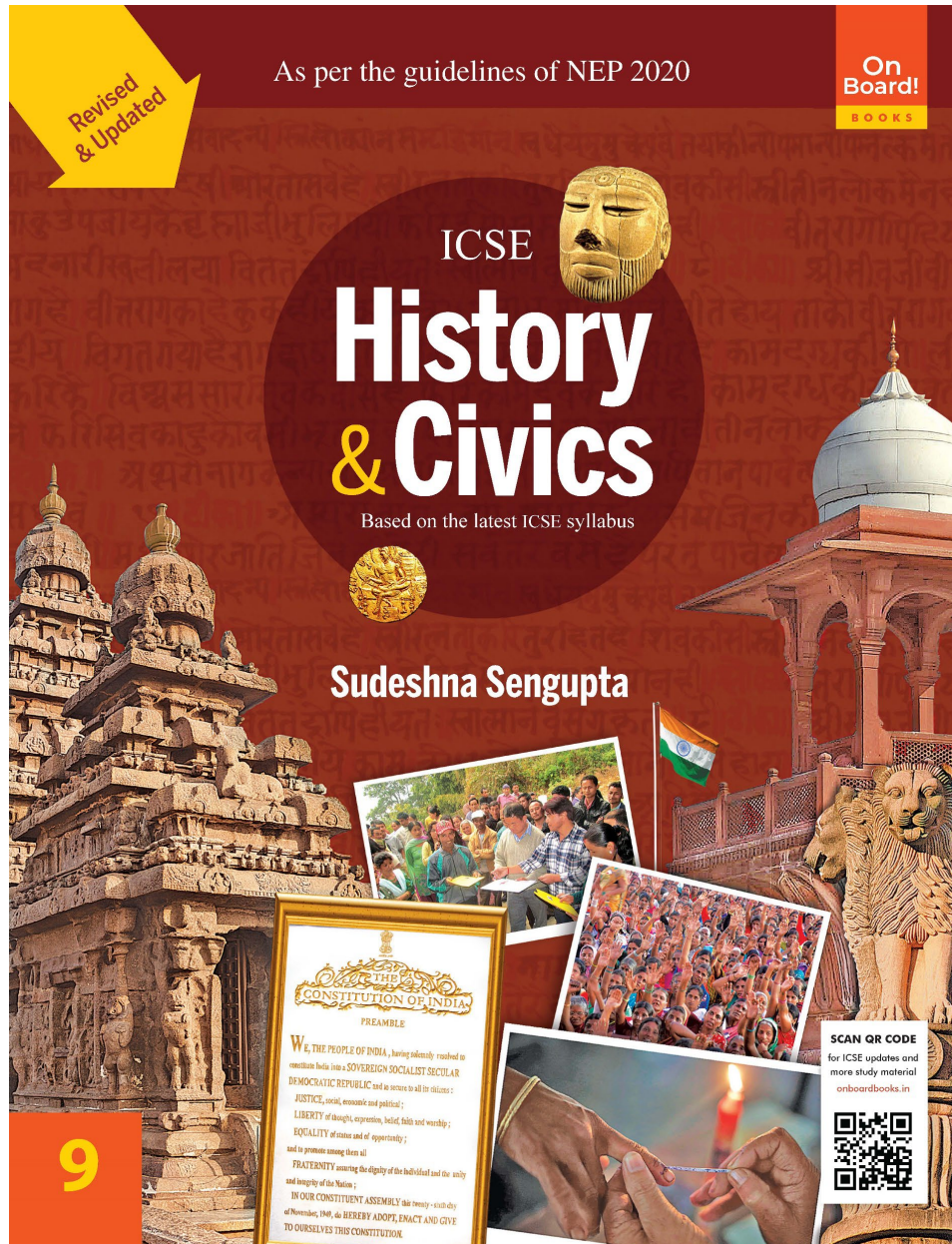


On Board!

B O O K S

History and Civics 9



History 9

Chapter 5: The Sangam Age

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Chapter 5: The Sangam Age

The Sangam Age is considered the classical period in the Tamilakam region which covers the present-day states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, and parts of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Three major dynasties ruled over the region between 300 BC and AD 200—the Pandyas, with their capital at Madurai; the Cholas, with their capital at Kaveripattanam; and the Cheras (or Keralaputras), with their capital at Vanji.

Most historians agree that the Sangam Age corresponds to the post-Maurya and the pre-Gupta period. The word 'Sangam' has perhaps been derived from the Indo-Aryan word 'Sangha', which means an assembly.

Historically, there existed three Sangams. They were held under the patronage of the Pandyan kings. The first assembly, called 'Talai Sangam', was held at the sea front city of Madurai. We know very little about this assembly. The second, called 'Idai Sangam', was held at Kapadapuram. The Pandyan kings later held the third Sangam, called 'Kadai Sangam', at the modern city of Madurai. Most historians have come to the conclusion that what is called the Sangam Age probably lasted from the third century BC till the fourth century AD.

LITERARY SOURCES

The Sangam literature is one of the earliest works of Tamil literature. It throws light on the political, social, economic and religious life of the people of the ancient Tamil country. The literature contains a corpus of poems and songs praising the achievements of numerous kings and princes. The Tamil language reached a level of maturity and began to serve as a powerful medium of literary expression. Many Pandyan kings are mentioned in the Sangam literature.

The Sangam literature can roughly be divided into two groups:

Melkannakku or the Eighteen Major Works, which are essentially narrative.

Kilkanakku or the Eighteen Minor Works, which are essentially didactic.

Besides these texts, the following literary works of the period have also survived:

- Tolkappiyam—a work on phonetics and Tamil grammar
- Tirukkural—a work on philosophy, written by Thiruvalluvar
- Silapadikaram and Manimekalai—two Tamil epics written by Adigal and Saathanar respectively

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

The archaeological sources for the Sangam period are limited. Those available may be classified into megaliths, herostones, inscriptions, artefacts and coins.

Megaliths

The early people who inhabited the region are called megalith builders. The actual settlements have not survived, but their graves (called ‘megaliths’) have. The graves are encircled by big pieces of stones. Human bones, pieces of pottery and iron objects such as arrowheads, spearheads, hoes and sickles have been excavated from these graves. These objects were placed in the graves in the belief that the dead would need them in the next world. The goods found in the graves give us an idea of the sources of livelihood. Also, hunting tools and agricultural implements excavated from the graves indicate hunting and agricultural practices prevalent during the period.

Herostones

The literature of the period mentions the practice of glorifying heroes. They also state that when a hero dies, he is reduced to a piece of stone. This belief possibly led to the practice of raising herostones, called virakal, in honour of those who died fighting in battles for the cause of the community.

Inscriptions

The edicts of Ashoka refer to the Chera, the Chola and the Pandyan kingdoms. The Hathigumpha Inscription of King Kharavela also mentions the three kingdoms. However, no details about these kingdoms is available.

Artefacts

Excavations by archaeologist Robert Bruce Foote at Adhichanallur have brought to light a large number of objects made of iron, bronze and gold, depicting the life of the ancient Tamils. Excavations at Arikamedu by Sir Mortimer Wheeler have unearthed Roman pottery, glass bowls, gems, coins and many other objects.

Coins

The archaeologists have confirmed that the kings of the Sangam period issued coins of gold and silver. Roman gold and silver coins have also been found across Tamil Nadu. They provide proof of the existence of trade links between the Roman world and the Tamil rulers of the Sangam Age.

SOCIETY OF THE SANGAM AGE

The Sangam Age, as depicted in the literature of the period, was prosperous and progressive in all spheres of life. Women had a respectable position and a few of them were well educated.

The Tamil society was divided into several groups. In the beginning, society was not organized along the lines of the Vedic caste system— Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Later, however, people were divided along caste lines. The text Tolkappiyam refers to the four divisions prevalent—Antharar, Arasar, Vaislyar and Vellalar.

The literature of the period throws light on the deities worshipped. In addition to the gods and goddesses, the people worshipped their ancestors.

ECONOMY OF THE SANGAM AGE

The economy of the period was initially based on barter, especially in context of internal trade. People exchanged their commodities with the neighbouring regions. Later, with usage of coins, commercial activities gained momentum. The main exports were spices, ivory, pearls, precious stones, muslin and silk. Indian spices and cloth were much sought after in the Roman Empire. The expansion of trade consequently led to the growth of towns.

Weaving and spinning were the common occupations. Uraiyar and Madurai were the main centres for the manufacture of cotton fabrics. The weavers produced and exported fine cotton clothes.

Agriculture was chiefly carried out in the fertile belts. Paddy was the main crop. Millets, gram and sugarcane were also cultivated. Rivers, tanks and wells were the main sources of artificial irrigation.

Land was divided into five types based on their property and physiographical attributes. These types are as follows:

- Kurinji—hills and forests (hunting place)
- Mullai—pasture land (cattle breeding and grazing place)
- Marudam—fertile field for plantation (plough agriculture)
- Neithal—seashore (fishing place)
- Palai—dry land (for warfare/acquired through plunder)

For the purpose of revenue, each region was assessed differently. Revenue from agriculture was called 'karai'. One-sixth of the total produce was generally claimed by the king.

The Sangam Age lasted for many centuries. It is famous and named after the Sangam literature which was compiled during this period. All that has been stated above about the life of the people during this period is based largely on the Sangam literature.

To Remember

Introduction—The Sangam Age flourished in the Tamilakam region, Kingdoms that ruled the region:

- a. Cholas—ruled over large parts of present-day Tamil Nadu and some parts of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka
- b. Pandyas—ruled over the region around Madurai
- c. Cheras—ruled over the entire present-day Kerala

Sangam literature—The classical Tamil literature compiled between 300 BC and AD 200 is called the Sangam literature, compiled during three assemblies held under the patronage of the Pandyan kings, these 500 years are known as the Sangam Age in the history of South India.

Literary sources—The main literary sources are *Melkannakku*, *Kilkanakku*, *Tolkappiyam*, *Tirukkural*, *Silapadikaram* and *Manimekalai*, the last two are regarded as the twin epics of Tamil literature.

Archaeological sources—The main archaeological sources are megaliths, herostones, inscriptions of Ashoka and Kharavela, artefacts and coins.

Society—Women were respected, there were four social divisions, the professions were perhaps based on birth, many Gods were worshipped, ancestor worship was prevalent.

Economy—There was a flourishing overland and overseas trade, spices, precious stones and cloth were the main exports to the Roman Empire, agriculture was carried out in the fertile pockets, there were many sources of revenue for the king.

Thank You