

APPSC GROUP-I MAINS — STUDY NOTES

SANGAM AGE

Society, Economy & Literature | Chera • Chola • Pandya • Tamil Poetry

Paper II — History, Culture & Geography | Day 13 (13 Apr 2026)

SECTION 1: SUMMARISED NOTES

1.1 Introduction

The Sangam Age (c. 300 BCE – 300 CE) refers to the period described in ancient Tamil literature composed by scholars at literary assemblies (Sangams) held under Pandya patronage at Madurai. Three Sangams are traditionally mentioned: the First at Then-Madurai (legendary), Second at Kapatapuram (mostly lost), and Third at Madurai (extant literature). The Sangam literature is unique because it is the ONLY pre-Gupta literary corpus in a non-Sanskrit Indian language that provides detailed socio-economic data about peninsular India.

1.2 The Three Kingdoms (Muvendhar)

- **Cheras:** Capital: Vanji (Karur, Kerala/TN). Emblem: Bow. Port: Muziris (Muchiri, modern Pattanam, Kerala) — major Roman trade port. Famous ruler: Senguttuvan (Cheran Senguttuvan) — subject of Silappadikaram's latter part; sent expedition to the Himalayas to bring stone for Pattini (Kannagi) temple. Fought the Cholas and Pandyas.
- **Cholas:** Capital: Uraiyr (near Trichy). Emblem: Tiger. Port: Puhar/Kaveripattinam (mouth of Kaveri) — described in Pattinappalai and Silappadikaram as a flourishing international port. Famous ruler: Karikala Chola — built the Grand Anicut (Kallanai) on the Kaveri, one of the world's oldest water-regulation structures (still in use!). Defeated Cheras and Pandyas at the Battle of Venni.
- **Pandyas:** Capital: Madurai. Emblem: Fish. Port: Korkai (pearl fisheries). Famous for pearl trade. Patronised Sangam assemblies. Mentioned by Megasthenes and in Ashokan Rock Edict II as a friendly kingdom ('Pandiya'). Nedunjelivan was a famous ruler whose injustice features in Silappadikaram.

Beyond the Three: The Velir chieftains (Ay, Irungovel, Pari, Ori, Kari, Nalli, Pegan — the 'Kadai Ezhu Vallal'/Seven Patrons) were minor rulers celebrated in Sangam poetry for their generosity.

1.3 Sangam Society

- **Thinai System:** Society was organised around 5 geographical/ecological zones (thinai): Kurinji (hills — hunting/gathering), Mullai (pastoral/forest — herding), Marudam (agricultural/riverine — farming), Neytal (coastal — fishing/salt-making), Palai (arid/desert — banditry/war). Each thinai had its own deity, occupation, musical mode, and literary conventions. This is a uniquely Tamil civilisational framework.
- **Occupation:** Agriculture (rice primary) was the base. Weaving (especially cotton, muslin), pearling, salt-making, fishing, and trade were important. Artisan guilds existed.

- **Varna System:** Less rigid than North India. Brahmins present but not dominant. 'Anthanar' (Brahmins), 'Arasar' (kings), 'Vanigar' (merchants), 'Velalar' (farmers) mentioned. But the Thinaï system was more socially relevant than varna.
- **Women:** Women composed poetry (Avvaiyar is the most famous woman poet). Sati existed but was not common. Women participated in agriculture and trade. Kannagi (Silappadikaram) = powerful female character.
- **Religion:** Murugan (Kurinji), Mayon/Vishnu (Mullai), Indra (Marudam), Varuna (Neytal), Korravai (Palai) — each Thinaï had a presiding deity. Jainism and Buddhism were present alongside folk religion. Brahmanical Hinduism was gaining influence but hadn't become dominant.

1.4 Economy & Trade

- **Agriculture:** Rice was staple. Sugarcane, cotton, pepper, spices. Irrigation through tanks and canals (Karikala's Grand Anicut). Velalar = agricultural community = backbone of economy.
- **Roman Trade:** The defining economic feature. Ports: Muziris (Chera), Puhar (Chola), Korkai/Arikamedu (Pandya). Exports to Rome: pepper ('black gold'), pearls, precious stones, muslin, ivory, spices. Imports from Rome: gold coins (found in thousands at archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu), wine, coral, glass. Pliny: Rome sent 50 million sesterces annually to India. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (1st century CE Greek text) describes these ports in detail.
- **Arikamedu:** Near Puducherry. Archaeological excavation (Mortimer Wheeler, 1945) found Roman pottery, beads, amphorae — confirmed Indo-Roman trade. Landmark site for South Indian archaeology.
- **Internal Trade:** Goods transported by bullock cart and boats. Markets (avanam/angadi) existed in towns. Barter + currency: gold (kazhanju), silver, copper coins used. Trade guilds active.

1.5 Sangam Literature

1.5.1 The Corpus

Sangam literature consists of: Ettuthogai (Eight Anthologies — 2,381 poems by 473 poets), Pattupattu (Ten Idylls — 10 long poems), and Tolkappiyam (grammar treatise, oldest extant Tamil grammar). Total: ~2,400 poems. The 18 works together are called 'Pathinenmelkanakku.'

- **Tolkappiyam:** By Tolkappiyar. Oldest Tamil grammar. Covers: phonology, morphology, and poetics (including the Thinaï system). Foundation of Tamil literary theory.
- **Two Themes:** Akam (inner/love poetry) and Puram (outer/heroic/war/public poetry). Akam poetry uses the Thinaï framework metaphorically for love situations. Puram celebrates kings, war, and generosity.

1.5.2 Key Works

- **Silappadikaram:** By Ilango Adigal (Jain prince, Chera Senguttuvan's brother). Story of Kannagi who burned Madurai when Pandya king unjustly killed her husband Kovalan. One of the 'Five Great Epics' of Tamil. Rich source for Sangam-era society, economy, and religion.

- **Manimekalai:** By Seethalai Saathanar. Buddhist epic. Sequel to Silappadikaram. Story of Manimekalai (daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi). Promotes Buddhism. Second of the Five Great Epics.
- **Tirukkural:** By Thiruvalluvar. 1,330 couplets on virtue (aram), wealth (porul), and love (inbam). Called 'Tamil Veda.' Universal ethical text — not tied to any religion. Translated into 80+ languages. Arguably Tamil literature's greatest work.

1.6 Decline

The Sangam Age ended around 300 CE with the invasion of the Kalabhras (an obscure dynasty), leading to a 'dark age' in Tamil history until the rise of the Pallavas and later Pandyas (6th–7th century CE). But Sangam literature survived, was rediscovered in the 19th century, and became the foundation of Tamil cultural identity.



SECTION 2: KEY DIMENSIONS TO COVER

Examiner angles.

1. **Three Kingdoms:** Chera (Vanji, Bow, Muziris), Chola (Uraiyur, Tiger, Puhar, Karikala/Grand Anicut), Pandya (Madurai, Fish, Korkai, Sangam patron). Know capitals, emblems, ports, key rulers.
2. **Thinai:** 5 zones: Kurinji (hills), Mullai (pastoral), Marudam (agriculture), Neytal (coast), Palai (arid). Each has deity, occupation, literary convention. Uniquely Tamil framework.
3. **Roman Trade:** Exports: pepper, pearls, muslin, spices. Imports: gold coins, wine. Pliny 50M sesterces. Periplus. Arikamedu (Wheeler 1945). Roman coins found in TN.
4. **Literature:** Ettuthogai + Pattupattu + Tolkappiyam. Akam (love) + Puram (war/heroic). Silappadikaram (Ilango), Manimekalai (Buddhist), Tirukkural (Thiruvalluvar, 'Tamil Veda').
5. **Society:** Thinai > Varna. Women poets (Avvaiyar). Less rigid caste. Murugan worship. Jain/Buddhist presence.



SECTION 3: PRELIMS MUST-REMEMBER FACTS

Crisp.

1. Sangam Age: c. 300 BCE – 300 CE. 3 Sangams at Madurai (Pandya patronage). 3rd Sangam = extant literature.
2. Chera: Capital Vanji (Karur). Emblem: Bow. Port: Muziris. Key ruler: Senguttuvan (Pattini temple, Himalayan stone).
3. Chola: Capital Uraiyur. Emblem: Tiger. Port: Puhar/Kaveripattinam. Key ruler: Karikala (Grand Anicut/Kallanai on Kaveri — oldest dam still in use). Battle of Venni.
4. Pandya: Capital Madurai. Emblem: Fish. Port: Korkai (pearls). Sangam patrons. Mentioned in Ashokan Rock Edict II + Megasthenes. Key ruler: Nedunjelidan.
5. Thina: 5 zones — Kurinji (hills/Murugan), Mullai (pastoral/Mayon), Marudam (agriculture/Indra), Neytal (coast/Varuna), Palai (arid/Korravai).
6. Tolkappiyam: Tolkappiyar. Oldest extant Tamil grammar. Phonology, morphology, poetics (Thina system).
7. Sangam corpus: Ettuthogai (8 anthologies, 2,381 poems, 473 poets) + Pattupattu (10 long poems) = Pathinenmelkanakku.
8. Akam = inner/love poetry (Thina framework). Puram = outer/heroic/war/public poetry. Two streams of Sangam literature.
9. Silappadikaram: Ilango Adigal (Jain prince). Kannagi burns Madurai. Rich socio-economic source. 5 Great Tamil Epics.
10. Manimekalai: Seethalai Saathanar. Buddhist epic. Sequel to Silappadikaram. Manimekalai = Kovalan's daughter.
11. Tirukkural: Thiruvalluvar. 1,330 couplets. Aram + Porul + Inbam (virtue + wealth + love). 'Tamil Veda.' 80+ language translations. Universal ethics.
12. Roman trade: Pepper ('black gold'), pearls, muslin → Rome. Gold coins, wine, coral ← Rome. Pliny: 50M sesterces/year. Periplus (1st CE Greek text).
13. Arikamedu: Near Puducherry. Wheeler (1945). Roman pottery, beads, amphorae. Confirmed Indo-Roman trade. Landmark excavation.
14. Grand Anicut/Kallanai: Karikala Chola. On Kaveri river. One of world's oldest water-regulation structures. Still functional.
15. Avvaiyar: Most famous woman Sangam poet. Moral/ethical poetry. Multiple Avvaiyars across centuries.
16. Kadai Ezhu Vallal: 7 patrons celebrated for generosity: Pari, Ori, Kari, Nalli, Pegan, Ay, Athiyaman. Puram poetry theme.
17. Kalabhras: Invaded c. 300 CE. 'Dark age' until Pallava/Pandya revival (6th–7th CE). Sangam literature rediscovered 19th century.

SECTION 4: MAINS MUST-WRITE POINTS

Each = paragraph.

- 1. The Thina System — India's Earliest Ecological Framework:** The Sangam Age's Thina system categorised Tamil society into 5 ecological zones — hills (Kurinji), pastoral land (Mullai), agricultural plains (Marudam), coast (Neytal), and arid land (Palai) — each with its own deity, occupation, musical mode, and literary conventions. This was not merely geographic but civilisational: it recognised that ecology shapes society, economy, and culture. The Thina framework was more socially relevant than the Brahmanical varna system in Sangam society. It anticipates modern concepts of ecological determinism and sustainable livelihoods.
- 2. Roman Trade — South India's First Globalisation:** The Sangam period witnessed South India's integration into the Roman trading world. Pepper ('black gold'), pearls, muslin, and spices flowed westward; Roman gold coins flowed eastward. Pliny's complaint (50 million sesterces annually) and the Periplus's port descriptions document this trade's scale. Arikamedu's excavation (Wheeler, 1945) provided archaeological confirmation. This was not colonial exploitation — it was mutually profitable trade that enriched Tamil kingdoms and funded the cultural flowering reflected in Sangam literature. The trade declined with Rome's fall (5th century CE), coinciding with the Sangam Age's end.
- 3. Tirukkural — Tamil Civilisation's Gift to the World:** Thiruvalluvar's Tirukkural (1,330 couplets on virtue, wealth, and love) is arguably Tamil literature's greatest work and one of the world's most translated ethical texts (80+ languages). Unlike religious scriptures, the Tirukkural is universal — not tied to any specific religion, caste, or region. Its teachings on governance ('a king who oppresses is worse than a murderer'), ethics ('all wealth acquired by harming others will perish'), and love transcend time and culture. The Tirukkural is to Tamil civilisation what the Arthashastra is to Mauryan statecraft or the Dhammapada is to Buddhism — a defining text.

SECTION 5: VALUE ADDITION

3 dimensions.

Interlinkages

- **Satavahanas (Day 12) ↔ Sangam:** Contemporary. Satavahanas ruled Deccan (AP); Sangam kingdoms ruled deep south (TN/Kerala). Overlapping trade networks (Machilipatnam → Puhar). Roman gold coins found in BOTH regions.
- **Ashoka (Day 9) ↔ Sangam:** Rock Edict II mentions Chola, Pandya, Chera, Satyaputra, Keralaputra as friendly neighbours. Confirms Sangam kingdoms' existence during Mauryan period.

AP Connection

- **Vengi Region:** The northern boundary of Sangam territory overlapped with the Satavahana Deccan near the Krishna-Godavari delta. Machilipatnam and Amaravati connected to Sangam trade networks.

Way Forward

- **Tamil Heritage UNESCO:** Sangam literature and archaeological sites (Arikamedu, Keeladi, Puhar) should receive greater international recognition. Keeladi excavation (post-2015) is rewriting Sangam archaeology.

SECTION 6: QUICK REVISION BOX

Glance.

▶ Chera: Vanji; Bow; Muziris; Senguttuvan	▶ Chola: Uraiyur; Tiger; Puhar; Karikala/Grand Anicut
▶ Pandya: Madurai; Fish; Korkai; Sangam patron	▶ Thina: Kuringi/Mullai/Marudam/Neytal/Palai
▶ Roman trade: pepper/pearls/muslin →; gold/wine ←	▶ Pliny: 50M sesterces; Periplus; Arikamedu (Wheeler 1945)
▶ Tolkappiyam: Oldest Tamil grammar	▶ Akam (love) + Puram (heroic) = 2 literary streams
▶ Silappadikaram: Ilango; Kannagi; Jain	▶ Tirukkural: Thiruvalluvar; 1,330 couplets; 'Tamil Veda'
▶ Avvaiyar: Woman poet; Kadai Ezhu Vallal: 7 patrons	▶ Kalabhras → 'dark age'; Pallava/Pandya revival later

SECTION 7: RECOMMENDED SOURCES

Refer.

Source	What to Read	Why
R.S. Sharma — India's Ancient Past	Ch. 18–20: Sangam Age	Exam-oriented; kingdoms, society, trade
NCERT Class XII — Themes in Indian History	Ch. 2 & 4: Trade and Cultural exchanges	Sangam trade, Arikamedu
Romila Thapar — Early India	Sangam chapters	Scholarly analysis of Sangam polity and economy