



## POLITICAL CONDITION OF SANGAM AGE

**R. Balakrishnan**

Department of History, Government Arts College (Autonomous), Karur, Tamilnadu

**Cite This Article:** R. Balakrishnan, "Political Condition of Sangam Age", International Journal of Current Research and Modern Education, Volume 2, Issue 1, Page Number 102-106, 2017.

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### **Abstract:**

The Sangam Age between 300 BC to 300 AD is called as the Age of Tamils. The Sangam classics gives many good details and historical synchronisms works like Silappadikaram and Manimekalai reflect the socio-political and cultural life of the people. The Sangam literature contains the much valuable information about the kings and kingdoms. Nachchinarkkiniyar speaks of the four divisions of Tamilaham. Chera, Cholar, Pandya and Tondai Mandalams. But the rulers of the three Mandalams Chera, Chola, Pandya alone were crowned Monarchs.

### **Introduction:**

The Tamilaham was divided into Chera, and Pandya Kingdoms. The Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas were its ruler. The Cheras ruled over the south-western, the Cholas ruled over the north-eastern and the Pandyas ruled over the south-eastern parts of Tamilaham<sup>1</sup>. Sangam period produced certain historical rulers. Senguttuvan was the greatest king of the Cheras. Karikala was prominent among cholas. The Pandyas also had glorious parts. Talaiyalamkanathu Nedunjeliam was the most important ruler of the Pandyas<sup>2</sup>. During this period the Tamilaham was ruled by several Chieftains. Pari, Kari, Oril, Nalli, Ay, Pehan, and Adhikaman are important chieftains in the Sangam age.

### **Central Government:**

In the Tamil language the 'king' also known as 'kon'. The other meaning of the word is Cowherd, 'ko' means king; it is the shorter form 'kon'. From this it is obvious that the kingship originated in the Pastuerland, i.e., 'Mullai' tracts<sup>3</sup>. The Cheras are known as Vanavar, Villavar, Kuttuvar, Malaiyar<sup>4</sup>. The Cholas also called Sennis, Sambiyans, Valavan and kitti. The Pandyas are known as Minavar, Kavuriyar, Tennar and Panchavar<sup>5</sup>.

### **Kingship:**

King was the center of the administrator, Kingship was common. It was hereditary<sup>6</sup>. Generally, the elder son was the heir apparent or crown prince. The crown prince was called as 'komahan'. The Cheras, the Cholas, the Pandyas are called as 'vendan'. The Chieftains are known as 'Mannan'. The rule of vendam and mannan existed at a same time side by side. The Sangam people considered their kings as Gods. Only males were appointed as the king of the country. There were no example of the rule of any women in the Sangam period. The king ascended the throne by a formal function called 'Mudisuttuvila'.

### **The Court:**

The king possessed an impressive court. It was called Arasavai. The court was the center of the king's official activities<sup>7</sup>. Usually the court assembled in the morning. The king presided over court. It was an open court. It permitted the members of the royal families, the officials, and the public to see the procedures of the court by sitting on the audience hall<sup>8</sup>. The king used to sit on the throne. It was called Ariyanai. In the court, king was surrounded by government officials, distinguished visitors, and court poets. The court also gave literary discussions when the official programs were not heavy. Learned scholars participated in this discussions<sup>9</sup>. The position of the king was very high. He was treated as God on earth. The king seldom appeared before the people. He used to appear before the public on certain important occasion. Dance performances were arranged frequently for the enjoyment of the king, the Queen and members of the royal family. The Queen used to sit by the side of the king in the audience hall. The Queen never participated in administrative matters. The birthday of the king was celebrated every year on a grand scale. This day was called, 'Perunal'. The king showed his clemency on this day by releasing prisoners and giving presents to beggars and poets. Military men were also honored on this occasion.

<sup>1</sup> Subramaniam N., Sangam Polity, Madurai, 1966, P-46.

<sup>2</sup> Kanasabhai Pillai V., The Tamils 1800 years ago, Madras, 1904, p-37.

<sup>3</sup> Srinivasa Iyengar P.T., History of the Tamils, Madras, 1929, p-10

<sup>4</sup> Silappadikaram : XXVI :99.

<sup>5</sup> Puram : 58.

<sup>6</sup> Mahajan, V.D., Early History of India, Delhi, 1982, p-443.

<sup>7</sup> Malaipadukadam : 39,40.

<sup>8</sup> Mahajan, V.D., Op. Cit p-443.

<sup>9</sup> Subramaniam, N., Op. Cit. p-42.

### **Duties of the King:**

The sangam rulers had fivefold duties. They were encouraging learning, performing sacrifices, making presents, protecting the people, and punishing the criminals<sup>10</sup>. The king considered himself as the protector of the people. He protected the people from foreign invasion and cruel animals. Hunting was important occupation for kings. The Sangam kings enjoyed absolute and unquestioned discretion. They had their advisers whom they consulted they wished and accepted their advice if they felt like doing so. The power of the kings were unquestioned. He could be a tyrant and he would suffer no ill consequences. The people only miserable and complained that their king was a cruel man. They were not to revolt against him. Divine qualities were attributed to the king. He was treated with respect and given the worship due to God<sup>11</sup>. The Sangam rulers conducted sacrifices for the welfare of the people. The Rajaswami, and the Asvamedha were the important sacrifices conducted during this period. Sacrifices were conducted in the sacrificial halls. The king used to spend most of his time in the capital. But at the time of conquest, he used to stay in the territories of the enemies, mainly to consolidate his success. The Sangam rulers patronized scholars and artists. They also encouraged fine arts. Most of the Sangam rulers were Philanthropists. They gave liberal gifts to the poets and artists likewise, the dances in the court were liberally gifted by the kings<sup>12</sup>. The gifts granted to the Brahmins were called Brahmatayam. But the grants to the temples were not known.

### **Royal Emblems:**

Sangam literature gives a beautiful account about the royal emblems. The following were very important royal emblems:

- ✓ The Crown (Mudi)
- ✓ The Suptre (Kol)
- ✓ The Umbrella (the Venkudai)
- ✓ The Throne (Arasu Kattil)
- ✓ The drum (Murasu Kattil)
- ✓ The Sword (Sheathed Sword)
- ✓ The Bannet and the Royal Crest (Vil, Puli, Kayal)
- ✓ The Garland (Palm leaves, Ar, Vembu)
- ✓ The Fly-wisk (hairy flap-kavari-samaram)
- ✓ The Wheel of Royalty
- ✓ The Royal Elephant
- ✓ The Horse
- ✓ The Chariot
- ✓ The Tutelary Tree (Kadimaram of Kalval Maram)

### **Aimperunkulu:**

The Sangam age king was assisted by a number of advisors. The Sangam works like Silappadikaram, Manimekalai, Maduraikkanji etc., mentioned the advisory bodies, which were frequently consulted by the king. They were known as Aimperumkula and Enperayam. The following members of the Aimperunkulu,

- ✓ Ministers
- ✓ Purohites
- ✓ Army Chiefs
- ✓ Envoys
- ✓ Spies

### **Enperayam:**

The following members of Enperayam,

- ✓ Karanattiyalavar
- ✓ Karunakarar
- ✓ Kanakasurram
- ✓ Kadai Kappalar
- ✓ Nagaramandar
- ✓ Padaittalivar
- ✓ Yanai virar
- ✓ Ivuli Maravar

The meetings of the assemblies were held at separate places of the capital. These assemblies were the recognized bodies of the people. The resolutions of the assemblies were just conveyed to the king. They were expected to give good advice to the rulers. Severe punishments were given to those who gave wrong advice.

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<sup>10</sup> Tholkappiyam, Porul Adikaram : 75

<sup>11</sup> Kanakasabhai Pillai, V., Op. Cit. p-98

<sup>12</sup> Subramanian, N., Op. Cit. p-48

These bodies never compel the ruler to accept their decisions<sup>13</sup>. The king may accept or reject the decisions of the bodies. They were treated purely as advisory bodies.

**Ministers:**

In the Sangam age minister was very important official. He was called 'Amaichar'. The king employed many ministers and their duties were advisory. It was the duty of the minister to guide the king properly. During emergency period and other important matters the king consulted with the minister. The ministers were not selected from any community<sup>14</sup>. Moreover the kural has a special chapter on Amaichar (Ministership)<sup>15</sup>. In this chapter Tiruvalluvar has give necessaru qualities and functions of a minister.

**Ambassadors:**

Ambassadors (Dutas) were employed by the kings during the Sangam age. The kurla has a whole chapter on Dutas. The played a significant role during this period. The most familiar instance of dutu in the Sangam period Avvai's Dutu to Tondaiman from Adhaiman Neduman Anji. Another instance was the work of Kovur Kilar.

**The Secret Service:**

During the Sangam age spies were employed in large numbers. The spies were called Orrar. The kural gives a detailed account of the nature and functions of the spies of the Sangam age<sup>16</sup>. They were very essential from the service of the service of homeland and foreign<sup>17</sup>. They were to spy on local persons and foreigners.

**The Purohit:**

Brahmins played an important role in the courts. The kings respected the Bhramins. They gave advice to the kings as and when necessary. The kings usually and normally followed the advice of the Brahmins.

**The Astrologer:**

During the Sangam the astrologer was also an important official. Great faith was attached to auspicious moments and good omans. The astrologer was called 'kani'. The chief astrologer was a 'perukani'. It was duty to mention the proper hour for the performance of royal function, routine as well as extraordinary. The kings followed the hours and dates fixed by the astrologer.

**The Time-Keeper:**

The Time keeper (Naliai Kanakkars) announced the hour of the day to the king in song. They kept awake day and night by turns trying to keep count of the hour; and that was a miserable job<sup>18</sup>.

**Other Officials:**

The yavanas settle in Tamilaham during the Sangam age. The yavanas worked as a body-guards, Place-guards and military camps.

**Local Administration:**

The village was the fundamental unit of administration. The entire kingdom was called Mandalam. Below the mandalam a major division was Nadu, kurrm was subdivision of a Nadu. The 'Ur' was a town (Perur), a small village (Sirur)<sup>19</sup> or an old village (Mudur)<sup>20</sup>. Pattinam was the name for a coastal town and puhar was the harbor area. Puhar, Uraiyur, Korkai, Madurai, Musuri, Vanji or Karur and Kanchi are important towns in the Sangam age.

**Military Organisation:**

The kings in the Sangam age maintained the armies and the weapons necessary therefor. The army is known as 'Padai'. The army consisted of the following:

- ✓ The infantry
- ✓ The elephant
- ✓ The cavalry
- ✓ The chariot force

Welfare was a major occupation of the ruling classes of the Sangam period. There was no dearth of wars in the Sangam period. The kings maintained armies and weapons necessary for it. The art of warfare was fairly advanced. The warriors were very brave and courageous. Considerable presents were given to the soldiers. The elephant corps, the horses, the chariots were the other important limbs of the army<sup>21</sup>. The army so equipped brought wealth, territory and fame to the king by fighting and winning wars on the land. There are Padaikkala during the period. The prominent weapons used during this period were vel, val, vil. Besides, the defensive weapons like Kadagam, Palalai, Kavacham and Puliurai were used by the soldiers.

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<sup>13</sup> Srinivasa Iyengar, P.T., Op.Cit. p-9

<sup>14</sup> Magajan, V.D., Op.Cit. p-444

<sup>15</sup> Kural : Chapter : 64

<sup>16</sup> Kural : Chapter 59

<sup>17</sup> Srinivasa Iyengar,P.T., Op.Cit. p-11

<sup>18</sup> Kuruntogai : 261

<sup>19</sup> Puram : 324

<sup>20</sup> Silappadikaram : II :111

<sup>21</sup> Ramachandra Dikshitar, V.R., Studies in Tamil Literature, Madras, 1936, p-219

#### **Five Types of War System:-**

- ✓ Vetchi
- ✓ Vanji
- ✓ Ulinai
- ✓ Tumbai
- ✓ Vahai

The first is the initial situation of the invaders for aggression. The lifting of Cattle is also a warning of an invasion that is to follow. It was usual for cattle-lifters and recoverers of cattle to wear the Vetchi flower as an emblem indication the task on which they were engaged. The third system was initiated by the invader to besiege a fort. The situation is ulinai, for the besiegers as well as the beleaguered wear the flower uninai. If the besieged are successful in compelling the besieger to lift the siege and rative, the successful parties wear the Tumbai flower. It was the fourth system of the war. The final stage was initiated by the aggressors after victory. The victors wear the vahai flower.

#### **Law and Justice:**

The king was fountain of justice during the Sangam age. There were law-courts in the urban and in the rural areas. In the capital town the court of justice was called 'Avvai', and in the villages manram served as the public place where simple justice was noted out. The king personally presided over the court of justice in the capital town. There was a body of learned men of high character, learning and integrity attached to these urban courts of justice; and it was their duty to function as judicial advisers to the king. They were called collectively carankuru avaiyam<sup>22</sup>. "Andanar are men of justice for they are equally just and kind to all"<sup>23</sup>.

#### **Crime and Punishment:**

During the Sangam age punishment were very severe. Crimes were not unusual during the Sangam age. Cutting of the udder of a cow, bringing about a forced abortion of a woman and killing of Brahmins were considered to be serious crimes<sup>24</sup>. Spies of foreign lands or enemy states were summarily executed<sup>25</sup>. Theft of royal property was a offence and it was punishment severely. Non-payment of taxes was punished. Failure to hand over the treasure troves to the king was punished with imprisonment. The punishment awarded for crimes in the Sangam age, therefore included decapitation, mutilation of the offending limbs of the body, torture and imprisonment and imposition of fines payable mostly in kind. Manunithi was also exercised in the Sangam age. In short the system of eye for eye and tooth for a tooth prevailed in the Sangam period.

#### **Prisons:**

Prison was called 'Sivai' or 'Sivaikkottam' during the Sangam age. Both ordinary criminals as well as captive king were put in the prison. Cheraman Kanaikkal Irumporai was taken prisoner and put in a prison at 'Kudavayil Kottam' by the Chola king Ko Chenganan. It was a special prison for royal captives. General amnesty for all prisoners was ordered by the king on special occasions-such as the kings' birthday etc. called 'irai'<sup>26</sup>. Tributes paid by the feudatories and war booty collected from recently conquered foes were irai; tolls and customs duties were 'ulugu' or 'sangam'. Irai is common term for land tax<sup>27</sup>.

#### **Tax:**

In the sangam age, many kinds of taxes were levied. A number of officers were appointed by the king to look after the revenue affairs. It was felt that the levy of taxes must be equitable and according to custom. Lank tax was the usual source of revenue. The 1/6 share of income levied as tax from the land<sup>28</sup>. The state also collected income from customs, tolls, tributes, court fines, etc. Toll was collected on high roads<sup>29</sup>. The officer who collected tool tax was called as Ayakkarar. There was a treasury during the Sangam age. It was in the king's own palace under heavy guard. It was kept in the palace because to give presents to the visitors as and when necessary. The coins used by the Sangam people. The coins called by 'kasu' in Tamil. The coins were used by the local settlement of foreign merchants. 'Kanam' was a kind of gold coin which was used by the people during this period<sup>30</sup>.

#### **Conclusion:-**

The sangam works refer to the Chera, Chola and Pandya kingdoms Megajthanes and Kutilya, who belonged to 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. mentioned the Pandya kingdom. Inscriptions of Asoka and Karavea too refer to these kingdoms. Hence we can conclude that Tamil kingdoms were as old as 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The achievements of prominent rulers and incidentally the character of monarchy are about the only date of political history which

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<sup>22</sup> Silappadikaram XXII : 8

<sup>23</sup> Kural : 30

<sup>24</sup> Puram : 84

<sup>25</sup> Kanakasabhai Pillai, V., Op.Cit. p-111

<sup>26</sup> Kanakasabhai Pillai, V., Ibid p-113

<sup>27</sup> Rajalakshmi, R., Tamil Polity, Madurai, 1983, p-145

<sup>28</sup> Ibit p-146

<sup>29</sup> Pillai, K.K., Op.Cit. p-241

<sup>30</sup> Ibit p-245

can be gathered from the poems. The Tamil kings were not only generous patrons of poets but some of them were poets themselves.

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