

UNIT 3

Early Tamil Society and Culture

Learning Objectives

The objectives of this lesson are to familiarize yourself with

- Tamil literary, archaeological, epigraphic and non-Tamil text sources for the study of the early Tamil society
- *Thinai*-based life in the society
- Literature, polity, society, economy and urbanization during the period



Introduction

Tamil civilization, as we have seen, begins atleast three centuries before the Common Era (AD (CE)). As seafaring people, Tamil traders and sailors established commercial and cultural links across the seas and merchants from foreign territories also visited the Tamil region. The resulting cultural and mercantile activities and internal developments led to urbanization in this region. Towns and ports emerged. Coins and currency came into circulation. Written documents were produced. The Tamil-Brahmi script was adopted to write the Tamil language. Classical Tamil poems were composed.

3.1 Sources for the study of early Tamil society

The sources for reconstructing the history of the ancient Tamils are:

1. Classical Tamil literature
2. Epigraphy (inscriptions)
3. Archaeological excavations and material culture
4. Non-Tamil and Foreign Literature

The Classical Sangam Tamil Literature

The Classical Sangam *corpus* (collection) consists of the *Tholkappiyam*, the *Pathinen Melkanakku* (18 Major works) and the *Pathinen Kilkanakku* (18 minor works) and the five epics.

Tholkappiyam

Tholkappiyam, attributed to Tholkappiyar, is the earliest written work on Tamil grammar. Apart from elaborating the rules of grammar, the third section of *Tholkappiyam* also describes poetic conventions that provide information on Tamil social life.

The texts of *Pathinen Melkanakku* include *Pathupaattu* (ten Idylls) and *Ettuthogai* (the eight anthologies). These texts are the oldest among the classical Tamil texts. The texts of *Pathinen Kilkanakku* belong to a later date.

The *Ettuthogai* or the eight anthologies are

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| (1) <i>Natrinai</i> | (2) <i>Kurunthogai</i> |
| (3) <i>Paripaadal</i> | (4) <i>Pathittrupathu</i> |
| (5) <i>Aingurunuru</i> | (6) <i>Kalithogai</i> |
| (7) <i>Akanaanuru</i> | (8) <i>Puranaanuru</i> |