
UNIT 10 EARLY TAMIL SOCIETY – REGIONS AND THEIR CULTURES AND CULT OF HERO WORSHIP

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10.0 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will study the Early Historic period in the Tamil country that witnessed significant developments in a number of areas. One of the important contributions of this period was the composition of the early Tamil texts, collectively known as the Sangam literature. The other important characteristics of this period include the Indo-Roman trade, which became active from the first century A.D. onwards, introduction of Tamil Brahmi script, beginning of urbanisation, and the continuing tradition of megaliths. The Early Historic period, which is also called the Sangam Age, is generally placed between fifth century B.C. and fifth century A.D. We are particularly concerned with the cult of hero worship in the context of the regions and their cultures.

Geographically, the ancient Tamil country was bounded by Venkatam (Tirupathi Hills in Andhra Pradesh) in the north, Kumari (Kanyakumarai or Cape Comarin) in the south and the seas (the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea) on the east and the west. Thus the ancient Tamil country covered the modern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

10.1 SOURCES

Here we will familiarise you with various sources of studying the early Tamil society.

10.1.1 Sangam Literature

The Sangam literature forms the main source of information for the Early Historic period. The literature derives its name from Sangam, where it is believed to have been composed or compiled. According to Tamil tradition, there were three Sangam

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Ages, each extending over a period of thousands of years and these Sangams were patronised by the Pandya rulers. The Sangam perhaps functioned as an academy or assembly, where a number of poets were present. The extant works, which are attributed to the third Sangam Age, were compiled in the early medieval period. All the Tamil works that were produced in the first two Sangams are said to have been lost. However, there is very little historical or linguistic evidence to prove the authenticity of this legend. It has also been stated that the term 'Sangam' is of very late origin.

The Sangam literature is the oral bardic literature of the ancient Tamils. Most of the works were composed by the bards and poets who praised the kings and received their patronage in return. They are also the emotional outpourings of the poets. The literature offers vital information for reconstructing the socio, economic and political history of the Early Historic Tamil country. Though the situations in the poems were described according to the poetic conventions, the poets have taken real life situations and the happenings in the society for similes, metaphors and other codes and symbols. The symbols and codes have hidden meanings, which are not obvious. A careful analysis of these symbols and codes can offer valuable information.

These works are preserved mainly due to the efforts of scholars including U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, who collected the manuscripts and published them in the modern period.

The major works produced during this era are grouped into *Pathinenmelkanakku* (eighteen major works - narrative) and *Pathinenkilkanakku* (eighteen minor works - didactic). *Pathinenmelkanakku* is divided into *Ettutokai* and *Paththupattu*. Besides these works, there is *Tolkappiyam*, an ancient Tamil grammatical treatise.

There are five major Tamil epics, *Silappadikaram*, *Manimekalai*, *Sivaka cintamani*, *Valaiyapati* and *Kundalakesi*, which postdate the Sangam Age. Among these, *Silapatikaram* and *Manimekalai* are the famous works. There are also five minor epics, *Yasodhara-kaviyam*, *Chulamani*, *Perunkathai*, *Nagakumara-kaviyam* and *Nilakesi*, written by Jain authors.

Tolkappiyam – Grammatical Work

Tolkappiyam, the ancient extant Tamil grammar work, was written by Tolkappiyar, who was believed to be a disciple of the mythical sage Agasthya. The *Tolkappiyam* lays down the rules and regulations for Tamil literature. The *Tolkappiyam* is divided into three components:

Eluttatikaram (Orthography)

Collatikaram (etymology and syntax) and

Porulatikaram (deals with *akam* [the inner life] and *puram* [outer life] and prosody).

Chronology of *Tolkappiyam* is debatable. Some scholars date it to around the beginning of the Christian era, while others place it in fifth century A.D.

Pathinenmelkanakku (the Eighteen Major Works)

Pathinenmelkanakku comprises *Ettutokai* (eight anthologies) and *Paththupattu* (ten Idylls), which are the earliest Sangam works.

Ettutokai (the eight anthologies)

The *Ettutokai* is a collection of eight long and short poems. The *Ettutokai* works are:

- 1) *Narrinai*: The general theme of *Narrinai* is love and it consists of 400 stanzas, composed by 175 poets.
- 2) *Kuruntokai*: It is a 'short anthology', consisting of 402 love poems.
- 3) *Ainkurunuru*: This 'short five hundreds' deals with love songs of five fold landscape.

- 4) *Pattirrupattu*: The ‘ten tens’ consists of ten long poems divided into ten sections. It is a *puram* work praising the valour of the Chera kings. The work is valuable for reconstructing the history of the early Chera rulers.
- 5) *Paripatal*: It is a composition of devotional songs dedicated to deities such as Vishnu and Karthikeya.
- 6) *Kalitokai*: It consists of 150 stanzas with most of the songs dealing with love theme and a few songs on moral values.
- 7) *Akananuru*: It contains 401 stanzas of poems composed by nearly 145 poets. All the songs deal with love theme.
- 8) *Purananuru*: It comprises of 400 heroic poems, composed by 157 poets.

Paththupattu (Ten Idylls)

The *Paththupattu* is a collection of ten long poems. Out of them, five belong to the *arrupatai* class in which a bard directs another to a person/king for the acquisition of wealth. They are:

- 1) *Tirumurukarruppatai*: A bard directs another to the abode of Lord Muruga, to acquire spiritual wealth. All the important shrines of Lord Muruga are described in this work. It was composed by Nakkirar.
- 2) *Porunararruppatai*: It praises the valour of the Chola king Karikala. It was composed by Muttatamakanniyar.
- 3) *Ciruppanarruppatai*: In this work, the bard directs the minstrel to the court of Nalliyakotan, a chieftain. While describing his kingdom, the work also portrays the capital cities of three major kingdoms, namely, the Cheras, the Cholas and the Pandyas. It was written by Nattattanar.
- 4) *Perumpanarruppatai*: This *arrupatai* is in praise of the ruler of Kanchi, written by the poet Uruttirakkannanar. Administration of the city of Kanchi and its trading activities are widely described in this work.
- 5) *Mullaipattu*: The shortest of ten idylls, containing 103 lines was composed by Naputtanar. This work deals with the *akam* concept.
- 6) *Maturaikanci*: The longest of ten poems, contains 782 lines. Mankuti Marutanar praises the valour of the Pandya king Netunceliyan and describes in detail the trade, commerce and administrative aspects of the Pandya Kingdom.
- 7) *Netunelvatai*: This *puram* work was written by Nakkirar in praise of Netunceliyan, the Pandya ruler.
- 8) *Kurincipattu*: Kapilar’s work deals with *akam* concept.
- 9) *Pattinapalai*: In praise of the Chola ruler Karikala, this work was composed by Uruttirankannanar. This work deals with the trade relations between ancient Tamil country and foreign countries.
- 10) *Malaipatukatam*: Composed by Perumkaucikanar, the work is an *arrupatai*, directing the fellow bard to the kingdom of Nannan.

Pathinenkilkanakku (Eighteen Minor Works)

The eighteen minor (*Kilkanakku*) works which are didactic in nature are later than the *Melkanakku* works. They show more influence of Prakrit and Sanskrit cultural traditions than the *Melkanakku* works. The impact of Jainism and Buddhism is also seen in these works, which mostly contain codes of conduct for kings and people. The *Kilkanakku* literature was composed in fourth-fifth centuries A.D., when the Tamil country was under the Kalabhra rule. The most famous among these works is *Muppal* or *Tirukural*, written by Tiruvalluvar. It deals with philosophy and maxims.

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The eighteen minor works are:

- 1) Naladiyar;
- 2) Nanmani Kadigai;
- 3) Palamoli Nanuru;
- 4) Aintinai Elupathu;
- 5) Aintinai Aimbathu;
- 6) Tinai Malai Nurrambathu;
- 7) Acharakovai;
- 8) Tinaimoli Aimbathu;
- 9) Muppai (Tirukural);
- 10) Tirikadugam;
- 11) Cirupanchamulam;
- 12) Kalavali Narpathu;
- 13) Kar Narpathu;
- 14) Inna Narpathu;
- 15) Iniyavai Narpathu;
- 16) Kainilai;
- 17) Innilai; and
- 18) Eladi.

10.1.2 Foreign Accounts

The Periplus Maris Erythraei (The Periplus of Erythrean Sea), compiled in first century A.D., serves as an important source of Indo-Roman Trade. The anonymous author of this work was a Greek merchant or sailor from Egypt. This work mentions about the major ports and towns in India during the Early Historic period and also the items of Indo-Roman trade.

Accounts of the Roman Writer, Pliny the Elder (23-79 A.D.) are also useful for investigating the Indo-Roman trade. Pliny speaks about the draining of wealth of the Roman Empire due to the demand for spices, especially pepper, in Rome. These accounts are quite useful in knowing about the Indo-Roman Trade.

Claudius Ptolemy's *Geographia* is another important source for Indo-Roman Trade. He was a Greek. He lived in Alexandria, the Roman capital of Egypt and was the head of the renowned library at Alexandria from 127 to 150 A.D.

Certain important information is also available in the Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka, namely, *Mahavamsa* and *Deepavamsa*.

10.1.3 Archaeological Materials

The archaeological evidence includes megalithic burials or monuments, coins and excavated sites, especially urban centres.

Megaliths are a class of burial or memorial monuments, erected as a part of ancestral worship. The term 'Megalith' means 'large stone'. Since the monuments were made of large stones, they are called megaliths. The megaliths are found all over the Tamil country. The dead were buried with grave goods like iron objects, black-and-red ware pottery and beads and other materials, and monuments were erected. Sometimes precious materials were also placed along with the remains of dead as offerings. Iron objects, especially, weapons of offence are found in large numbers in the burials.

The burial types are: Cairn circle, Urn burials, Dolmens, *Topikals* and *Kodaikkals*. Numerous megalithic sites have been excavated in Tamil country. Sanur, Kunnathur, Amirthamangalam, Kodumanal, Porkalam and Mangadu are a few of them.

Excavated Habitation Sites

Apart from the megalithic burials, many habitation sites, especially urban centres of the Early Historic period have been excavated in Tamil Nadu. These sites offer a lot of information about the Early Historic period. Vasavasamudram near the mouth of the Palar, Kanchipuram on the bank of the Palar, Arikamedu near Pondichery, Kaveripattinam near the mouth of the Kaveri, Uraiyur on the bank of the Kaveri, Alagankulam near the mouth of the Vaigai and Korkai near the mouth of the Tambrabarani River are the important excavated Early Historic habitation sites in Tamil Nadu. They give valuable evidence for the Indo-Roman trade, and towns of the Sangam Age. Brick structures, pottery with Tamil Brahmi inscriptions and imported pottery from Rome (e.g. Amphora) have been found at these sites. The excavated sites are also indirectly useful in determining the chronology of the Sangam literature.

10.1.4 Tamil Brahmi Inscriptions

Another category of evidence is the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions found on the rock shelters carved with stone beds for the residence of Jain monks and on pottery. They serve as corroborative evidence for dating the literature. They have been found at several sites near Madurai and Karur. The inscriptions at Pugalur near Karur give information about the genealogy of the Chera rulers.

10.1.5 Coins – Indian and Roman

Coins of Early Historic period have been found at many sites in Tamil Nadu. They include coins of the Sangam Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas. Besides these local coins, gold, silver and copper Roman coins have also been found in large numbers from several sites. Most of the Roman coin hoards are concentrated in the Coimbatore region. This is attributed to the important role this region had played in the Indo-Roman trade.

Chronology

Dating the Sangam literature has not been an easy task in the absence of specific evidence. As a result, there is no unanimous opinion among the scholars on the date of the Sangam literature. Some scholars date it between third century B.C. and fifth century A.D., while others place it between first century and fifth century A.D. Some of the criteria used for dating the Sangam literature are listed below:

- Based on the linguistic development of Tamil language used in the Sangam literature, the works are dated between second century B.C. and third century A.D.
- Tamil Brahmi inscriptions with similar individual names mentioned in the Sangam literature are dated from second century B.C. to fourth century A.D.
- Foreign accounts such as *Periplus Maraei of Erythrei* date the trading centres mentioned in the Sangam literature to the early centuries of Christian era.
- No reference to the Pallava rulers in the Sangam literature denotes a pre-Pallava chronology for the works.

Though the broad time range of the entire corpus of Sangam literature can be easily fixed, the internal chronology is a problematic. Among the Sangam works, the texts grouped under the *Pathinenmelkanakku* are considered earlier than the *Pathinenkilkanakku* texts. Within the *Pathinenmelkanakku*, *Ettutokai* with the exception of *Kalitokai* and *Paripatal* was the earliest. Some of the *arruppadai* literature is also dated to early period.

10.2 REGIONS AND THEIR CULTURES (AINTINAI/FIVE FOLD LANDSCAPE)

Here we describe the eoniches in which the early Tamil Society lived.

10.2.1 Tinai Concept

The ancient Tamils had divided the Tamil country into five distinct ecological zones, with each zone having its own characteristics. Each zone with its distinct characteristics is called Tinai. The concept of *tinai* can be compared to the modern ecosystem approach adopted in the study of cultures. The five *tinai* are

- 1) *Kurinci* – mountainous zone;
- 2) *Mullai* – pastoral zone;
- 3) *Marutam* – riverine zone;
- 4) *Neytal* – coastal zone; and
- 5) *Palai*- arid zone.

These zonal classifications were adopted for the composition of poems. Besides, they also more or less reflected the actual ecological systems of Tamil country. However, it should not be considered that the five fold divisions were found as distinct units in reality. They were idealised landscapes. Though such distinct units existed in some areas, quite a few regions had overlapping of various *tinai*s. *Tolkappiyam* refers to such a situation as *tinai mayakkam*.

Each zone or *tinai* includes the conduct code ascribed to love situations (*akam*) and war situations (*puram*). The *tinai*s have distinct characteristic features, namely, time, season, fauna, flora, avifauna and occupation. In the composition of poems the poets followed these conventions. While composing a poem on Marutam *tinai*, the plants, animals and the way of life seen in that zone are incorporated in the poems. While creating these conventions the poets have visualised the way of life they saw in each *tinai* and created the conventions. In actual life, the subsistence and various aspects of the life in these zones are varied depending upon the landscape patterns. The *Akam* and *puram tinai*s also reflect the predominant behavioural patterns among the people of each landscape. It can be concluded that these poems more or less reflect the ground reality, though it is quite possible that certain generalisations and exaggerations found their place.

10.2.2 Kurinji

The Kurinji landscape was the mountainous zone. The people who lived in this zone are called *kuravan*. Hunting and gathering was the main occupation here. Muruga was the God of Kurinji.

Characteristics of Kurinji Landscape

Tinai or Landscape: Kurinji, mountainous zone (named after a flower of the hilly region (*Phelophylum Kunthianum nees*)).

Time: Midnight.

Season: Early winter and early dew season.

Flora: Jackfruit and bamboo.

Fauna: Elephant, monkey, tiger.

Avifauna: Peacock, parrot.

Settlement: Small settlement (*cirukuti*).

Subsistence Pattern: Hunting of wild animals and gathering of honey and plant produce, slash-burn cultivation.

Food/Crops: Rice, pepper, *tinai*, tuber, honey.

People: People of mountains (Kuravar, Kanavar & Vetar).

Deity: Muruga, the God of warfare.

Conduct Code (Akam): Clandestine meeting of the hero and the heroine (*punartal*).

Conduct Code (Puram): cattle lifting (*vetci*).

10.2.3 Mullai

Mullai was the pastoral zone. Pastoralists lived in this region and animal husbandry was the main occupation. Vishnu was the God of this region.

Characteristics of Mullai Landscape

Tinai or Landscape: Mullai, the pastoral or forest zone (named after white jasmine flower (*Jasminum auriculatum*)).

Time: Evening.

Season: Winter and early rainy season.

Flora: Indian laburnum, iron wood tree.

Fauna: Cow, bull, sheep, goat and deer.

Avifauna: Sparrow and wild fowl.

Settlement: Pastoral villages and hamlets.

Subsistence Pattern: Animal husbandry and small scale cultivation.

People: Pastoralists, cowherds & shepherds (*Ayar* and *Itaiyar*).

Deity: Vishnu.

Conduct Code (*Akam*): patient waiting on the part of wife for the return of her husband from a journey (*iruttal*).

Conduct Code (*Puram*): Invasion (*Vanji*).

10.2.4 Marutam

Marutam was the riverine zone. Farmers lived in this zone. Indra was the God of this region.

Characteristics of Marutam Landscape

Tinai or Landscape: Marutam, riverine or agricultural zone (named after a flower of the mystle tree (*Terminalia arjuna*)).

Time: Last hours of night and dawn.

Season: All the six seasons, winter, autumn, early dew, late dew, early spring and late spring.

Flora: Mango trees.

Fauna: Buffalo, fresh water fish.

Avifauna: Heron.

Settlement: Village (*ur*).

Subsistence Pattern: Agriculture and allied activities.

People: Ploughmen, agriculturalists, villager (*Ulavar* and *Urar*).

Deity: Indra, God of rains.

Conduct Code (*akam*): Lover's quarrel due to hero's infidelity (*Utal*).

Conduct Code (*puram*): Besieging the enemy's fort (*Ulinai*).

10.2.5 Neytal

The Neytal was the coastal zone. The people who lived here were known as Paratavars. Varuana was the God of this region. Fishing and salt mining were the main occupations.

Characteristics of Neytal Landscape

Tinai or Landscape: Neytal, coastal zone (named after the flower which grows in the back waters (*Nymphaea violacea*)).

Time: Afternoon.

Season: All the six seasons.

Flora: *Punnai*.

Fauna: Crocodile, shark.

Avifauna: Seagull.

Settlement: Coastal towns (*pattinam*).

Subsistence Pattern: Fishing and salt collection.

People: Fisher folk (Valaiyar, paratavar & minavar).

Deity: Varuna, the God of Sea.

Conduct Code (Akam): Bemoaning the lover's absence (*Irnakal*).

Conduct Code (Puram): Battle (*tumpai*).

10.2.6 Palai

Palai was the dry, semi arid zone. As such there is no desert land in ancient Tamil country, the landscapes of Kurinji and Mullai, during the dry climate or in the time of rain failure, became parched and resulted in the formation of Palai land. Korravai was the goddess of this region.

Characteristics of Palai Landscape

Tinai or Landscape: Palai, arid zone (named after the flower of the desert region (*Wrightia tinctoria*)).

Time: Mid day.

Season: Late spring or summer.

Flora: Cactus and other thorny shrubs.

Fauna: Elephant, tiger, wolf.

Avifauna: Eagle.

Settlement: Small settlements on the highway.

Subsistence Pattern: Highway robbery, plundering and cattle lifting.

People: Warriors, robbers, and hunters (Maravar, Eyinar, Vetar, Kalvar).

Deity: Korravai, the Goddess of victory.

Conduct Code (Akam): Separation of lovers (*Pirital*).

Conduct Code (Puram): Victory (*Vakai*).

Akam and Puram embedded in the concept of the Regions:

A unique feature of Sangam literature is the special place accorded to common men and women. Most of the works deal with day-to-day activities of common people, who were immortalized in these poems. The literature covers all the aspects of human life under two categories - *akam* and *puram*.

Akam indicates the inner life of the people, which encompasses the love feelings of men and women. *Puram*, on the other hand, deals with the outer life of the people, with the emphasis on war, victory, and human values.

There are three main components in the *akam* concept, namely, the *mutalporul*, *karuporul* and *uriporul*. The *mutalporul* or the primary element denotes space and time of action. The *karuporul* or the principal element indicates the natural elements belonging to a particular landscape (deity, food, flora, fauna and economic activities). The *uriporul* or the human elements, denotes human emotions and feelings that are appropriate to the aspects of *mudal* and *karu*. There are five corresponding *tinai*s for *akam* situations.

Akam Conduct Code for the Five Tinai

<i>Tinai</i>	Code of Conduct
<i>Kurinji</i>	Clandestine meeting of the hero and the heroine (<i>punartal</i>).
<i>Mullai</i>	Patient waiting on the part of wife for the return of her husband from a journey (<i>iruttal</i>).
<i>Marutam</i>	Lover's quarrel due to hero's infidelity (<i>utal</i>).
<i>Neytal</i>	Separation of lovers (<i>pirital</i>).
<i>Palai</i>	Bemoaning the lover's absence (<i>irankal</i>).

There are also two additional situations in *akam* poetry, namely the *Porunta tinai* or mismatched love and *kaikillai* or unrequited love.

Puram Codes for the Five Tinai

<i>Tinai</i>	Code of Conduct
<i>Kurinji</i>	Cattle lifting (<i>vetci</i>)
<i>Mullai</i>	Invasion (<i>vanji</i>)
<i>Marutam</i>	Besieging the enemy's fort (<i>ulinai</i>)
<i>Neytal</i>	Battle (<i>tumpai</i>)
<i>Palai</i>	Victory (<i>vakai</i>)

The two additional *tinai*s of *puram* concept, namely, the *Kanchi* and *Padantina* deal with human values and ethics in life.

10.3 POLITY

The political formations of the Sangam age were in a preliminary stage. There was no major empire, but only three large kingdoms ruled by *Ventars* (crowned kings), and many chieftains (*Velirs*), who controlled small territories. The Cheras and Cholas and Pandyas were the *Muventars* or three major kings, who controlled large territories and ruled independently. The *Muventars* performed Vedic sacrifices (e.g. *Rajasuya*) to legitimise their kingship. There are references to these monarchs in the Asokan inscriptions as Chodas, Padas and Keralaputos. The Asokan inscriptions also mention

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‘Satiyaputos’ who are identified with the rulers of Tagadur region (Dharmapuri region in western Tamil Nadu). The *ventars* and the chieftains frequently fought among themselves for supremacy. While a few of chieftains were independent, others were aligned with one of the *Muventars*.

The history of Sangam Cheras is gleaned from *Patirrupattu*, a work of eight anthologies. The Pugalur Tamil Brahmi inscription of early centuries of the Christian era also refers to the genealogy of the Chera rulers. The Cheras ruled over most part of Kerala and western Tamil Nadu from Vanchi and Karur. Vanji is identified with modern Karur near Tiruchirapalli. Some scholars identify it with Kodungallore near Thrissur in Kerala. Muziris near the mouth of Periyar was the famous port of the Cheras. Senguttuvan was the prominent ruler of this dynasty and he was a contemporary of Gajabahu of Sri Lanka. Bow and arrow was the emblem of the Cheras.

The Cholas ruled over the Kaveri delta. Their capital was situated at Uraiyur. They also had another capital at Puhar (Kaveripattinam), which also acted as a port city. Karikala was the famous king of this dynasty, who is said to have destroyed all his enemies at a very young age and also credited with the building of a dam or bund across the river Kaveri. There were other rulers such as Nedunkilli. Tiger was their emblem.

The Pandyas are considered to be the earliest rulers of the Sangam Age. There are many references to Pandyas in literary sources such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Arthasastra* and the accounts of Megasthenes. They ruled over the southern Tamil country. According to legends, they patronised the poets of Sangam Age. Their capital was at Madurai. Korkai was their port city. Neducheliyan was the famous ruler of this dynasty, who is said to have defeated the Aryan rulers. Fish was their emblem.

There were numerous chieftains like Ori, Kari, Pari, Atiyaman, Nalliyakotan, and Ay, ruling over small areas. There were frequent battles among the chieftains to control territories and to collect booty. The collected booty was redistributed by the chief among the followers (warriors, bards and others). Some of the chieftains were powerful and received tributes from other smaller chieftains (*Purananuru* 97). The chieftains also fought with the *Ventars*, e.g. Pari of Parambu hills.

10.5 CULT OF HERO WORSHIP

The economy of the Early Historic period was a mixed type with different modes of production prevailing in different ecozones. Hunting-gathering and slash-burn/shifting cultivation were practised in the hilly areas (Kurinci). Pastoralism was common in the Mullai areas, fishing and collection of salt were the occupations in the coastal areas, and farming was the main mode of production in the Marutam region. In the Palai region, plundering was the occupation, besides hunting. However, these should not be taken as the only mode of production of the respective region, but as the chief mode of production.

Cattle or sheep rearing was the dominant mode of resource use in most of the areas. According to the literature, it was predominant in the Mullai region. Those who engaged in cattle rearing were called *idaiyar*. Cattle were treated as wealth as indicated by the term. The frequent raids conducted by the chiefs, mainly to steal the cattle suggest the importance of cattle. Archaeological evidence shows distribution of cattle and sheep in most parts of Tamil Nadu except Kerala, where no Early Historic habitation sites have been excavated. The people from the dry agro-pastoral regions seem to have dominated the political scenario.

Cultivation contributed significantly to the production, but it was restricted to certain ecozones. It was not as popular and dominant as cattle rearing. The amount of agricultural implements reported from the megalithic burials also indicates that agriculture was not the predominant mode of production. The method and crops of cultivation differed from one zone to another. In Kurinji zone, *milagu* (pepper), *tinai* and *samai* were cultivated. In Mullai region, *cennel* (a type of red rice) was cultivated. The land was classified into *vanpulam* and *menpulam*, referring respectively to dry, rough lands and soft, wet lands. Perhaps dry cultivation was common in the *vanpulam*, while wet or rice cultivation was common in the *menpulam*. The poems suggest that the people of *menpulam* were prosperous and those from *vanpulam* faced drought situations frequently.

Monarchs played a significant role in promoting agriculture. King Karikala Chola is said to have destroyed forest lands and brought more lands under cultivation. For irrigation purpose, he built a dam or bund across the river Kaveri. Animals and ploughs were used in cultivation. There are also references to the use of cattle and elephant in thrashing paddy. A *Purananuru* poem mentions the practice of slash-burn cultivation by the Vedars of Kollimalai (*Puram* 231). Tank irrigation was also known.

There is evidence for land donations in the Sangam Age. The Velvikudi copper plates of sixth century A.D. mention about the restoration of earlier grant originally given by the Sangam Pandya rulers, by the by the Later Pandyas. Land donation was made to bards and warriors. According to Sangam literature, the Chera king Selvakadunkko Valiadan is said to have donated lands. The landed classes were known as *uyarntor* and landless labourers were called *illisinar*. Hunting gathering was the main occupation of the hill region. Bow and arrow were used for hunting. Plant products were also gathered for subsistence.

According to Rajan Gurukkal, kinship was the basis of contemporary relations of production for the native people. The people of the ecozones were clan based descent groups dispersed into domestic segments called *kutis*, around the clan settlement called *ur*. Each *kuti* was an independent production unit under *ur* which was controlled by headman (*kilar*). The *kilar*'s authority was based on clan-ties. He controlled the clan's resources, which was allocated to the clan members through redistribution.

Agriculture and animal husbandry were dependent upon cooperative labour of affinal or agnatic kins and thus there was no developed division of labour. The poems have references to potters performing rituals and bards carrying out certain magico-religious rites. This suggests that the division of labour had hardly evolved.

However, in the case of brahmana households the situation was different. As the brahmanas were not cultivators themselves, they had to use non-kin labour for cultivation. This gradually began to change the equations towards the end of the Early Historic period and led to the formation of land owning and cultivating classes. From Medieval period onwards, when more brahmanas migrated into Tamil country and received land donations, the older institutions disintegrated and caused the formation of a new order.

The allusions found in the Sangam poems suggest that heroism and martyrdom received tremendous respect in the early Tamil society. The heroic ideology was very popular and the heroes were worshiped by erecting memorial stones. Wars and plunder raids were justified and glorified through various means. Losing one's life in the battle, and that too with wounds on the chest was considered a great honour. On the contrary, wounds on the back were considered a sign of cowardice or disgrace. Numerous poems talk about the delight of brave mothers over the death of their sons in the battle with wounds on the chest.

**Early Historic Societies:
6th Century B.C. to 4th
Century A.D.**

In the Early Historic period, a number of chiefs dotted the landscape and they frequently attacked each other. Plunder was one of the means adopted by the chiefs to generate resources and frequent raids were carried out for this purpose. More battles were fought for the booty rather than land, as tax from land was not a well established means of income. Cattle were the target of such raids. This was called *vetchi* in the literary convention. This is because cattle were considered wealth. It is interesting to note that the Tamil term for cattle '*Madu*' also denoted wealth. The booty recovered during the raids was redistributed among the kinsmen, warriors, bards and the chief.

Ability to organise strong warriors to conduct frequent raids and to successfully lead them were important qualities required for the chiefs. The very existence and fame of the chiefs depended on successful raids on enemies, and effective defence in case of enemy raids. The warriors were rewarded with the booty or land, if they happened to be alive. What if they lose their life? Therefore, a reward, much more attractive than a share of land and booty, was the necessity to draw and motivate the warriors. What else could be the fitting compensation than making them on par with Gods? Thus, was born the ideology of heroism and cult of hero worship.

The cult of hero worship was promoted in many ways. The bards and poets who were patronised by the kings, mainly from the booty plundered during the raids, immortalised the heroes and reinforced the cult of hero worship. The cult of hero worship encouraged mothers to motivate their children, boosting the supply of warriors. The works cited below are suggestive of the ways the society nurtured the cult of the hero worship.

“.....Her delight
When she heard that her son fell in battle
Felling an elephant,
Was greater than at his birth”
Purananuru 277 (A.K Ramanujan 1985:181)

“..When people said
her son had taken fright,
had turned his back on battle,
she raged and shouted
“If he really broke down in the thick of the battle, I'll slash these breasts that gave him suck”
and went there,
sword in hand
Turning over body after fallen body
she rummaged through the blood-red battle field
till she found her son,
quartered in pieces,
and she rejoiced 'more than on the day she gave him birth.
Purananuru 278 (A.K Ramanujan 1985:182)
“If a child of my clan should die,
if it is born dead,
a mere gob of flesh

not yet human,
they will put it to the sword,
to give the thing a warrior's death....”

Purananuru 74 (A.K Ramanujan 1985:120)

Though these poems certainly have an element of exaggeration, it is clear that heroic ideology was dominant and strong. The abundance of weapons of offence found in the contemporary Megalithic burials also corroborates the significant role of warfare and heroism in the Early Historic Tamil society.

Hero stones were manifestations of the cult of hero worship. It is one of the rewards offered for the sacrifice of warriors. Most probably the tradition of erecting hero stone evolved from the megalithic tradition that was very popular before the Early Historic period. It seems that in the Early Historic period the memorials were mainly erected for heroes, unlike the Pre-Early Historic (Megalithic) period where the burials or memorials were erected for most of the of the people.

Hero-stones form part of a matrix of what has been categorized as ‘memorial’ stones. Memorial stones are spread across the subcontinent from the deep south to the arid reaches of Rajasthan desert. There are sati stones and stones set up in remembrance of dead men. The latter can be subdivided into those set up to commemorate individuals who died a natural death, and those set up to honour ‘heroes’ who died in battle.

Normally the hero-stone has three panels. The lowest panel depicts the event in which the person has died. In case the death occurred in a battle or a skirmish, the battle is depicted on the lowest panel of the stone. Sometimes that panel is expanded or new ones added according to the scale of the event in which death occurs. The middle panel depicts the heavenly march of the dead, escorted by the *apsara*. The top most panel depicts the dead hero, worshipping a deity, which in most cases is a *sivalinga*. In this stereotype, there are variations to cater to the need of the situation. In case more than one member of a family dies, then we find two slabs joined together or the slab is vertically divided. We also come across quadrilaterally carved hero-stones, which depict three panels of identical sizes.

There are many poems in Sangam literature describing about the *Nadukals*. There are references to hero stones on the highways and hero stones being worshipped by people by decorating them with peacock feathers. Tolkappiyam discusses the rituals involved in the erection of hero stones. Sangam literature mentions that hero stones were erected for kings (Atiyaman, *Purananuru* 232). In one instance, a bard while directing another, describes the wild region with memorial stones planted on the way side.

‘On many junctions there are planted stones
inscribed with noted names of maravars
who, finding their foes raised shouts of joy
when they retreated, were ashamed, returned,
considering the moment opportune,
and yielded up their lives. These stones too speak
with such contempt of those who flee from foes.
thou may'st go after playing on thy yal
observing ancient rules and singing songs
that please hew ear in praise of Gods that live
in planted stones’

Malaipatakam, lines 386-396 (Chelliah 1946:31)

10.5 SUMMARY

So, you saw how nature and culture intertwined to shape the early tamil society. The cult of hero worship was manifestation of the pastoral nomadic nature of the society. Study of its eco zones and the developments of the pastoral nomadic society then complement each other to give us a picture of the early tamil society.

10.6 GLOSSARY

Hero Stones : These are commemorative stones, which are erected, in pastoral nomadic societies to honour those who died in wars related to cattle. For the historian these are valuable sources of information about the nature of cattle raid. By plotting the location of each stone on a map the historian can also map out the routes the pastoral nomads took while roaming the countryside for pasture and water.

Eco Zones : By these we mean the ecological zones into which a region is divided. An ecological zone normally combines certain natural eco characteristics and is complete in itself for the purposes of giving food, water, and shelter to the flora and fauna in its habitat.

10.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the nature of the sources for the early historic period for Sangam age.
- 2) Discuss in detail the concept of Tinai.
- 3) What was the importance of cattle raids in the early Tamil society?