

UNIT 31 GROWTH OF TAMIL LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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31.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to learn:

- how old is the Tamil language and literature,
- what are the Tamil Heroic Poems,
- how were they composed and classified,
- what are their literary merits, and
- which are the other compositions of the period.

31.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Units you learnt how settlements grew up, agriculture began to expand and trade flourished in Tamilzakar. Trade brings in immigrants and opens up avenues of interaction between local people and outsiders within the region. Interaction of cultures helps the growth of language and literature in a region. In this Unit you will be made familiar with the growth of the Tamil language and literature.

31.2 EARLY EVIDENCES

Tamil had become a literary language i.e., a full-blown language with its own system of writing, at least by third century B.C. if not earlier. The earliest evidence for the Tamil literary tradition i.e. the tradition of writings in the language comes from the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions in the Jain and Buddhist caves from the Tamil Brahmi hills. These inscriptions are in the form of labels of persons or bodies who donated the caverns. The major centres of these label inscriptions are Arittappatti (Maugulam, Madurai), Karungalakkuti (Melur, Madurai), Kongarpuliyamkulam (Madurai), Azakarmalai (Madurai). Many Tamil words along with the local adaptations of Sanskrit and Prakrit/Pali occur in the labels. Nigamattor (the member of a nigaman and Vanikan (he who is engaged in Vanibham trade) may be cited as two examples for the Tamil adaptations of the Sanskrit words. It has to be noted that the Tamil language used in these labels was different from the literary Tamil. The difference was due to the Jain and Buddhist immigrants from the north who were introducing a (considerable member) of Sanskrit and Prakrit/Pali terms. These terms were adapted to suit the linguistic structure of the Tamil language. The combination of names of persons, professions and places that figure in the inscriptions gives clues to the currency of Tamil as a literary language. The period of these label inscriptions is roughly between c. 200 B.C. and A.D. 300. The Tamil heroic poems, popularly called the Sangam literature, constitute the major evidence for the old Tamil literary tradition.

31.3 HEROIC POEMS

The Tamil heroic poems are called the **Sangam** literature since they were collected and classified by the **Sangam** which was an academy of scholars. Poems by themselves were not the product of the **Sangam**. The poems were, in fact, much earlier than the **Sangam**. The history of the **Sangam** is clogged in legends. Tradition says that there were originally three **Sangams** among which the works of the last one alone have survived. Previously it was believed that the **Sangams** were academies of court poets. But now it is a matter of consensus that they were constituted by scholars in literature. The time lag between the **Sangam** and the heroic poems shows that the name **Sangam** literature is a misnomer. By and large the Tamil heroic poems were the products of the folk. They signify the tradition of bards who roamed about singing the praise of their patron chiefs. However, all the poetic compositions were not of wandering bards. Some of them were composed by scholarly poets who followed the bardic tradition. Kapilar, Paranar, Avvayar and Gautamanar were some of the well known poets of the period. They were scholarly bards, namely the **pulavar** as distinguished from the common bards, namely the **panar**. It is thus not the literature of any particular social group but part of a common way of life. Spanned over a few centuries, the poems reflect the gradual development of the Tamil language and literature. They survive not in their original independent form, but as classified anthologies or choice collections.

31.3.1 Classification

Now we see the poems in the form of classified collections of specific poetic themes and conventions. **Ettuttogai** or the eight collections of poems and **Pattupattu** or the ten idylls are the two categories of anthologies that comprise the heroic poems. **Narrinai**, **Kuruntokai**, **Ainkurunuru**, **Patirrupattu** etc. are the few examples of anthologies grouped under **Ettuttokai**, **Mullaippattu**, **Madurikkanj**, **Kurunjippattu** etc. are the example of anthologies under **Pattupattu**. (See the table) The anthologies are divided into **akam**, dealing with themes of subjective experience like love or affection, and **puram**, dealing with themes of objectification like raid or plunder. Both the above categories of anthologies comprise collections of poems based on **akam** and **puram** themes. **Akananuru**, a collection of four hundred poems based on **akam** themes and **Purananuru**, a similar collection based on **puram** themes are two examples of **Ettuttogai** category. In the same manner there are examples of both **akam** and **puram** anthologies in the **Pattupattu** category. Apart from the heroic anthologies, the classified corpus of Sangam literature includes **Tolkappiyam**, a treatise on Tamil grammar and **Patinenkizkanakku**, the eighteen didactic texts also. The famous **Tirukkural** by Tiruvalluvar is one of the eighteen didactic texts. Both **Tolkappiya** and **Patinenkizkanakku** were composed after most of the **Ettuttogai** and **Pattupattu** poems had been composed. The diction and the techniques of composition of the heroic anthologies keep them distinct from other texts that are later.

31.3.2 Techniques of Composition

The heroic poems were composed on the principles of oral bardic literature. The features of oral compositions are strikingly similar all over the world. The use of stock phrases and expressions is the most important feature. Stock phrases or expressions are readymade expressions or phrases current among the people of those times. The poets knew the contexts of the ready made expressions and where to use them and how in their poems. Poems are composed using the set motifs or readymade expressions, in a formula that is orally transmitted and commonly shared by the bards as well as the society. The set expressions required for poetising the variety of contexts recur in the poems. For instance, if the context is to praise a chieftain, the series of stock forms like "warrior of victorious lance", "possessor of lofty chariots", "chieftain of swift steeds", "hero of eyefilling garlands" and so on flow effortlessly whoever the poet is or the chieftain. These examples show that the bards just had to master such ready-made expressions and their contexts. This is not to minimise the individual poetic talents completely. But by and large, the most important aspect was not the individual style or expressions of the poets. The technique of versification in oral poetry depended on the general or common styles and expressions. It is a technique of combining the set phrases over which the poets as well as the society by and large had mastery. So there are repeated lines and themes with marginal modifications in different poems by different

poets. The hereditarily transmitted stock phrases leave the bulk of heroic poems full of old memory. This is one of the many hazards in dating the poems.

31.3.3 Problems of Dating

The corpus of the **Sangam** literature cannot be precisely dated owing to a series of problems. In fact, several periods are represented in the poems of Sangam anthologies. One is the period of actual composition and oral transmission, which is fairly long and spread over a few centuries from about 2nd century B.C. to A.D. 3rd century. Next is the period of the codification of the poems into anthologies, which is between circa 6th and 9th centuries. Another period is that of the commentaries which are not earlier than 13th-14th centuries. **Tolkappiyam**, the traditional grammatical treatise in its present form is not earlier than the 3rd century A.D. though the basic parts of the text could be slightly earlier. All the **Kizkanakku** texts belong to a period later than 3rd century A.D. The great difficulty in dating the **Sangam** literature is that it is hard to clearly sort out the earlier from the later as they are all mixed up.

31.3.4 The Poetics

Based on the Sangam literature, there developed a fairly evolved set of poetic conventions. Though the poetics as such as a little later, the rules and conventions of composition were part of the old Tamil bardic tradition. The two fundamental aspects of the traditional Tamil poetics are the divisions of compositions into **akam** and **puram** genres. We have already noted what is **akam** and what is **puram** in a previous section. **Akam** is subdivided into five stages of love in relation to the five **tinai**s. Each **tinai** is associated with a particular mood of love. For instance, the **palai** is associated with the sentiment of separation of the lovers. The **puram** genre of poems have their own **tinai**s (situations) and **turai**s (contexts). There are as many as nine **tinai**s and sixty three **turai**s which the poets could opt for the compositions. Both the **akam** and **puram** genres of poems followed the fixed conventions of each. Each **akam** poem had to follow the notion of **tinai** which had its own deity, biological organisms, subsistence pattern, musical instruments and songs. Similarly, each **puram** poem had to abide by the restrictions associated with the variety of **tinai**s or situations of behaviour.

31.3.5 Literary Development

The Tamil literary tradition is independent of the classical Sanskritic literary tradition of India. It represents a parallel linguistic tradition in relation to Sanskrit. However, the development of the Tamil language and literature was never a process in isolation. Even the earliest stratum of the Tamil literature contains influences of Sanskrit. The heroic poems and the other **Sangam** works contain traces of Aryan culture. By Aryan culture we mean Vedic ideas and institutions in this context. The tradition of Vedic rituals is well attested by the poems. Some of the bards like Gautamanar, Parinar and Kapilar were Brahmanas. Gautamanar is mentioned to have effeciated many **velvi** (**Yajna** or Vedic sacrifice) for his patron Celkezu Kuttuvan, Cera chief. Epic and puranic ideas are also seen in the Tamil heroic poems. While praising the patron chiefs, the poets refer to the farmer's participation in the Mahabharata battle. Many puranic deities are equated to their Tamil Counterparts. Mayon (the black god) well known in the poems as the Tamil counterpart of Krishna is one example. But these influences never undermined what was typical of the Tamil literary tradition. This original aspect of the Tamil language and literature does not owe to Sanskrit for its origin. But its growth and development toward linguistic and literary perfection certainly owes to the influences of Aryan culture. The heroic poems and other works of the **Sangam** tradition testify the widespread literary culture of early Tamizakam. They also indicate the linguistic maturity achieved by the Tamils by the 3rd century.

31.4 OTHER COMPOSITIONS

The basic parts of **Tolkappiyam** and some of the **Kizkanakku** texts constitute the other compositions here. These are called the other compositions because they do not belong to the bardic tradition of heroic poems. But they are not far removed from the literary background of the bardic tradition. The **poruladikaram** part of **Tolkappiyam** that deals with the **akam** and **puram** conventions of old Tamil is close to the period of heroic

poems. Similarly, the **tinai** texts and works like **Kalavazi** are relatively earlier. Though some scholars regard the twin epics **Silappadikaram** and **Manimekhalai** as contemporaneous to the heroic poems, they are identified as works of a much later period.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (×):
 - i) The **Sangam** literature belongs to a uniform period.
 - ii) The name **Sangam** literature is a misnomer.
 - iii) The heroic poems are composed using set phrases and expressions.
 - iv) The development of the Tamil language and literature was a process in isolation.
- 2) What do you know about the literary conventions of the Tamil bardic tradition?
Answer in ten lines.

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31.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you learnt about how old the Tamil literature is and what it is constituted by. You also learnt about the main features of heroic poems, their techniques of composition and problems of dating. Another point you learnt was the level of literary and linguistic development of old Tamil. You could also understand how the works in old Tamil were classified and codified into anthologies during the **Sangam** period.

31.6 KEY WORDS

- Sangam:** An academy of scholars that collected and classified old Tamil works.
- Akam:** A genre of poems dealing with subjective experience like love.
- Puram:** A genre of poems dealing with objectifiable experience like raid or plunder.
- Bard:** He who roams about composing and singing poems in praise of his patrons.
- Turai:** A poetic convention indicating the thematic situation of **puram** poems.
- Didactic:** Poetry or text which intends to teach moral lesson is called **Didactic** poetry or text.