



Mains Practice Question

Q. Discuss the significance of Sangam literature in understanding early Tamil society, economy, and polity. **(150 words)**

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Approach

- Introduce the answer by briefing about the Sangam literature
- Give its Significance in Understanding Early Tamil Society, Economy, and Polity.
- Conclude suitably.

Introduction

Sangam literature, composed between **3rd century BCE and 3rd century CE**, is one of the earliest known literary traditions in India. It provides a **rich account of early Tamil society, economy, and polity**, offering insights into the lives, governance, and culture of the people of Tamilakam..

Body

Significance in Understanding Early Tamil Society:

- **Social Structure**
 - Society was organized into five **physiographic divisions (Tinai)**, each associated with a distinct lifestyle:
 - **Kurinji - Murugan, Mullai - Vishnu, Marudam - Indra, Neydal - Varuna, Palai - Korravai.**
 - **Caste-like classifications:**
 - **Avasar (Rulers), Anthanar (Priests), Vanigar (Traders), and Vellalar (Farmers)** were recognized.
 - **Brahmins** played an increasing role, evident in references to Vedic rituals.
- **Position of Women**
 - **Women poets like Avvaiyar, Nachchellaiyar, and Kakkaiyapadiyar** contributed to Sangam literature.
 - The practice of **Sati** existed among the elite, but **self-earned love marriages (Kalavu)** were also acknowledged.
- **Religion and Beliefs**
 - The predominant faith was **animism and nature worship**, with deities like **Murugan, Varuna, and Kottiravai (war goddess)**.
 - *Manimekalai* highlights the influence of **Buddhism**, while *Silappadikaram* reflects the **Kannagi cult**.
- **Economic Aspects in Sangam Literature**
 - **Agriculture and Land Use**
 - **Paddy cultivation** was dominant, especially in Chola and Pandya lands.
 - *Pattinappalai* praises the **fertility of land and irrigation projects**, including the

Kaveri embankment built by Karikala Chola.

- **Trade and Commerce**
 - Sangam texts highlight **flourishing maritime trade** with Rome, Greece, and Southeast Asia.
 - Ports such as **Puhar (Kaveripattinam), Korkai, and Arikamedu** were key commercial hubs.
- **Urban Centers and Craft Production**
 - Cities like **Madurai, Uraiyur, and Vanji** were centers of politics and trade.
 - **Textile and pearl industries** were well-developed. Silappadikaram describes the **silk-weaving skills** of Puhar.
- **Political Structure in Sangam Age**
 - **Dynastic Rule:** The three major kingdoms—**Chera, Chola, and Pandya**—formed the backbone of Tamil polity.
 - **Chera Dynasty:** Controlled Kerala; known for **trade and patronage of Buddhism and Jainism.**
 - **Chola Dynasty:** Known for **naval power, irrigation projects, and conquests** (Karikala Chola).
 - **Pandya Dynasty:** Capital at **Madurai**, famed for its **Sangam patronage.**
- **Governance and Administration**
 - **Hereditary monarchy with titles and emblems** (*Tiger for Cholas, Bow for Cheras, Fish for Pandyas*).
 - Kings had a **five-member council** (*Amaichchar - ministers, Purohitar - priests, Senapatiyar - army chiefs, Dutars - envoys, Orrar - spies*).

Conclusion

Sangam literature serves as a **mirror to early Tamil civilization**, offering a comprehensive view of **social structures, economic prosperity, and political systems**. It highlights the **interactions of Tamilakam with the larger world** and provides an invaluable cultural legacy that continues to shape Tamil identity.

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