

Tamil Literature: An overview

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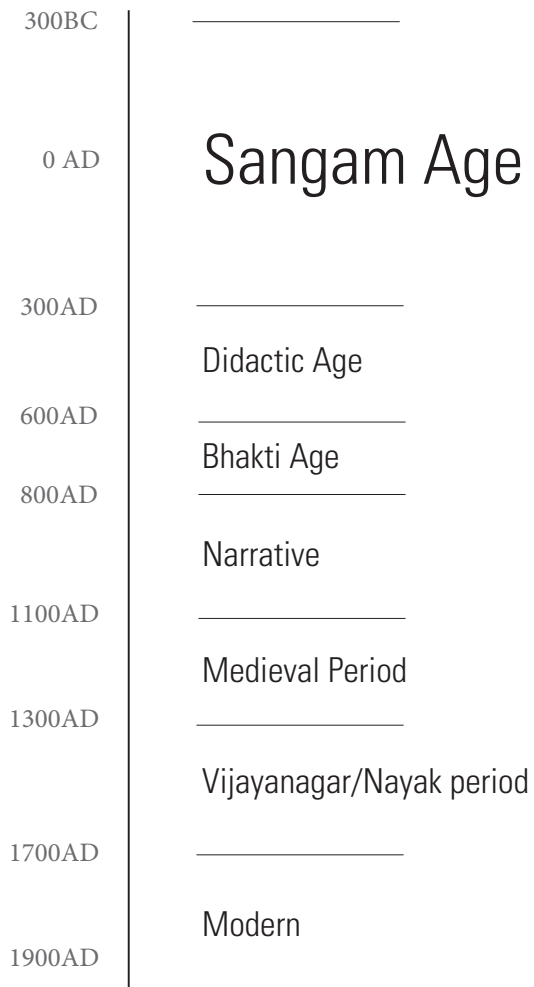
Tamil literature – Through the ages

300BC	_____
0 AD	Sangam Age
300AD	_____
	Didactic Age
600AD	_____
	Bhakti Age
800AD	_____
	Narrative
1100AD	_____
	Medieval Period
1300AD	_____
	Vijayanagar/Nayak period
1700AD	_____
	Modern
1900AD	

Tamil, with literary history of more than two thousand years, is the oldest living language in the world. Evidence of literature had been found from 3rd Century BC, though some historians claim that the Language is well over three thousand years old. The fact that Tamil was deemed a 'Classical Language' by the government of India comes as no surprise, owing to the maturity of concepts even in the oldest of works found in the language.

The history of Tamil literature was deeply influenced by the social and political situation in India through the ages. The invasions and the rule changes in Tamil Land had at least one positive outcome – exchange of ideas. Tamil people were exposed to Jain and Buddhist traditions from the time of the Kalabhras to the ideology of European rulers in the 19th century. This broadened the outlook of the scholars, thus broadening the range of Tamil literature. The political changes not just influenced the literature but brought in contributors for it as well. There have been sizeable contributions from Jain, Buddhist and later Muslim and European authors to the growth of Tamil literature.

A revival of Tamil literature happened in the late 19th Century when epics were re-written in a manner that would reach the common man. Poetry was used to influence the masses in the early 20th century when freedom struggle was at its peak. Short stories and novels began to appear during this phase. The popularity of Tamil Cinema opened the doors for Tamil writers and poets to evolve.

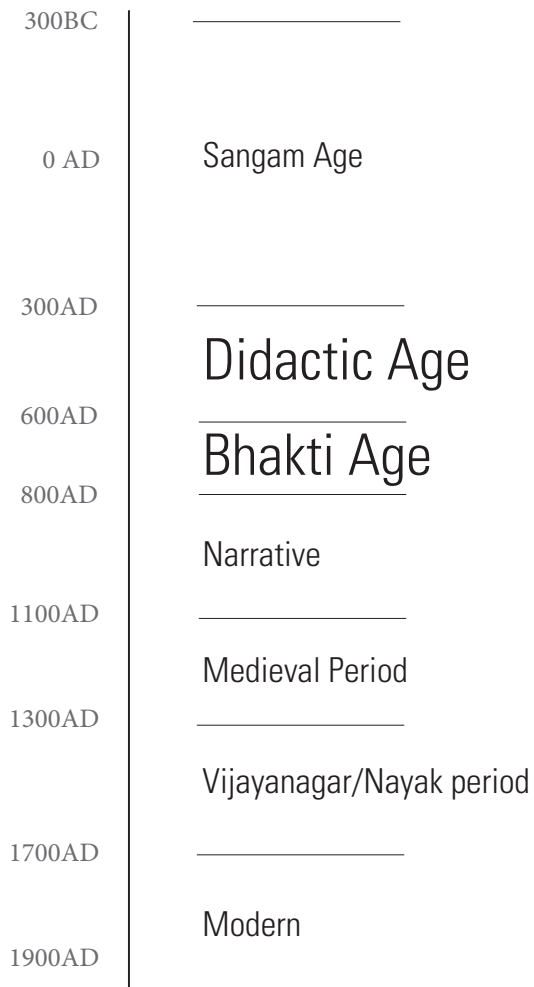


The Sangam Age

The Sangam age of Tamil literature extends from 3rd century BC to 3rd Century AD. Oldest found Tamil literature dates back to 3rd century BC but historians speculate that the language could be much older than that. The literature was either passed on orally or written on dried palm leaf manuscripts. The latter too, had a limited time-span. Hence one had to copy the writings manually. Unfortunately, most of the sangam age literature had been lost as the manuscripts could not be preserved with time.

Sangam Literature addresses human emotions like love, war, bereavement, governance and trade. Poems belonging to this period were composed by both men and women, from various classes of the society. The poems were edited and added to anthologies by anthologists around 1000AD. Tolkaapiyam is by far the greatest piece of literature from the sangam era. Even though it is supposed to be a book on grammar, the part about human emotions is significant. The book contains three parts – orthography, etymology and subject matter. While first two parts deal with the codification of the language itself, the third (porul) talks about the human aspect, thus merging the language with its people. Tolkaappiyam also painted the picture of the landscape with vivid detail (kurinji, mullai, marutham, neithal, paalai); as the description of people and their emotions would be fruitless without describing the environment.

Sangam literature was forgotten soon after. Only in the nineteenth century were they rediscovered, collected and categorized painstakingly by Tamil scholars. They were later printed and published.



Didactic Age

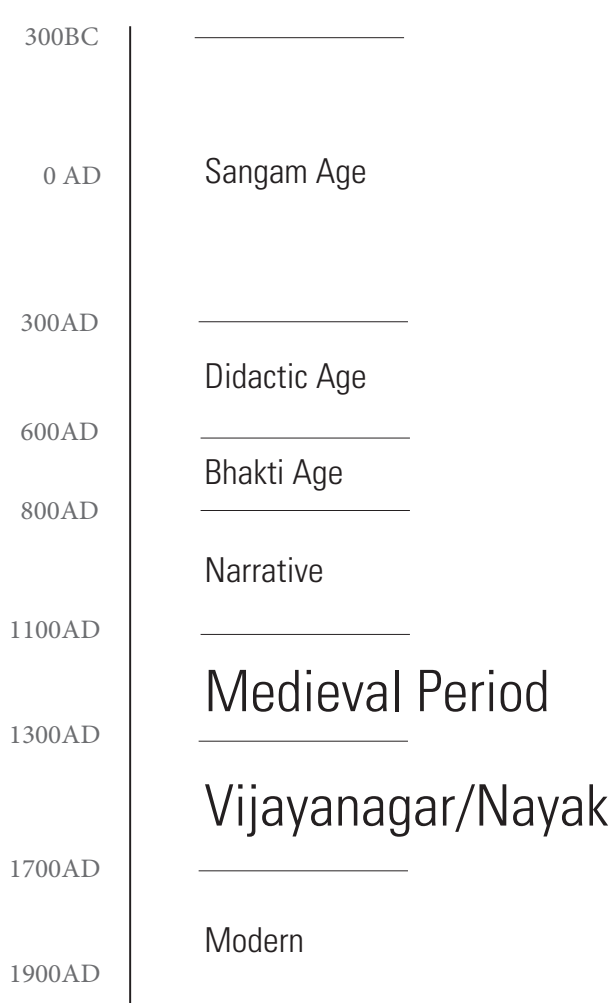
The post-sangam age which spanned for 300-400 years is referred to as the Didactic age of Tamil literature. This was the time when philosophy and religious thoughts were exchanged between Sanskrit and Tamil. Around 300AD, the Tamil land was under the influence of Kalabhras. They were predominantly Buddhist, hence Buddhist and Jain morals and ethics were taught through their works. Thirukkural by Thiruvalluvar is perhaps the most famous Tamil poetry till date, covering aspects like ethics, polity, love to name a few.

Bhakti Age

The Kalabharas fell by around 600AD and the long-suppressed Hinduism began to revive. The Pallavas and Pandyas replaced the Kalabharas, this however did not stop the decline of Hinduism as the early kings were followers of these faiths. The feeling of suppression began to materialize into a movement and lead to the creation of myriad saiva and vaishnava poems. The works of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Thirugnanasambanthar and Appar formed the first six books of the Saiva canon. Vaishnavas had Andal, Poigai, Pudam et al. to add to its canon.

Bhakti age was when Hinduism spread in south India. Even the famous temples in south India like Thirupathi, Meenakshi were once said to be a non-hindu non-brahmin temples. It is theorized that those temples were converted to Hinduism from shamanism, the faith of the Dravidians.

Imperum Kaappiyangal (five great epics) were written during this phase. The five epics, till date, define the class of Tamil literature. The names of the epics relate to each ornament that the tamizh thai (hypothetical mother of tamil) wears. Silappadikaaram (silambu – anklet), manimegalai (megalai – waistlet), seevaga sinthamani (sinthamani – necklace), valayaapadhi (valai – bracelet), kundalakesi (kundalam -earrings) are the five great epics.



Medieval literature

Tamil literature from 11th century AD to 14th Century AD is referred to as medieval literature. During this period, the whole of south India was ruled by cholas, with little threat of invasion from outside. The cholas built numerous temples for shiva and encouraged saiva literature. This was the period when canons of religious literature were categorized. One of the greatest tamil work of this period was Ramavatharam by Kamban, who flourished during the chola reign. Auvaiyyar, a comtemporary of Kamban, wrote specifically for children, teaching them basic wisdom. Her works, which are didactic in nature, are still taught in schools. Kaliggathubharani was a biography of the Kalinga invasion by Kulohunga Chola. A few more poets had written about the greatness of chola dynasty during this phase.

Vijayanagar and Nayak period

The period between 14th and the 17th century saw constant change in political situation in Tamil land. Delhi Sultanate was defeated and the Vijayanagar kingdom went on to rule the whole of south India. Even though the kings spoke Telugu, Tamil literature was encouraged.

There were quite a few philosophical and religious poems written during this time. The great epic Mahabharata was translated into Tamil by Villiputtar and was called Villibharatam. Many Ancient Tamil works like Tholkaapiyam, Thirukkural and Silappathikaram, were annotated. Parimelazhagar's commentary on Thirukkural is still considered one of the best. Fag end of the seventeenth century saw Tamil literary works by Muslim and Christian authors for the first time. Costanzo Beschi, better known as Veeramamunivar, compiled the first dictionary in Tamil.

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Modern Era

In the 18th and the 19th century, most of the Tamil kings were defeated by European invasion. Struggle to keep the invasion off and the establishment of British rule was a major setback to the development of Tamil literature during this period.

Western culture was imposed onto the people by the British, French and the Portuguese. This had taken a serious toll on the development of Tamil literature. Native writers were forbidden from publishing their work freely. Presence of political content meant immediate confrontation, which usually led to arrests. The imposition of western culture and the fear of Tamil being completely faced out, led to the establishment of Saiva Mutts. These were literary institutions run by eminent writers and poets of that time. The most influential among the writers was Minatchi Sundaram Pillai. He was a prolific writer with more than 80,000 poems in 80 works to his credit. Maraimalai Adigal was one of the earliest proponents of pure Tamil movement. He even changed his name from Venkatachalam, a Sanskrit name, to its pure Tamil equivalent and stood against Sanskritization.

Though the Mutts were doing a good job, English was given a lot of importance (by the British of course). Many were forced to learn English for the sake of employment. This suppression and the feeling of being trapped in one's own land manifested itself into a thirst for freedom. Poets and writers used their gift of writing to spread the message of freedom. Passionate poems ignited the fire of freedom in the heart of the common man. Chief among the poets was Subramanya Bharathiyar. His patriotic poems were delivered with such piquance and depth that, he was placed under the scanner by the government.

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In addition to his patriotic writings, he questioned the wrongs in the society. He was among the first to stress on the equality of women and fought for the rights of women. Bharathiyaarin Pudhumai Penn (new woman) was his vision of the woman of the future. So much was his positive attitude that he had written about the celebration during independence, more than 25 years before India actually got her independence.

“aaduvome pallu paaduvome, Aanandha sudandiram
Adaindhu vittom endru”

Post Independence

After independence, various administrators and politicians did their bit for the development of Tamil language. The one who pioneered this movement was former chief minister of Tamil Nadu C.N. Annadurai (Arignar Anna). His exemplary Tamil, fluency in English and his oratorical skills in both the languages made him unite the weaker sections of the society against social evils, with inequality as a platform.

The name of the state was changed to “Tamil Nadu” from “Madras” to depict the fact that it is a country of Tamils. Special committees were setup to coin technical English words in Tamil. Salaries of Tamil staffs were increased. Steps were taken to make Tamil Nadu, a completely ‘Tamil’ state. Research institutes were setup to promote the language and preserve the culture. All this resulted in a noticeable increase in the quality of spoken and written English. The flamboyance of political speeches actually made people to throng to them. There was a shift in literary policy from being religious instructions to social reforms on various levels.

The literary format of Tamil is classified as Iyal (literature), isai (music), naadakam (theatre). Out of the three, Iyal is going to be looked into-

Right from the Sangam age of Tamil literature to the early twentieth century, the poetic format of Tamil literature was the bulk. In spite of the beauty and depth in meaning of sangam works, most poets got carried away and wrote

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with such complexity that only the elite literary groups could comprehend. Ordinary people with a little or no knowledge about literature could not enjoy them.

Short format poems introduced by Subramanya Bharathiyar became popular in the twentieth century, as it reached the masses directly. These poems were called Pudhukkavidhaigal ('new poems'). This basically discussed the social and political issues prevailing in the state. The most well known and highly regarded authors of this period were Kanna Dasan, Bharathi Dasan and Namakkal Ramalingam Pillai.

Kanaka Supparathinam was his real name. Being an ardent follower of Subramanya Bharathi, he changed his name to Bharathi Dasan (follower of Bharathi). He was thoroughly influenced by the way Bharathi wrote. He picked up where Bharathiyar left off and questioned the social inequalities, fought for the eradication of religious superstitions and the use of pure Tamil. Bharathi Dasan considered serving Tamil as his sole mission in life; to save the purity of his mother-tongue and utilize new media and formats to convey revolutionary ideas. His writings were simple in language, which invoked a lot of criticism. This did not hinder him one bit and continued writing for the masses. His dream was to translate every book in the world into Tamil so that the youngsters need not depend on other languages to gain knowledge. He wanted writers to write in simple language so that everyone could gain from them.

Kannadasan is one of the most popular contemporary poets in Tamil. He has written on everything from sensual pleasures to religious sublimation. He is known for writing about political issues with absolute frankness that he developed as many enemies as friends. Kannadasan has also written many songs for movies that have now become classics.

This was the time when many medieval classics were commented on, by famous scholars so that common people with limited literary knowledge could gain from them. Biographies of famous scholars and political personalities were

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also released. Another prose type that gained popularity when Tamil people migrated was the travelogues. This was extremely useful in the sense that it exposed Tamil people to various cultures of the world.

Only during the second half of the 20th century did the fiction style become popular. VVS Iyer was the first one to popularize short stories in Tamil with his trademark style of writing. Presently, the most widely read Tamil books are novels. Novels in Tamil involved a number of fictional characters, but most stories were inspired from real incidents. This medium was also used to describe political problems, sometimes in a sarcastic manner. Mystery novels, where the reader is given the challenge of solving the mystery based on the clues given, also became very popular.

R Krishnamurti (Kalki) maybe regarded as the pioneer of historical novels in Tamil. He is said to have the style of English author Walter Scott. Kalki researched thoroughly on the historic subject and characters before using them in his book. Many have learnt more about history from Kalki's novels than from school books.

Many of the contemporary authors of Tamil were well versed in English as well. This brought in western themes written to cater Tamil audience. Authors like Sujatha specialized in science fiction. This completely new genre was well received by the public. Some books actually went on to become Tamil movies. Tamil pulp fiction reached its hay-day during the mid 90s. Many poets and writers had shifted to movies and Television serials market, as it proved to be more lucrative compared to traditional way of writing.

With the advent of internet, many classics of Tamil literature have found permanent place in the electronic world. Constant voluntary efforts are being taken in this front. This has made sharing and retrieval of knowledge a breeze. It has also led to the rise of Tamil blogs and portals aimed specifically at preserving and appreciating the language.

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