The Sangam Age which relates to the period extending from almost the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE is regarded as the golden age of the Tamils. The Sangam Literature was composed between 200 BCE and 300 CE. The texts were composed by poets who assembled in colleges patronised by the kings and chiefs of the Tamilakam region. Such colleges were called sangam or meeting point and the literature produced in these assemblies was known as Sangam Literature.

SOURCES OF THE SANGAM AGE

The historical sources for the study of Sangam Age are classified into:
1. Literary Sources
2. Archaeological Sources

1. Literary Sources
   A. Tirukurral
      The literary works constituted the most important part of the Sangam Literature and they are the main source of information about the life and traditions of the Tamil people. Tirukurral was written by Tiruvalluvar. It consists of 1330 couplets, organised into 133 Chapters. Each chapter has a specific subject varying from ruling a country to ploughing a piece of land. This important Tamil composition has been translated into various other languages.

2. Archaeological Sources
   A. The Megaliths
      The word 'Megalith' means large stone (mega + lith). Experts say the burial grounds existed in the Tamil country from time immemorial. Many such burial grounds have been found in different parts of Tamil country held by the Cheras, Pandyas and the Chols dynasties. In some burial grounds megaliths or large/big stones are found dug in the earth in a circular form. Some of these stones have even inscriptions engraved on them. These inscriptions help us a lot in forming an idea of different aspects of the social life of the people during the Sangam Age.

SOCIETY DURING THE SANGAM AGE

The Sangam Literature gives us a true picture of the social conditions of the age.
1. The Social Divisions
During the Sangam period the Tamil society was divided into several groups. In the beginning of the Sangam Age, the Tamil society was not organised on the basis of the Vedic caste system, namely Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. However, the earliest of the Sangam Literature, Tolkappiyam refers to the four divisions prevalent in the Sangam society namely, Arashar (kings), Vaishiyar (traders), Velalar (farmers) and Brahmanas (priests). It may be said that this classification roughly corresponds to the Vedic social division.

2. Status of Women

The joint family system characterised the society. Although some women got good education, their status in society was not equal to that of men. They did not have the right to inherit property. There were ascetics also among women, following the Jain and the Buddhist tradition. The worship of Kannagi or Pattini suggests that the vow of chastity was regarded as the greatest of feminine virtues. In fact, the images of Pattini Devi were being preserved and worshipped by Tamils in their temples until very recently.

3. Dress and Ornaments

People belonging to the higher social class wore dresses of fine muslin and silk. People generally wore a two piece garment. The men and women of the Sangam Age were fond of using oil, aromatic scents, coloured powders and sandal paste. Ornaments were worn round the neck, arms and legs by both men and women. Valuable ornaments of gold and precious stones were worn by the men and women of higher strata. The lower class wore bracelets made of conch-shell and necklaces made of coloured beads.

4. Food and Hospitality

The food consisted of rice, milk, ghee, curd and honey. The people ate various kinds of sweet made with curd, jaggery, puffed rice, milk and ghee. Non-vegetarianism was equally popular. Spiced curry and rice is also mentioned in the Sangam texts. The Brahmins preferred vegetarian food and avoided alcoholic drinks.

5. Entertainment

Music and dance were favourite pastimes. Cock-fighting and goat fighting were popular in villages. Gambling and wrestling were widely practised.

ECONOMIC LIFE DURING THE SANGAM AGE

The Sangam Literature gives a complete and true picture of economic conditions as well.

1. Agriculture

Agriculture was the main occupation of a large section of the people. Paddy was the main crop. Millet, gram and sugarcane were also cultivated. Chera country was famous for jackfruit, pepper and turmeric. Irrigation through rivers, tanks and wells was used for cultivation.

2. Industry
The Sangam Age also witnessed industrial activities. The occupations were generally hereditary. Some of them are discussed here.
* Many poems refer to various kinds of smiths like goldsmiths, blacksmiths and coppersmiths.
* The art of building reached a high standard during this period. Special references have been made about carpenters who made boats with face of horses, elephants and lions.
* Weaving and spinning were the most important crafts of the Sangam period. The weavers produced and exported fine cotton clothes.
* Fishing and hunting had also remained an important occupation during this period.

3. Trade and Commerce

Trade was a very important source of royal revenue. The Sangam Literature refers to trade and commercial activities, both internal and external. Barter system was prevalent. We also have the information that foreigners (yuvanas) visited the coastal towns for trade. Many Roman traders resided in South India in those days. The ports of Naura (Cannanore) and Nelcynda (Kottayam) were among the most prominent ports of India’s Western Coast.

EXERCISES

Short Answer Questions
1. What is the period of the Sangam Age?
2. Name any one literary source to reconstruct history of the Sangam Age.
3. Who wrote Tirukurral?
4. What is a Megalith?
5. Name the two agricultural products during the Sangam Age.
6. Name the two prominent ports on India’s Western Coast during the Sangam Age.

Structured Essay Type Questions
1. How are the following sources of the Sangam Age important to us?
   (a) Tirukurral
   (b) Megaliths
2. Give a pen-picture of the Tamil society during the Sangam Age concerning the following points:
   (a) The Social Division
   (b) Status of Women
   (c) Dress and Ornaments
   (d) Food and Hospitality
3. Throw some light on the economic life of the ancient Tamil people concerning the following points:
   (a) Agriculture
   (b) Industries
   (c) Trade and Commerce