Five Great Epics of Tamil – Silappathikaram, Manimekalai, Seevaka Sinthamani, Valayapathi, Kundalakesi and the Five Minor Epics | TNPSC Notes

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The **Five Great Epics** (Aimperumkappiyangal) of Tamil are the **Silappathikaram** (Ilango Adigal), **Manimekalai** (Seethalai Sathanar), **Seevaka Sinthamani** (Thiruthakka Thevar), **Valayapathi** (author unknown) and **Kundalakesi** (Nathakuthanar). They were composed between the post-Sangam age and about the 10th century CE. Three – Silappathikaram, Seevaka Sinthamani and Valayapathi – are **Jain** in outlook (Silappathikaram by general view), while Manimekalai and Kundalakesi are **Buddhist** epics. The first three survive in full; only 72 verses of Valayapathi and 19 of Kundalakesi survive.

தமிழில் படிக்க

These notes are written for TNPSC Group 1, 2/2A and 4 aspirants. They serve the syllabus topic "Tamil literature from the Sangam age till contemporary times" in the unit on **History, Culture, Heritage and Socio-Political Movements of Tamil Nadu**, and the work–author–religion matching questions of Group 4 **General Tamil**. For the earlier literary background see the Sangam literature note.

The Five Great Epics at a Glance

Epic	Author	Religious outlook	Structure	Status today
Silappathikaram	Ilango Adigal	Jain (general view)	3 kandams, 30 kathais	Complete
Manimekalai	Seethalai Sathanar	Buddhist	30 kathais	Complete
Seevaka Sinthamani	Thiruthakka Thevar	Jain	13 ilambagams, 3,145 verses	Complete
Valayapathi	Author unknown	Jain	–	Only 72 verses survive
Kundalakesi	Nathakuthanar	Buddhist	–	Only 19 verses survive

- **Definition of a great epic:** according to the Thandiyalangaram, a great epic (perumkappiyam) deals with all four aims of life – aram (virtue), porul (wealth), inbam (love) and veedu (liberation); if one or more is missing it is a **minor epic** (sirukappiyam).
- **The phrase "Aimperumkappiyam":** first found in **Mayilainathar's** commentary on the Nannool, which does not name the five works; the list of titles appears only in later works.

- **Religious count:** Jain 3 (Silappathikaram, Seevaka Sinthamani, Valayapathi) + Buddhist 2 (Manimekalai, Kundalakesi).
- **Twin epics:** Silappathikaram and Manimekalai – the story continues (Manimekalai is the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi).

Silappathikaram

- **Author:** Ilango Adigal. The prologue (pathigam) calls him the younger brother of the Chera king Senguttuvan (a traditional account).
- **Name:** "the epic of the anklet" (silambu) – the story turns on Kannagi's anklet.
- **Characters:** Kovalan, Kannagi, Madhavi, Kavunthi Adigal, Mathari, the Pandya king Nedunchezhiyan, Queen Kopperundevi, Cheran Senguttuvan.
- **Three truths (prologue):** dharma becomes death to rulers who err in governance; the great praise a renowned chaste woman; past deeds (oozh vinai) come back to bear fruit.
- **Epithets: Kudimakkal Kappiyam** (citizens' epic – its heroes are a merchant family, not kings), **Muthamizh Kappiyam** (iyal, isai, nadagam – literature, music, drama), **Uraiyidaiyitta Pattudai Cheyyul** (verse with prose passages), the first Tamil epic.
- **All three kingdoms:** Puhar (Chola), Madurai (Pandya) and Vanji (Chera) – the three kandams are set in the three capitals.
- **Commentators:** Arumpadavuraiyasiriyar and Adiyarkunallar (whose commentary is key for music and dance).
- **First printed edition:** U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer, 1892.

Kandam	Kathais	Main events
Puhar Kandam	10	Marriage of Kovalan and Kannagi; Madhavi's debut performance; Kovalan leaves Madhavi
Madurai Kandam	13	Journey to Madurai with Kavunthi Adigal; Kovalan killed while selling the anklet; Kannagi argues her case; the Pandya king dies; Madurai burns
Vanji Kandam	7	Cheran Senguttuvan brings a stone from the Himalayas and builds a temple for Kannagi as the Pathini goddess

- **Gajabahu synchronism:** the epic says the Sri Lankan king Gajabahu attended the consecration of Kannagi's temple at Vanji. On this basis Senguttuvan is traditionally placed in the 2nd century CE; the date of composition of the epic is still debated by scholars.
- **As a historical source:** the layout of Puhar, the Indra festival, sea trade, the streets of Madurai, and folk forms such as the Aaychiyar Kuravai, Vettuva Vari and Kundrak Kuravai give a detailed picture of society.
- **Art:** Madhavi's debut (Arangetru Kathai) gives the measurements of the stage, and the Kadalaadu Kathai describes the eleven dances (pathinoradal) – a primary source on Tamil music and dance.

Manimekalai

- **Author:** Seethalai Sathanar (the grain merchant Sathanar of Madurai); a **Buddhist** epic in 30 kathais, also called "Manimekalai Thuravu" (Manimekalai's renunciation).
- **Story:** Manimekalai, daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi, rejects the love of prince Udayakumaran and becomes a Buddhist nun. The goddess Manimekala takes her to the island of **Manipallavam**, where she receives the inexhaustible bowl **Amudhasurabhi**, with which she feeds the hungry.
- **Teacher:** Aravana Adigal.
- **Special feature:** the "Samaya Kanakkar Tham Thiram Ketta Kathai" in which Manimekalai hears out the philosophical schools of the time – an early Tamil text of philosophical debate.
- **Social message:** removal of hunger and turning a prison into a house of charity.
- **First printed edition:** U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer, 1898.

Seevaka Sinthamani

- **Author:** Thiruthakka Thevar (a Jain monk); generally placed in about the 9th–10th century CE.
- **Structure:** 13 ilambagams, 3,145 verses; a great epic in the **viruttam** metre – by tradition a model for later epics, including the Kamba Ramayanam.
- **Story:** the birth and exploits of Prince Seevakan (Jivaka) of Emangatham, his marriage to eight wives, the recovery of his lost kingdom and final renunciation. The eight marriages give it the name "**Mana Nool**" (book of marriages).
- **Commentator:** Nachinarkkiniyar. **First printed edition:** U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer, 1887 – the first great epic he published.

Valayapathi and Kundalakesi

- **Valayapathi:** a Jain epic by an unknown author. Only **72 verses**, quoted in anthologies such as the **Purathirattu** and in commentaries, survive; the full story is not known with certainty. The surviving verses are mostly ethical teachings.
- **Kundalakesi:** a Buddhist epic by **Nathakuthanar**; only **19 verses** survive. It tells of Kundalakesi, a merchant's daughter, who overcomes her husband, a thief, when he tries to kill her, becomes a Buddhist nun and wins religious debates.
- **Neelakesi:** a Jain work written to refute the Buddhist ideas of Kundalakesi – one of the five minor epics, and evidence of Jain–Buddhist debate in the Tamil country.

Five Minor Epics (in brief)

Epics lacking one or more of the four aims of life are minor epics. All five are **Jain** works.

Minor epic	Religion	Note
Yasodhara Kaviyam	Jain	Stresses the ethic of not killing living beings
Choolamani	Jain	Author: Tholamozhi Thevar
Udayanakumara Kaviyam	Jain	Story of Udayanan

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Nagakumara Kaviyam	Jain	Story of Nagakumaran
Neelakesi	Jain	A work of debate written to refute the Buddhist Kundalakesi

Tamil Nadu Angle – the Epic Tradition Today

- **Kannagi statue, Marina, Chennai:** installed in 1968 in connection with the Second World Tamil Conference held in Chennai.
- **Poompuhar:** the Tamil Nadu Government has set up the **Silappathikaram Art Gallery** (Silappathikara Kalaikoodam) with sculpted scenes from the epic.
- **Mangaladevi Kannagi temple:** on the Tamil Nadu–Keralam border in the hills adjoining Theni district; a festival is held on the Chithirai full-moon day.
- **Translations:** V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar translated the Silappathikaram into English (1939); the Central Institute of Classical Tamil carries out translations and research on the epics.
- The **Tamil Virtual Academy** (tamilvu.org) offers the texts and commentaries free online.

Writing Mains Answers (Group 1 / Group 2)

Silappathikaram as a social document (about 150–250 words)

- **Introduction:** Ilango Adigal; 3 kandams, 30 kathais; the citizens' epic.
- **Polity:** capitals of the three kingdoms; "dharma becomes death to rulers who err" – the idea of just rule.
- **Economy:** Puhar port, merchant families, the markets of Madurai.
- **Culture:** Indra festival, kuravai dance, music and dance (Madhavi), the Pathini cult.
- **Place of women:** Kannagi's voice for justice, Madhavi's artistic skill.
- **Conclusion:** both literature and historical source – a symbol of Tamil identity.

The twin epics compared (about 150 words)

- Silappathikaram – fate, chastity, royal justice; Manimekalai – renunciation, ending hunger, Buddhist ethics.
- Continuity: Manimekalai is the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi.
- Both are set in Puhar, Madurai and Vanji; both have 30 kathais.
- Significance: the contribution of Jain and Buddhist ethical traditions to Tamil literature.

Practice: Match the Following

Item	Match
Seevaka Sinthamani	Mana Nool – Thiruthakka Thevar
Manimekalai	Amudhasurabhi – Seethalai Sathanar
Kundalakesi	Nathakuthanar – 19 verses
Valayapathi	72 verses – author unknown
Neelakesi	Refutation of Kundalakesi

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Choolamani	Tholamozhi Thevar

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- The Kamba Ramayanam, Periya Puranam and Perungathai are not among the Five Great Epics.
- Manimekalai is Buddhist; Seevaka Sinthamani is Jain – do not swap them.
- Kundalakesi is Buddhist; Neelakesi, which refutes it, is Jain – do not confuse the two.
- Valayapathi – 72 verses; Kundalakesi – 19 verses – do not swap the numbers.
- All five minor epics are Jain; none is Buddhist.
- The date of the Silappathikaram is not settled – "2nd century CE" is only a traditional estimate based on the Gajabahu synchronism.

Key Terms – Tamil / English (for the bilingual paper)

தமிழ்	English
ஐம்பெருங்காப்பியங்கள்	Five Great Epics
ஐஞ்சிறுகாப்பியங்கள்	Five Minor Epics
காதை	Canto (chapter of an epic)
இலம்பகம்	Section of the Seevaka Sinthamani
உறுதிப்பொருள் (அறம், பொருள், இன்பம், வீடு)	Four aims of life (virtue, wealth, love, liberation)
குடிமக்கள் காப்பியம்	Citizens' epic
இரட்டைக் காப்பியங்கள்	Twin epics
பத்தினி வழிபாடு	Cult of the chaste goddess (Pathini)

Quick Revision Table

Year / period	Event
Post-Sangam age – c. 10th century CE	Span in which the Five Great Epics were composed (general view)
c. 9th–10th century CE	Seevaka Sinthamani (Thiruthakka Thevar)
1887	U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer prints the Seevaka Sinthamani
1892	U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer prints the Silappathikaram
1898	U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer prints the Manimekalai
1939	V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar's English translation of the Silappathikaram
1968	Kannagi statue on the Marina, Chennai (Second World Tamil Conference)

TNPSC Key Points (PYQ-style facts)

- Five Great Epics: Silappathikaram, Manimekalai, Seevaka Sinthamani, Valayapathi, Kundalakesi.
- Jain 3 – Silappathikaram, Seevaka Sinthamani, Valayapathi; Buddhist 2 – Manimekalai, Kundalakesi.
- Silappathikaram – 3 kandams (Puhar 10, Madurai 13, Vanji 7) – 30 kathais.
- Silappathikaram = citizens' epic, Muthamizh epic, verse with prose passages.
- Manimekalai – 30 kathais – Amudhasurabhi – Manipallavam – Aravana Adigal.
- Seevaka Sinthamani – 13 ilambagams, 3,145 verses – Mana Nool – commentary by Nachinarkkiniyar.
- Valayapathi – 72 verses (Purathirattu); Kundalakesi – Nathakuthanar – 19 verses.
- Neelakesi refutes Kundalakesi; Choolamani – Tholamozhi Thevar.
- Great epic = all four aims of life (Thandiyalangaram).
- The phrase "Aimperumkappiyam" first appears in Mayilainathar's commentary on the Nannool.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the Five Great Epics and who wrote them?

Silappathikaram – Ilango Adigal; Manimekalai – Seethalai Sathanar; Seevaka Sinthamani – Thiruthakka Thevar; Valayapathi – author unknown; Kundalakesi – Nathakuthanar. Three are Jain in outlook and two are Buddhist epics.

How does a great epic differ from a minor epic?

According to the Thandiyalangaram, a great epic deals with all four aims of life – virtue, wealth, love and liberation; if one or more is missing it is a minor epic. Yasodhara Kaviyam, Choolamani, Udayanakumara Kaviyam, Nagakumara Kaviyam and Neelakesi are the five minor epics.

Why is the Silappathikaram called the "citizens' epic"?

Most epics have kings or gods as heroes; the heroes of the Silappathikaram, Kovalan and Kannagi, belong to a merchant family. Because it sings of ordinary citizens it is the citizens' epic, and because it has literature, music and drama it is the Muthamizh epic.

Which are the twin epics?

The Silappathikaram and the Manimekalai. The heroine of the Manimekalai is the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi of the Silappathikaram. Both have 30 kathais; the first is Jain in outlook and the second is a Buddhist epic.

Why are Valayapathi and Kundalakesi incomplete?

No complete palm-leaf manuscript of either work has been found. Only verses quoted in anthologies such as the Purathirattu and by commentators survive – 72 of Valayapathi and 19 of Kundalakesi.

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Practice questions

1. Who composed the Silappathikaram?

A. Ilango Adigal
B. Seethalai Sathanar
C. Thiruthakka Thevar
D. Nathakuthanar

2. Which of the Five Great Epics are Buddhist?

A. Silappathikaram, Valayapathi
B. Manimekalai, Kundalakesi
C. Seevaka Sinthamani, Manimekalai
D. Valayapathi, Kundalakesi

3. How many kathais does the Silappathikaram have?

A. 13
B. 30
C. 33
D. 50

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4. How many kathais are in the Madurai Kandam of the Silappathikaram?

A. 7
B. 10
C. 13
D. 30

5. Which work is called the "citizens' epic"?

A. Silappathikaram
B. Seevaka Sinthamani
C. Manimekalai
D. Kundalakesi

6. Which epic is called "Mana Nool"?

A. Silappathikaram
B. Seevaka Sinthamani
C. Valayapathi
D. Manimekalai

7. How many ilambagams does the Seevaka Sinthamani have?

A. 10
B. 12
C. 13
D. 30

8. What was the inexhaustible bowl received by Manimekalai called?

A. Karpagam
B. Sinthamani
C. Manipallavam
D. Amudhasurabhi

9. Who is the author of Kundalakesi?

A. Nathakuthanar
B. Tholamozhi Thevar
C. Seethalai Sathanar
D. Thiruthakka Thevar

10. How many verses of Valayapathi survive today?

A. 19
B. 30
C. 72
D. 145

11. Which Jain work was written to refute Kundalakesi?

A. Choolamani
B. Yasodhara Kaviyam
C. Neelakesi
D. Valayapathi

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12. Where is the phrase "Aimperumkappiyam" first found?

A. Adiyarkunallar's commentary
B. Ilampooranar's commentary
C. Nachinarkkiniyar's commentary
D. Mayilainathar's commentary

13. According to the Thandiyalangaram, what must a great epic deal with?

A. Virtue, wealth, love and liberation
B. Virtue and wealth only
C. Love only
D. Literature, music and drama

14. Who wrote the Choolamani?

A. Thiruthakka Thevar
B. Tholamozhi Thevar
C. Nathakuthanar
D. Ilango Adigal

15. Who first printed the Silappathikaram (1892)?

A. C.W. Damodaram Pillai
B. Arumuga Navalar
C. U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer
D. V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar

16. Which kandam describes Cheran Senguttuvan building a temple for Kannagi?

A. Puhar Kandam
B. Madurai Kandam
C. Manipallava Kandam
D. Vanji Kandam

17. Who was Manimekalai's teacher (guru)?

A. Aravana Adigal
B. Kavunthi Adigal
C. Ilango Adigal
D. Mathari

18. Which of these is NOT one of the Five Great Epics?

A. Valayapathi
B. Perungathai
C. Kundalakesi
D. Seevaka Sinthamani

19. Why is the Silappathikaram called the "Muthamizh epic"?

A. It has three kandams
B. Three authors wrote it
C. It has literature, music and drama
D. It praises three religions

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20. In which year was the Kannagi statue installed on the Marina, Chennai?

A. 1956

B. 1968

C. 1981

D. 1995

Answers with explanations

1. A) Ilango Adigal – Silappathikaram – Ilango Adigal.

2. B) Manimekalai, Kundalakesi – Manimekalai and Kundalakesi are Buddhist; the other three are Jain.

3. B) 30 – Puhar 10 + Madurai 13 + Vanji 7 = 30.

4. C) 13 – Madurai 13; Puhar 10; Vanji 7.

5. A) Silappathikaram – Silappathikaram – its heroes are a merchant family.

6. B) Seevaka Sinthamani – Seevaka Sinthamani – Seevakan marries eight wives.

7. C) 13 – 13 ilambagams, 3,145 verses.

8. D) Amudhasurabhi – Amudhasurabhi; the island was Manipallavam.

9. A) Nathakuthanar – Kundalakesi – Nathakuthanar (Buddhist).

10. C) 72 – Valayapathi 72; Kundalakesi 19.

11. C) Neelakesi – Neelakesi – one of the five minor epics.

12. D) Mayilainathar's commentary – In Mayilainathar's commentary on the Nannool.

13. A) Virtue, wealth, love and liberation – All four aims of life; if one is missing it is a minor epic.

14. B) Tholamozhi Thevar – Choolamani – Tholamozhi Thevar (Jain minor epic).

15. C) U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer – U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer, 1892.

16. D) Vanji Kandam – Vanji Kandam – the Chera part.

17. A) Aravana Adigal – Aravana Adigal; Kavunthi Adigal belongs to the Silappathikaram.

18. B) Perungathai – Perungathai is not among the five.

19. C) It has literature, music and drama – Iyal, isai and nadagam – the three Tamils.

20. B) 1968 – 1968 – in connection with the Second World Tamil Conference.

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