Sangam Literature – Ettuthogai, Pathuppattu, Tolkappiyam, the Thinai Concept, Akam & Puram, the Three-Sangam Tradition and Sangam Society | TNPSC Notes

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Sangam literature is the corpus of early Tamil poems generally dated to about the **3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE**. It consists of the **Pathinen Melkanakku** (Eighteen Major Works) – the **Ettuthogai** (eight anthologies) and the **Pathuppattu** (ten long idylls) – while the grammar **Tolkappiyam** sets out the conventions they follow. The poems fall into **akam** (love and family life) and **puram** (war, gifts, governance and society) and are organised by the **thinai** concept that links landscape and emotion. Tradition speaks of three Sangams (academies) under Pandya patronage at Madurai.

தமிழில் படிக்க

These notes are written for TNPSC Group 1, 2/2A and 4 aspirants. They form the base for the syllabus topics "Tamil literature from the Sangam age till contemporary times" and "History of Tamil society" in the unit on **History, Culture, Heritage and Socio-Political Movements of Tamil Nadu**; Group 4 **General Tamil** regularly asks book–author–patron matching questions. Related note: Keeladi excavations.

Sangam Literature at a Glance

Feature	Details
Period (general view)	About 3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE
Corpus	Pathinen Melkanakku = Ettuthogai (8) + Pathuppattu (10)
Size	About 2,381 poems by about 473 poets (some anonymous)
Grammar	Tolkappiyam by Tolkappiyar – three books: Ezhuthu, Sol, Porul
Themes	Akam (love, domestic life) / Puram (war, gifts, ethics, society)
Women poets (examples)	Avvaiyar, Velliveethiyar, Kakkaipadiniyar Nachellaiyar, Aathimanthiyar
Rediscovered and printed by	C.W. Damodaram Pillai (Kalithogai 1887), U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer (Pathuppattu 1889, Purananuru 1894)
Later collection	Pathinen Keezhkanakku (didactic works such as Thirukkural, Naladiyar) – post-Sangam age

Ettuthogai (Eight Anthologies)

The old mnemonic venba lists them in order: "Natrinai nalla Kurunthogai Ainkurunuru, oththa Pathitruppaththu, ongu Paripadal, katrarindhaar eththum Kaliyodu Agam Puram endru iththiraththa ettuth thogai".

Work	Poems	Akam / Puram	Notes
Natrinai	400	Akam	9–12 lines
Kurunthogai	400	Akam	4–8 lines; compiled by Poorikko
Ainkurunuru	500	Akam	3–6 lines; 100 poems for each of five thinais; compiled by Koodalur Kizhar
Pathitruppathu	100 (ten decads)	Puram	Praises Chera kings; the first and last decads are lost
Paripadal	70	Akam and Puram	Musical poems on Thirumal, Murugan, the Vaigai river and Madurai; only some survive
Kalithogai	150	Akam	Kali metre; compiled by Nallanthuvanar
Akananuru	400	Akam	13–31 lines; "Nedunthogai"; compiled by Uruthirasanman
Purananuru	400	Puram	Kings, war, gifts and social life – a primary historical source

- **Akam works (5):** Natrinai, Kurunthogai, Ainkurunuru, Kalithogai, Akananuru.
- **Puram works (2):** Purananuru, Pathitruppathu. **Both:** Paripadal.
- In Ainkurunuru: Marutham – Orampokiyar, Neithal – Ammoovanar, Kurinji – Kapilar, Palai – Othalanthaiyar, Mullai – Peyanar (100 poems each).
- Akam poems do not name the hero or heroine – a basic convention of akam.

Pathuppattu (Ten Idylls)

Mnemonic venba: "Murugu, Porunaaru, Paan irandu, Mullai, perugu vala Maduraik Kanchi, maruviniya kola Nedunalvadai, kol Kurinji, Pattinappalai, Kadaaththodum paththu".

Work	Author	Patron / subject	Note
Thirumurugatruppadai	Nakkeerar	Murugan	Aatruppadai; first of the ten
Porunaratruppadai	Mudathama Kanniyar	Karikal Chola	Aatruppadai
Sirupanatruppadai	Nalloor Nathathanar	Nalliyakkodan	Aatruppadai
Perumpanatruppadai	Kadiyalur Uruthirankannanar	Thondaiman Ilanthiraiyan (Kanchi)	Aatruppadai

Mullaippattu	Napputhanar	–	Akam; shortest of the ten (103 lines)
Maduraikkanchi	Mangudi Maruthanar	Thalaiyalanganathu Seruvendra Pandyan Nedunchezhiyan	Longest (782 lines); life in Madurai
Nedunalvadai	Nakkeerar	Pandyan Nedunchezhiyan	The cold north-wind season; palace description
Kurinjippattu	Kapilar	Composed to explain Tamil love to the Aryan king Brahadatta (Pirakaththan)	Akam; lists 99 flowers
Pattinappalai	Kadiyalur Uruthirankannanar	Karikal Chola	Akam; describes Kaveripoompattinam (Puhar)
Malaipadukadam (Koothar-atruppadai)	Perunkousikanar	Nannan	Aatruppadai

- **Aatruppadai works (5):** Thirumurugatruppadai, Porunaratruppadai, Sirupanatruppadai, Perumpanatruppadai and Malaipadukadam. In an aatruppadai, a bard who has received gifts guides another bard to the patron.
- **Akam works:** Mullaippattu, Kurinjippattu, Pattinappalai; commentators differ on whether Nedunalvadai is akam or puram.
- Nakkeerar composed two (Thirumurugatruppadai, Nedunalvadai), and Kadiyalur Uruthirankannanar two (Perumpanatruppadai, Pattinappalai).

Tolkappiyam

- The **oldest extant Tamil grammar**, by **Tolkappiyar**.
- **Structure:** three books (athikarams) – Ezhuthathikaram (letters), Sollathikaram (words), Porulathikaram (subject matter) – each with 9 iyals, i.e. **27 iyals**; about 1,600 sutras (the count varies slightly by edition).
- **Porulathikaram** is unique as a "grammar of life": it explains akam and puram thinais, mudhal–karu–uri porul, meyppadu (expression of emotions), simile and prosody.
- **Preface (payiram):** by Panamparanar; it says the work was presented in the court of the Pandya king Nilantharu Thiruvil Pandiyan, with Athankottu Aasan presiding.
- **Commentators:** Ilampooranar (the first), Senavaraiyar, Perasiriyar, Nachinarkkiniyar, Deivachilaiyar, Kalladar.

The Thinai Concept: Akam Thinais

Tolkappiyam divides the content of a poem into **mudhal porul** (land and time), **karu porul** (deity, people, animals, trees, flowers, occupation, music, etc.) and **uri porul** (the emotion proper to that landscape). The five landscapes of love:

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Thinai	Land	Deity	Uri porul (emotion)
Kurinji	Hills and adjoining land	Murugan (Seyon)	Union of lovers
Mullai	Forest and pasture land	Thirumal (Mayon)	Patient waiting
Marutham	Cultivated fields	Indiran (Vendhan)	Lovers' quarrel (oodal)
Neithal	Seashore	Varunan	Pining / lament
Palai	Kurinji or Mullai turned arid in drought	Kotravai	Separation

- **Palai has no land of its own:** the Silappathikaram says Mullai and Kurinji, losing their nature in drought, take the form called Palai.
- With **Kaikkilai** (one-sided love) and **Perunthinai** (mismatched love), there are **seven akam thinais**.
- The thinai idea links land, nature, occupation and emotion – an **ecological** literary theory unique in world literature.

Puram Thinais

Tolkappiyam gives seven puram thinais, each paired with an akam thinai (Vetchi – Kurinji, Vanchi – Mullai, Uzhinai – Marutham, Thumbai – Neithal, Vaagai – Palai, Kanchi – Perunthinai, Paadaan – Kaikkilai). The later **Purapporul Venbamalai** (Aiyanaridhanar) expanded them to twelve.

Puram thinai	Meaning
Vetchi	Raiding the enemy's cattle
Vanchi	Invading enemy territory
Uzhinai	Besieging the enemy fort
Thumbai	Pitched battle
Vaagai	Victory
Kanchi	Transience of life
Paadaan	Praising a patron's fame, gifts and valour

The Three-Sangam Tradition

According to the tradition recorded in the **commentary on Iraiyanar Akapporul** (Kalaviyal urai), three Sangams flourished under Pandya kings. Historians generally treat this as **legend**; notably, the word "sangam" does not occur in the Sangam poems themselves. The surviving works are attributed to the last Sangam.

Sangam	Place (tradition)	Duration (traditional count)	Note

First (Thalaichangam)	Then Madurai (swallowed by the sea)	4,440 years	No works survive
Middle (Idaichangam)	Kapadapuram (swallowed by the sea)	3,700 years	Tradition places Tolkappiyam here
Last (Kadaichangam)	Madurai (present city)	1,850 years	Ettuthogai and Pathuppattu

Society and History in Sangam Literature

- **Moovendhar:** Cheras (Vanchi/Karur, Muziris), Cholas (Uraiyur, Puhar), Pandyas (Madurai, Korkai), with Velir chiefs. The seven patrons (Kadai Ezhu Vallalgal): Pari, Ori, Kari, Aay, Athiyaman, Nalli, Pegan.
- **Famous kings:** Karikal Chola (battle of Venni; Pattinappalai, Porunaratruppadai), Thalaiyalanganathu Seruvendra Pandyan Nedunchezhiyan (Maduraikkanchi, Nedunalvadai), Cheran Senguttuvan (Pathitruppathu).
- **Economy:** agriculture, cattle, fishing, salt, weaving; trade with the Romans (Yavanas) through Puhar, Muziris and Korkai.
- **Society:** bards and performers (panar, viraliyar, koothar); hero-stone (nadukal) worship; women poets.
- **Cross-checking:** Ashoka's Rock Edicts II and XIII mention the Cholas, Pandyas, Satiyaputras and Keralaputras; excavations at Keeladi, Kodumanal and Arikamedu confirm the urban and trade picture of the poems.

Tamil Nadu Angle – Classical Status and Present Efforts

- **2004:** the Government of India declared Tamil India's first **Classical Language**; the antiquity of Sangam literature was central to this.
- The **Central Institute of Classical Tamil**, Chennai, carries out research and translation of Tolkappiyam and the Sangam works.
- The **Tamil Virtual Academy** (tamilvu.org) offers the texts and commentaries free online.

Writing Mains Answers (Group 1 / Group 2)

Sangam literature as a source of Tamil history (about 150–250 words)

- **Introduction:** Ettuthogai and Pathuppattu; about 3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE.
- **Polity:** Moovendhar and Velir; Purananuru, Pathitruppathu, Maduraikkanchi.
- **Economy:** thinai-based occupations; Puhar port in Pattinappalai; Yavana trade.
- **Society and culture:** akam–puram, hero stones, bards, women poets.
- **Limits:** poetic exaggeration and dating problems – cross-check with inscriptions and excavations (Keeladi, Ashokan edicts).
- **Conclusion:** the foundation of Tamil's classical status and identity.

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The thinai concept – land and emotion (about 150 words)

- Porulathikaram of Tolkappiyam; mudhal–karu–uri porul.
- Table of the five thinais (land, deity, emotion).
- Seven akam thinais with Kaikkilai and Perunthinai; seven puram thinais.
- Significance: ecological outlook and a record of people's ways of life.

Practice: Match the Following

Item	Match
Maduraikkanchi	Mangudi Maruthanar
Kurinjippattu	Kapilar – 99 flowers
Pattinappalai	Kaveripoompattinam – Karikalan
Malaipadukadam	Koothar-atruppadai – Nannan
Neithal	Lament – Varunan
Uzhinai	Siege of a fort

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Thirukkural and Naladiyar are not Sangam (Melkanakku) works – they are Keezhkanakku works.
- Only two Ettuthogai works are puram – Purananuru and Pathitruppathu; Paripadal has both.
- Shortest of the Pathuppattu: Mullaippattu; longest: Maduraikkanchi.
- Palai has no land of its own; its deity is Kotravai.
- Oodal belongs to Marutham and lament (irangal) to Neithal – do not swap them.
- The three-Sangam account is tradition; do not present it as proven history.

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

தமிழ்	English
எட்டுத்தொகை	Eight Anthologies
பத்துப்பாட்டு	Ten Idylls
பதினெண் மேற்கணக்கு	Eighteen Major Works
அகம் / புறம்	Interior (love) / Exterior (war, public life)
திணை	Landscape-mood category
ஆற்றுப்படை	Guide poem (bard directing another bard to a patron)
நடுகல்	Hero stone
உரிப்பொருள்	Characteristic emotion of a thinai
செம்மொழி	Classical language

Quick Revision Table

Year / period	Event
c. 3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE	Sangam poems composed (general view)
3rd century BCE	Ashokan edicts mention Cholas, Pandyas, Satiyaputras, Keralaputras
Later (medieval) period	Poems arranged as Ettuthogai and Pathuppattu; three-Sangam legend in the Iraiyanar Akapporul commentary
1887	C.W. Damodaram Pillai prints Kalithogai
1889	U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer prints Pathuppattu
1894	U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer prints Purananuru
2004	Tamil becomes India's first classical language

TNPSC Key Points (PYQ-style facts)

- Pathinen Melkanakku = Ettuthogai + Pathuppattu.
- Ettuthogai: 5 akam, 2 puram, Paripadal both.
- Ainkurunuru – 500 short poems (3–6 lines); Kurunthogai 4–8 lines; Akananuru 13–31 lines.
- Akananuru is also called Nedunthogai; Kalithogai is in kali metre.
- Five aatruppadai works; Malaipadukadam = Koothar-atruppadai.
- Mullaippattu – 103 lines (shortest); Maduraikkanchi – 782 lines (longest).
- Kurinjippattu – Kapilar – 99 flowers – Brahadatta.
- Pattinappalai and Porunaratruppadai – Karikal Chola.
- Tolkappiyam – 3 books, 27 iyals; first commentator Ilampooranar.
- Thinai deities: Murugan, Thirumal, Indiran, Varunan, Kotravai.
- 7 akam thinais; 7 puram thinais in Tolkappiyam; 12 in Purapporul Venbamalai.
- Three Sangams: Then Madurai, Kapadapuram, Madurai (Iraiyanar Akapporul commentary).

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the Pathinen Melkanakku works?

The eighteen works of the Ettuthogai (Natrinai, Kurunthogai, Ainkurunuru, Pathitruppathu, Paripadal, Kalithogai, Akananuru, Purananuru) and the Pathuppattu (ten long poems from Thirumurugatruppadai to Malaipadukadam). Together they form Sangam literature.

What do akam and puram mean?

Akam poems describe the love and domestic emotions of an unnamed hero and heroine; puram poems deal with public life – war, valour, gifts, ethics, rule and society. Puram poems name kings and poets openly and are therefore valuable historical sources.

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What are the five thinais and their landscapes?

Kurinji – hills, Mullai – forest, Marutham – fields, Neithal – seashore, and Palai – Kurinji or Mullai land turned arid in drought. Their emotions are union, waiting, quarrel, lament and separation respectively.

What is the structure of the Tolkappiyam?

Tolkappiyam by Tolkappiyar has three books – Ezhuthu, Sol and Porul – each with nine iyals, 27 in all. The Porulathikaram, which sets out the grammar of life (akam, puram, thinai), is its distinctive feature.

Did the three Sangams really exist?

The account of three Sangams at Then Madurai, Kapadapuram and Madurai comes from the commentary on Iraiyanar Akapporul. Because it gives durations of thousands of years, historians treat it as legend, while accepting that an assembly of poets may have flourished at Madurai under the Pandyas.

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Frequently asked questions

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Practice questions

1. What does Pathinen Melkanakku consist of?

A. Ettuthogai + Pathuppattu
B. Pathinen Keezhkanakku
C. The Five Great Epics
D. Thirukkural + Naladiyar

2. Which Ettuthogai works are puram?

A. Natrinai, Kurunthogai
B. Purananuru, Pathitruppathu
C. Kalithogai, Akananuru
D. Ainkurunuru, Paripadal

3. How many poems are there in Ainkurunuru?

A. 400
B. 500
C. 150
D. 70

4. Which work is called "Nedunthogai"?

A. Purananuru
B. Kurunthogai
C. Kalithogai
D. Akananuru

5. Which Ettuthogai work is about the Chera kings?

A. Pathitruppathu
B. Paripadal
C. Natrinai
D. Kalithogai

6. Which is the longest of the Pathuppattu?

A. Mullaippattu
B. Maduraikkanchi
C. Pattinappalai
D. Nedunalvadai

7. Which work lists 99 flowers?

A. Malaipadukadam
B. Mullaippattu
C. Kurinjippattu
D. Thirumurugatruppadai

8. Who is the patron-hero of Pattinappalai?

A. Nedunchezhiyan
B. Senguttuvan
C. Nannan
D. Karikal Chola

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9. Which work is also called "Koothar-atruppadai"?

A. Malaipadukadam
B. Porunaratruppadai
C. Sirupanatruppadai
D. Perumpanatruppadai

10. Who composed Maduraikkanchi?

A. Nakkeerar
B. Mangudi Maruthanar
C. Kapilar
D. Napputhanar

11. How many iyals are there in the Tolkappiyam?

A. 9
B. 18
C. 27
D. 33

12. Who was the first commentator on the Tolkappiyam?

A. Parimelazhagar
B. Senavaraiyar
C. Nachinarkkiniyar
D. Ilampooranar

13. What is the uri porul (emotion) of Marutham?

A. Lovers' quarrel (oodal)
B. Waiting
C. Union
D. Lament

14. Who is the deity of Palai?

A. Murugan
B. Kotravai
C. Varunan
D. Indiran

15. Neithal denotes which landscape?

A. Hills
B. Forest
C. Seashore
D. Fields

16. Which puram thinai denotes the siege of an enemy fort?

A. Vetchi
B. Kanchi
C. Vaagai
D. Uzhinai

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17. Which work records the tradition of three Sangams?

A. Commentary on Iraiyanar Akapporul
B. Tolkappiyam
C. Silappathikaram
D. Purananuru

18. According to tradition, where was the Middle Sangam held?

A. Then Madurai
B. Kapadapuram
C. Madurai
D. Uraiyur

19. Who first printed the Purananuru (1894)?

A. C.W. Damodaram Pillai
B. Arumuga Navalar
C. U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer
D. Maraimalai Adigal

20. Which of these is NOT an aatruppadai work?

A. Porunaratruppadai
B. Sirupanatruppadai
C. Malaipadukadam
D. Nedunalvadai

Answers with explanations

1. A) Ettuthogai + Pathuppattu – 8 anthologies + 10 idylls = the 18 major works.

2. B) Purananuru, Pathitruppathu – Purananuru and Pathitruppathu are puram; Paripadal has both.

3. B) 500 – 100 poems for each of five thinais – 500.

4. D) Akananuru – Akananuru, with long (13–31 line) poems.

5. A) Pathitruppathu – Pathitruppathu praises Chera kings in decads.

6. B) Maduraikkanchi – Maduraikkanchi, 782 lines; Mullaippattu (103) is the shortest.

7. C) Kurinjippattu – Kapilar's Kurinjippattu names 99 flowers.

8. D) Karikal Chola – Kadiyalur Uruthirankannanar sang of Karikalan and Puhar.

9. A) Malaipadukadam – Perunkousikanar's Malaipadukadam.

10. B) Mangudi Maruthanar – Mangudi Maruthanar, on Pandyan Nedunchezhiyan.

11. C) 27 – Three books × nine iyals = 27.

12. D) Ilampooranar – Ilampooranar wrote the first commentary.

13. A) Lovers' quarrel (oodal) – Marutham – oodal; Neithal – lament; Mullai – waiting.

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14. B) Kotravai – Kotravai is the deity of Palai.

15. C) Seashore – Neithal is the seashore.

16. D) Uzhinai – Uzhinai – siege; Vetchi – cattle raid; Vaagai – victory.

17. A) Commentary on Iraiyanar Akapporul – The commentary on Iraiyanar Akapporul.

18. B) Kapadapuram – First – Then Madurai; Middle – Kapadapuram; Last – Madurai.

19. C) U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer – U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer published it in 1894.

20. D) Nedunalvadai – Nedunalvadai is not an aatruppadai; the others are.

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