

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS IN KEELADI**

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Paper-I  
 (Art & Culture)

Keeladi is a tiny hamlet in the Sivaganga district in south Tamil Nadu. It is about 12 km southeast to the temple city of Madurai and is located along the Vaigai river. The excavations here from 2015 prove that an urban civilisation existed in Tamil Nadu in the Sangam age on the banks of the Vaigai river.

**How is Keeladi linked to Sangam age?**

The Sangam age is a period of history in ancient Tamil Nadu which was believed to be from the third century BCE to the third century CE. The name is derived from the renowned Sangam poets of Madurai from that time. Excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department (TNSDA)

has pushed the Sangam age further back. In 2019, a TNSDA report dated the unearthed artefacts from Keeladi to a period between sixth century BCE and first century BCE. One of the six samples collected at a depth of 353 cm, sent for carbon dating in the U.S., dated back to 580 BCE. The findings in the TNSDA report placed Keeladi artefacts about 300 years earlier than the previously believed third century BCE. A recent ASI report by K. Amarnath Ramakrishna, the Superintendent Archaeologist who discovered Keeladi in 2015, has pushed the Sangam age to 800 BCE based on these archaeological findings.



Keeladi could also provide crucial evidence for understanding the missing links of the Iron Age (12th century BCE to sixth century BCE) to the Early Historic Period (sixth century BCE to fourth century BCE) and subsequent cultural developments.

### **What was the controversy surrounding Keeladi?**

After reports of possible links with the Indus Valley Civilisation, the third round (2017) of diggings by the ASI saw a delayed start. Superintending Archaeologist Amarnath Ramakrishna was transferred to Assam, allegedly in a perceived attempt to play down the excavation findings. Keeladi almost faded from public memory as there was no “significant finding” in the third round. This led to criticism that the excavation had been deliberately restricted to 400 metres. Tamil Nadu politicians criticised the BJP-led Union Government of trying to suppress information about an ancient Tamil civilisation that had flourished on the banks of the Vaigai river. On the intervention of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, the ASI permitted the TNSDA to take up further excavation on its own. Since then, the TNSDA has been carrying out excavations to unearth more about the history of Tamil civilisation.

### **Are there links to Indus Valley?**

The unearthed Keeladi artefacts have led academics to describe the site as part of the Vaigai Valley Civilisation. The findings have also invited comparisons with the Indus Valley Civilisation while acknowledging the cultural gap of 1,000 years between the two places. Till now, the gap is filled with Iron Age material in south India, which serve as residual links. However, some of the symbols found in pot sherds of Keeladi bear a close resemblance to Indus Valley signs. A lot of digging and study has to be done to establish the links between these two civilisations. TNSDA affirms that Keeladi has all the characteristics of an urban civilisation, with brick structures, luxury items and proof of internal and external trade. It comes across as an industrious and advanced civilisation and has given evidence of urban life and settlements in Tamil Nadu during the Early Historic Period. Keeladi has also added to the credibility of Sangam Literature.

### **What has been unearthed so far?**

In the eight rounds of excavations, including the first three by the ASI, over 18,000 artefacts have been unearthed from the site and the unique artefacts will be on display at the museum to be opened soon.

Unearthing of heaps of pottery suggest the existence of a pottery making industry, mostly made of locally available raw materials. Over 120 potsherds containing Tamil Brahmi inscriptions have been found. Keeladi, along with other Tamil Nadu sites which have over a thousand inscribed potsherds, clearly suggest the long survival of the script. Spindle whorls, copper needles, terracotta seal, hanging stones of the yarn, terracotta spheres and earthen vessels to hold liquid suggest various stages of a weaving industry. There also existed a dyeing industry and a glass bead industry.

Gold ornaments, copper articles, semi-precious stones, shell bangles, ivory bangles and ivory combs reflect the artistic, culturally rich and prosperous lifestyle of the Keeladi people. Agate and carnelian beads suggest import through commercial networks while terracotta and ivory dice, gamesmen and evidence of hopscotch have been unearthed revealing their pastime hobbies.

## Sangam Age

Sangam refers to the association or conference of Tamil poets which was held under the patronage of the Pandya kings. The period between about 300 BCE to 300 CE in South India (the area south of the Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers) is known as the Sangam period. It was also called 'Muchchangam'. Sangam literature is mainly written in Tamil language. The major works of the Sangam age include the texts Tolkappiyam, Ettuttouke, Pattuppattu, Padinekillakanakku, etc. and the epics Silappadikaram, Manimekhalai and Jivaka Chintamani.

### Political History of the Sangam Age

During the Sangam Age, South India was ruled by three dynasties - Chera, Chola and Pandya. Information about these states can be obtained from the literary sources of the Sangam period. The Sangam administration was monarchical. The kingships were hereditary. The state was called 'Mandal'. All the rights were vested in the king. The king was given titles like mannam, vandan, caravan etc. These titles were for both the king and the deity. The king's supreme court or Rajya Sabha was called 'Manram'. Stone sculptures were made in the memory of the soldiers who died in the war. These types of idols were called 'Naddukal' or Veerakkal.

### Confluence Age Society and Culture

During the Sangam period, elements of the culture of North India spread to the South. The four varnas of the Sangam period were Arasar (ruler), Andanar (Brahmin), Venigar (merchant), Velalar (peasant). In this period also the basis of caste system was business. The basis of business used to be the geographical location of different areas. The arrival of Brahmins in the Tamil region is the first in the Sangam period. The land was mostly in the hands of the Vallal caste, which was a wealthy farming class. The ruling class also emerged from the Vallal caste. The head of the Vallal was called Velir. The laborers who worked in the fields were called Kadasiyar. Rich farmers in the Chola kingdom were given the titles of 'Vela' and 'Arshu'. He was given the title of 'Kavidi' in the Pandya kingdom. The practice of Sati was prevalent in the upper military classes. Intercaste marriage was also prevalent. Slavery was also prevalent. There were regular markets for slaves.

The worship of Murugan is the most ancient in South India. Another name of Murugan Subramaniam is also found. Later Subramaniam was merged with Skandha Kartikeya. Velan was also another name of Murgan. Vel or spear was their main weapon. The symbol of Murgan was the cock. The hunters of the hill region worshiped Murugan as a mountain god. One of the wives of Murugan is a woman from a mountain tribe called Kurvas. Other deities worshiped during the Sangam period were Mayon (Vishnu), Vandan (Indra), Krishna, Varuna and Korravai.

From the point of view of education and literature, the Sangam age is called the golden age. At this time, education was not only prevalent in the society, but all the subjects of the world of knowledge like science, art, literature, grammar, mathematics and astrology, painting and sculpture etc. were given proper knowledge. Temples were chosen for imparting education and the teacher was called 'Kanakattam' and the one receiving education was called 'Pillai'. The students used to give 'Guru Dakshina' to the teachers after completing their education.

### Expected Question

**Que. Consider the following statements-**

1. The principal deity of the Sangam period was Murugan, known as the Tamil God.
2. Poetry, music and dance were popular among the people of the Sangam age.
3. Every dynasty of the Sangam age had a royal emblem. Like- tiger for Cholas, fish for Pandyas and bow for Cheras.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1
- (b) Only 2
- (c) Only 3
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Answer : D**

### Mains Expected Question & Format

**Que.:** How does the discovery made at Keeladi in Tamil Nadu throw light on the Sangam Age? Also throw light on the society and culture of the Sangam period.

**Answer Format :**

- ❖ Discuss the discovery made at Keeladi in Tamil Nadu.
- ❖ Write about the society and culture of the Sangam age.
- ❖ Give a balanced conclusion.

**Note:** - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.