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A walk through the Sangam Age

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REWIND TO THE PAST: A part of the Sangam Art Gallery. Photo: A. Shrikumar



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Get transported to the times of Avvaiyar and Tholkappiar at the newly opened Sangam Art Gallery where paintings and exhibits throw light on the ancient Tamil way of living

Scenes from the *Agananuru* and *Purananuru*, depicting the courts of legendary Sangam kings like Pari, Koperunchozhan and Adhiyaman and anecdotes from the lives of acclaimed Tamil poets like Avvaiyar, Tholkappiar and Kabilar play out in the form of paintings, life-size sculptures and 3D murals at the newly opened *Sanga-Tamil Kaatchi Koodam*, the Sangam Art Gallery. Last Sunday, on a visit to the art gallery, jointly organized by Indian National Trust for Art Culture and Heritage (INTACH) Madurai Chapter and Gujarati Seva Samaj, a group of history enthusiasts, school goers, home makers and academicians had a brush with the historical richness of the Sangam Age.

“The uniqueness of Sangam literature is in the narratives and tales it brings forth about common people in the *Agananuru* and *Purananuru*. The *Agam* talks about family, love life, the nature-oriented lifestyle and revolves around the women of the society, while the *Puram* deals with the men, their heroism in the battle fields, warfare, seafaring and trade in the ancient times,” says Retired Art Historian Dr. R. Venkatraman, taking the participants through the exhibits. “The Sangam literary works records the various values and morals in the Tamil Society, the practices and belief system. For instance, we come to know that ancient Tamils didn’t have the concept of grand temples. Every king or country had a tree which was worshipped. A guardian angel/spirit was believed to dwell in the tree which in turn protected the people and kingdom.” “And when a king defeats the other in a battle, the first thing he destroyed in the country was the holy tree, out of which a battle drum (*murasu*) was made, as a trophy of victory.”

Explaining the episode of King Adhiyaman gifting the *nelli kani* (Amla fruit) to Avvaiyar, Venkatraman says, “King Adhiyaman is portrayed as an embodiment of generosity. The point to be noted is Avvaiyar sings in praise of his generosity and not the king.” “In Sangam works, a single individual is never glorified. It’s always the values they stand for, their characters that get praised,” says Vani Chenguttuvan, a historian and member of INTACH. “In Agananuru, which talks in details about the love life between the husband and wife, it’s always the *‘thalaivan and thalaivi’* (The lover and the beloved) and there are no individual names.”

“The culture of ancient Tamils was based on the 90 odd chieftains who ruled the dry lands and were dependent on millets, among whom seven are hailed as the Kadai ezhu Vallal, which includes Aari, Pari, Kari, Oori, Adhiyaman, Malaiyaman and Pekan. Whereas, the three big dynasties of Chozha, Chera and Pandyas were busy in the battled fields,” says Venkatraman. “The contribution of poets and learned scholars to the ancient Tamil society cannot be undermined. They acted as the link between the kings and the people. Recent researches show that many of these lauded Sangam poets were Jains.”

The Sangam Art Gallery features around 13 anecdotes shown as paintings in four separate compartments, apart from a display of photographs of the Tamil brahmi inscriptions, rock art and Jain sites found in and Madurai and across various districts in the state. There are also murals made on ‘Mullai ku ther kodatha Pari’ (King Pari giving his chariot to the jasmine creeper) and King Karikal Chozhan building the Kallanai dam across the Cauvery.

“The gallery is first of its kind in Madurai and it was enlightening to go through the paintings. Labels and explanations in English and an audio guide to the paintings will help foreigners and tourists who will be visiting the place,” says R. Sudha, Head of French Department, Madurai Kamaraj University. Bharati Kishore, president of Gujarati Seva Samaj, says, “We feel happy that Jains had played a role in enriching Tamil literature.” Rajesh Kanna, Co-Convener of INTACH Madurai, says, “The aim of the visit was to trace our roots. A gallery like this is a welcome move in the city. We hope to conduct more such visits to places of historical importance and spread awareness among the city’s denizens.” An official from the Tamil Development Department informs that there are plans to introduce labels in English, French and German, commission more paintings for the gallery and also paint the inner side of the compound wall of the campus. Currently, the gallery houses paintings by 18 different artists from across the state.

Sangam Art Gallery is opposite Gandhi Memorial Museum and is open for visitors from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Entry is free. For details, call 2530611

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