

# Toddy Consumption in Ancient Tamil Society: A Conceptual Analysis of Its Multifaceted Importance in The Sangam Ages

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The Sangam Age marks a pivotal role in the cultural and historical evolution of South India, particularly in the Tamil region. This period is renowned for its remarkable literary and linguistic accomplishments, deeply rooted in Tamil traditions. During the Sangam period in Tamil Nadu, Toddy occupied a notable position within the socio-cultural and economic landscape. Its widespread consumption, particularly among individuals belonging to lower socio-economic strata such as laborers, soldiers, and peripatetic performers, stands in contrast to the consumption patterns of more affluent social groups who favored more refined locally produced alcoholic beverages and imported wines. Moreover, available evidence implies that toddy served as a medium of exchange within the internal trade system, demonstrated by its utilization in bartering transactions for goods. Apart from Toddy, various fermented beverages were consumed by sangam age people made up of honey, Rice, Flowers, Tubers and distilled beverages also widely consumed in different lands of people at different occasions entitled by Sangam literatures. This article seeks to explore the indigenous Toddy and the various types consumed by people during the Sangam Age, drawing evidence from Sangam literature.

Keywords: Sangam Literature, Murchangam, toddy, Imported wines, Social groups

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The consumption of Toddy is not a recent phenomenon, with its origins likely predating formalized societal structures. It is plausible that the advent of pyrotechnology coincided with the initial brewing of this beverage. Notably, during the Sangam period, toddy held a prominent position across various social strata, including royalty, warriors, poets, dancers, women, and agricultural laborers, who regarded it as a preferred drink.(1) In the arid climate of Tamil Nadu, toddy served as a means to mitigate physical discomfort and quench the thirst of farmers engaged in labours, characterized by its cooling and slightly acidic taste. This beverage was an integrated aspect of the prevailing lifestyle, even finding acceptance in gatherings of political, intellectual, and military elites.(2)

During the Sangam Age, the ingenuity in crafting toddy was remarkable! Rather than a single brew, a diverse array of fermented drinks flourished, each uniquely tailored to the land and lifestyle of its people.(3) Imagine the fragrant Thinai (A type of rice) transforming into a local brew, or the sweet nectar of fruits, delicate blossoms, and rich honey undergoing fermentation. These weren't just beverages; they were expressions of the land itself, with the inhabitants of the five distinct geographical regions of the Sangam era each savoring concoctions best suited to their environment and the rhythm of their work.(4)

# Objectives of the Study

- To critically examine the structure and classifications of Sangam literature.
- To analyze the social and cultural significance of toddy consumption among the people of the ancient Sangam period.

To investigate the references to toddy consumption within Sangam literature and evaluate their contextual relevance and implications.

#### Methodology of The Study

The study conducted employed a descriptive approach using qualitative methods. Research represents a systematic quest for deeper understanding within a specific field of inquiry. This study adopts the historical method to critically examine the selected area, drawing on past events and contexts to inform present insights. The findings are presented through a descriptive and analytical framework, designed to offer readers a clear and nuanced interpretation of the researcher's perspectives."

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#### Research Design

**Literature Review:** Comprehensive review of historical texts, religious scriptures, scholarly articles, reports, newspapers, and personal interviews to understand the historical, cultural, and contemporary landscape of alcohol consumption in Tamil Nadu.

**Mixed-Methods Approach:** Employed both qualitative analysis (interpretation of texts, historical accounts, epics, and religious scriptures) and quantitative analysis (data from reports, statistics on alcohol-related issues) to provide a holistic understanding.

## **Data Collection**

"Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and email correspondence with expert chefs and academic professionals. To supplement and validate the findings, secondary data were sourced from peer-reviewed journals, reputable newspapers, magazines, and credible websites for both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

**Scope and Limitations:** This study acknowledges certain inherent limitations, including potential inaccuracies in historical records, subjective biases arising from personal interviews, and restricted access to specific archival documents. These constraints are carefully considered in the interpretation of findings.

**Subjectivity and Interpretative Framework:** The research is cognizant of the subjectivity that may influence the analysis of historical texts and oral narratives. Efforts have been made to maintain analytical neutrality while recognizing that interpretations are shaped by both the context of the sources and the lens of the researcher.

**Ethical Considerations:** Ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from interview participants, confidentiality was maintained, and appropriate permissions were secured for the use of historical documents and literary sources.

**Presentation of Findings:** The study is structured around a chronological and thematic analysis of historical findings. A descriptive approach has been employed, integrating evidence from Sangam literature and other relevant sources to construct a coherent and contextually grounded narrative.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Toddy, a traditional fermented beverage, is derived from the sap of various palm species, including coconut (Cocos nucifera) and palmyra (Borassus flabellifer). This alcoholic drink, consumed widely in certain ancient Tamil Nadu regions, is a product of natural fermentation during Sangam Age(5)In sangam Era, the festival of *Untatu* was observed by warriors as a celebration of military victory. The consumption of toddy formed an integral part of the ritual practices associated with the festival.(6)

The **Sangam literary corpus** offers compelling evidence for the widespread and culturally ingrained practice of **toddy consumption** in ancient Tamil society. Beyond its reported **thermogenic properties**, which provided warmth to drinkers.(7) Toddy also held profound **ceremonial significance**. This is clearly demonstrated by its ritualistic offering to **sacred stones** venerating the deceased.(8) Furthermore, the frequent literary allusions to its abundance, such as "toddy flowed like water,"(9) alongside vivid descriptions of its casual spillage during lively public gatherings, including scenes where people rushed into pools where elephants played, strongly indicate its **ubiquitous presence** and deep integration into the daily and ritualistic lives of the Sangam populace.(10)

"The tradition of alcohol consumption persisted in Tamil society beyond the Sangam period, maintaining its cultural presence through successive historical eras. Literary and epigraphic sources from the Pallava,(11) Chola, Pandya,(12) Vijayanagara,(13) and post-Vijayanagara periods consistently attest to the continuity of this practice. Notably, during the Vijayanagara era, the consumption of liquor was not merely tolerated but became an accepted social custom, particularly during festive occasions such as the Tamil New Year, Deepavali, and Holi. These patterns underscore the integration of drinking habits into the rhythm of communal celebration and social life across centuries

In Tamil, the term mattu encompasses a range of meanings, including honey, toddy, fermented liquor, sweet juice, and beverages consumed during sexual union. It can also refer to a liquor jar and is associated with fragrant or aromatic qualities."(14)

"Some historians propose that ancient South Indian societies possessed knowledge of toddy tapping, indicating an early familiarity with techniques for extracting and fermenting palm sap."(15)

#### I.An In-depth Exploration of Sangam Literature: Its Structure, Categories, and Significance"

Sangam literature constitutes the earliest surviving corpus of Tamil literary works, traditionally dated between 300 BCE and 300 CE, with the majority of compositions believed to have been produced between 100 CE and 250 CE. The term *Sangam*, meaning 'assembly' or 'association,' refers to the legendary gatherings of Tamil poets and scholars in ancient South India, where these works were created and compiled.(16) According to tradition, the first Tamil Sangam was presided over by the

revered sage Agastya in the city of Madurai. This literary and cultural period is thus referred to as the Sangam Age, which coincided with the reign of the three dominant Tamil dynasties—the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas—whose patronage played a pivotal role in the development of Tamil language, culture, and literature.(17)

Sangam literature is broadly categorized into two major thematic divisions: Akam, which deals with the inner world of love and personal emotions, and Puram, which focuses on the external world, encompassing themes such as heroism, warfare, and the praise of kings and their accomplishments.(18)

All the works of the first two Sangams except Tolkappiyam (2nd Sangam work) are lost. Only the works of the third Sangam survives. Sangam Literature – Tolkappiyam Composed by Tolkappiyar.  $\Box$  Oldest extant Tamil work till date. The work is divided into three sections, each section further divided into nine chapters.  $\Box$  Contains a total of 1612 sutras which are extensive in their range. (19)  $\Box$ 

Third Tamil Sangam The compositions of the third Sangam are classified into eight anthologies known as Ettuttokoi/Ettuthokai and ten idylls known as Pattuppattu. Ettuthokai It consists of the following works: 1. Natrinai 2. Kuruntogai 3. Ainkurunuru (composed by Gudalur Mar) 4. Pathitrupathu 5. Paripadal 6. Kalittogai 7. Ahanuru (compiled by Rudrasarman) 8. Purananuru Pattuppattu It consists of the following works: 1. ThiruMurugatrupadai (composed by Nakkirar) 2. Sirupanarruppadai 3. Perumbanarruppadai 4. Pattinappalai 5. Maduraikkanji 6. Porunararrupadai 7. Kurinchippattu 8. Nedunalvadai 9. Malaipadukadam 10. Mullaippattu(20).

## II.From Palm to Poem: Fermented Flavors in the Literary Spirit of the Sangam Age

The beverage was a staple of the local diet, consumed widely by individuals across all genders and socioeconomic strata. Its consumption was commonplace during social interactions. Furthermore, this practice was particularly prevalent within royal courts and among various chieftains, where royalty, visitors, and guests freely partook in the drink.(21)

# A.King Adhiyaman and poetess Olavaiyar

"Ciriyakat perinē, emakkīyum mannē;

periyakat perinē yāmpātat tānmakilntu uņņum mannē;

cirucōr rānum nanipala kalattan mannē; (Pura-235)

The Sangam era poetess Olavaiyar and King Adhiyaman of Thagadur shared toddy. In this pharase, she explains, My King, You grant me the small portion of *kal* (toddy), while taking for yourself the larger share to drink joyfully as you listen to my song!"Here, *ciriya kal* and *periya kal* refer not to different types of toddy but rather to the **quantity**—"small toddy" and "large toddy," indicating a modest versus generous portion. (22)

peruñcōrrānum nanipala kalattan mannē;

enpotu taţipaţu valiyellām emakkīyum mannē;

ampotu vēlnulai valivellām tānnirkum mannē;

narantam nārum tan kaiyāl pulavu nārum entalai taivarum mannē;"(purna-235)

The text also notes King Adhiyaman personally stroking Olavaiyar's hair, which was scented with narandham grass.(23)

# B. Women and the Cultural Dynamics of Toddy Consumption in Traditional Societies

During specific social or functional contexts, different types of liquor were consumed. For instance, kama panam was associated with sexual encounters, whereas veera panam was imbibed by warriors before battle. Additionally, literary sources refer to pookamazh theral and manakamazh theral as two distinct alcoholic beverages used as aphrodisiacs.(24)

A verse from the *Pattinappālai*, a classical Tamil poetic work, alludes to women's practices during intimate moments. The lines:

## "Pāţu nīkki tuhil uţuthum,

## Maţţu nīkkiţu maţumā kiļutum"(Patt-110)

can be interpreted as follows: Women removed their silken garments ( $p\bar{a}tu$ ) and donned cotton clothing (tuhil) during the height of sexual pleasure. They also consumed a mildly intoxicating beverage known as kal, described here as mattu—a term that suggests the drink was sweet-tasting and did not induce drowsiness or stupor. This indicates a nuanced cultural association between sensory pleasure, controlled intoxication, and erotic expression in ancient Tamil society.(25)

# C.Toddy as a Symbol of Hospitality in the Sangam Era

The poet Kapilar sings in praise of the chieftain  $V\bar{e}l$   $P\bar{a}ri$ , one of the most celebrated patrons of Tamil literature. The verse includes the lines:

## "Mattuvāy tirappavum maiyitai vīlppavum

#### Aţţān rānāk koluntuva iūnsōrum"(Puru-113)

This verse vividly portrays the lavish hospitality extended by Vēļ Pāri. The term "maṭṭuvāy" refers to a jar or container of toddy, with its mouth (vāy) being opened—"maṭṭuvāy tirappavum" meaning "opening the mouth of the toddy jar." The next line, "maiyiṭai vīlppavum," suggests the pouring and spreading of the contents, indicating that the liquor was being freely served.(26)

The phrase "koluntuva iūnsōru" refers to tender, well-cooked meat rice, likely a luxurious dish made of meat and rice, similar to what we might compare to biryani today. The entire verse conveys an image of abundant feasting, with intoxicating drinks and rich meat dishes generously provided to guests—symbolizing the wealth, generosity, and cultural refinement of the chieftain. Thus, the poet Kapilar uses these references not just to describe food and drink, but to highlight the munificence and noble status of Vēļ Pāri, reinforcing his stature as an ideal Tamil ruler. (27)

In the next song, the same Kapilar also mentions the offering of Toddy to the guests.

"Īnṭu nin rōrkkum tōnrum; siru varai

cenru nin rorkkum tonrum, manra;

kaļiru menru itta kavaļam pola,

naravup pilintitta kõtutai citaral

vār acumpu oļuka munril,

tēr vīcu irukkai, neṭiyōn kunrē."(pura-114)

Just as the chewed morsels spat out by an elephant lie scattered, from the discarded toddy press (sak-kai) where liquor had been extracted and left in disarray, toddy sediment flows across the courtyard. From this courtyard—filled with such abundance—chariots are given freely and without restraint. The hill of the noble Vēļ Pāri, who possesses such generous nature, is visible not only to those standing nearby, but also clearly seen even by those who have gone a short distance away.(28)

## C.Literary evidences of Toddy consumption in the Sangam Age

The use of **palm toddy** (*kal*), a traditional alcoholic beverage, has had a long-standing presence in Tamil society—an aspect worth noting. The **Nattirnai** refers to it as:

"Onkit tōnrum tīm kaļ" (Natt-323)— "The fine liquor that rises and overflows," suggesting both its sensory appeal and cultural significance.(29)

Similarly, the **Paripātal** links toddy with sensual desire and emotional states:

"Kāmam kaṇaintu era, kaṇṇin kaļi era

Ūr mannum añci olipparāravar nilai

Kallin kali erak kāttānku"(Pari-65)

This passage vividly portrays how toddy (*kal*) is intertwined with **emotional intensity and romantic longing**, showing its symbolic and psychological impact in Sangam literature. It underscores how toddy was not merely a drink, but also a literary motif used to express deeper human experiences like love, desire, and even vulnerability.(30)

# D. The Multifaceted Role of Toddy in Communal Feasts and Daily Life

The Patthu pattu makes a noteworthy reference, encouraging the consumption of toddy:

"Uņmin kaļļē, atumin cōrē,

Eriyak tirri ērrumin pulukkē''(pattu- 384-85)

This verse reflects a scene of **communal feasting and daily life**, where the consumption of toddy (*kal*) is presented as a natural and accepted part of routine sustenance and social enjoyment. It emphasizes **simplicity**, **labor**, **and pleasure** as interconnected aspects of traditional Tamil life. The verse's direct tone also implies a **normalization and endorsement** of toddy drinking, reinforcing its **cultural legitimacy** in early Tamil society. (31)

Kaļļin vālttik, kaļļin vālttik,

kāttotu mitainta cīvā munril,

nāṭcerukku aṇantart tuñcu vōṇē!(Pura 316)

In this Pharse, King welcomes every guest who comes to him, offering them toddy again and again in greeting. (32)

Kaļ ār uvakaik kali makiļ (agan- 348)

"Drinking liquor that brings joy and delight, the farmers rejoice with happiness," sings Nakkīrar in the Akanānūru, describing the joy of farmers.(33)

Eri akaintanna tāmarai iṭai iṭai

arintu kāl kuvitta cen nel viņaiñar

kaļ koņţu marukum cākāţu aļar rurin

āy karumpu aṭukkum pāypunal ūra

periya nān ilaimanru pori enap''(purananooru -5)

This verse, composed by **Paranar** and found in the *Puranaanooru*, vividly captures the beautiful setting and the careful measures taken to protect the **bullock carts carrying liquor**, ensuring they don't get stuck in the mud.It also illustrates the **thriving state of liquor production** at that time — so abundant and organized that it was transported by carts to serve the farmers. The scene reflects a **joyous, festive rural life**, where the land was fertile, the harvest was rich, and the celebration was grand.(34)

Kaļikan kaļikatku nīttattan kaiyār

kaļikaļ vitirttitta venkat - tuļikalantu

ōnkelil yānai mitippaccē rākumē

pumpunal vañci akam''(Mutt- 133)

Those who are intoxicated and joyful after drinking toddy **offer it to others as well**, wanting them to experience the same happiness. While sharing, **some of the liquor spills onto the ground**, and the drops together **form streams that run through the streets**. Such is the abundance that toddy **flows through the roads** of the town. As **elephants walk along those liquor-soaked streets**, the ground becomes **slushy and soft** from the constant spilling. This description in *Muthollayiram* illustrates not only the **overflowing abundance of liquor** but also the **height of joy and generosity** among the people. It paints a vivid picture of a **community immersed in festivity**, where even the streets are soaked in celebration.(35)

# **E.Traces of Toddy Taverns in Sangam Literature**

Mīn taţintu viţakku aruttu

ūn porikkum oli munril

maṇal kuvai'i malar citarip

palar puku manaip palip putavin

naravu totaik koṭiyōṭu(Patt-25)

The phrase "Flags indicating places where fish and toddy are sold fly in Kaveripoompattinam" encapsulates the vibrant commercial life of Kaveripoompattinam, also known as Poompuhar, a historic port city situated at the mouth of the Kaveri River in Tamil Nadu.Described in the ancient Tamil poem Pattinappalai, the city was renowned for its well-organized markets, where flags were hoisted to signify specific goods available for sale. These flags served as visual indicators, guiding traders and buyers to designated stalls selling fish, toddy, and other commodities. This system not only facilitated commerce but also highlighted the city's advanced urban planning and vibrant market culture.(36)

Pūtavātiyaip pukal nī enna

tātakippūvum kaţţiyum iţţu

marrum kūţţa matukkaļi pirantānku

urrițum pūtattu uņarvu tōnrițum (Mani-)

"By boiling a mixture of **Aathipoo** (**Jasmine**) and **Karuppu Katti** (**Black resin**) along with other substances, fumes are produced, leading to a state of intoxication or delirium. Similarly, when elements combine to form a living being, consciousness arises. When these elements disband, consciousness dissipates, akin to the fading sound of a drum as it moves away. This illustrates the transient nature of life and consciousness."(37).

## F. Toddy as a Token of Honour for Sangam Poets

Toddy offered to bard by Sangam age kings

In Porunaratruppadai, one of the earliest poems in the Pattuppāṭṭu anthology, the poet encounters a wandering minstrel and guides him toward the generous Chola king Karikālan. The hospitality extended to bards by the king is vividly illustrated through references to toddy (theral) offered to them.

#### Peralarun kalattir pettän kunkenap

## pūkkama<u>l</u> tē<u>r</u>a lākkupu tarattara

vaikal vaikal kaikavi paruki(Peru-159)

"After dressing in new attire, he will pour toddy (theral) into a bowl and serve you a suitable amount to drink. In the morning, it is customary to drink the toddy by cupping it in one's hand."(38)

## III."Toddy and Tradition of consuming Practices in Sangam Era"

The Sangam literary texts mention that the people of the ancient Tamil land consumed various types of intoxicating drinks along with their food, and that this practice was widespread. Among the different types of alcoholic beverages (kudi vagai), names such as *theral* (fermented palm sap), *narravu*, *thopi*, *ariyal*, *kandharam*, *pizi*, *veri*, and *mattu* are found.(39)

Theral was made from ingredients such as flower nectar, honey, and fermented sap; thopi was brewed from rice; pizi was extracted from palm, honey-bearing trees, and jackfruit. People enjoyed these drinks with great pleasure. It was also customary to wear garlands made from ginger and flowers while drinking from clay pots. Sandal paste was often applied to the drinking vessel.(40)The reason for this was practical: ginger helped the body tolerate heavy drinking, while the fragrance of flowers and the cooling quality of sandalwood helped mask the strong smell of alcohol. In some cases, people even gave elephant tusks in exchange for liquor. Leaves of the aambal (blue lotus) plant and panangkudai (palm leaves) were also used during drinking rituals.(41)

In *Manimekalai*, one of the five great epics (*Aimperumkappiyam*) of classical Tamil literature, its author, the Madurai merchant *Seethalai Saathanar*, offers a vivid description of the *Nāgars* (Nāgas). According to Saathanar, the Nāgars were a tribal group who lived in a primitive state on *Nāgathīvu*—an island located in the southern seas. They are portrayed as uncivilized people who roamed naked, without any form of clothing, and are referred to as "Nakka Sāraṇar" (naked wanderers) by the poet.(42)

# Kaļļatu kuliciyum kalimutai nārramum

## vellen punankalum viraviya irukkaiyil

## enku tanpinavotu iruntu pola '(Mani-16:84-90)

Saathanar also notes the presence of fermentation pots used for distilling *kallu* (toddy or palm liquor) in the areas where the Nāgars congregated. This observation suggests that even during the so-called savage stages of human civilization, there existed knowledge of alcohol distillation.(43)

#### 3. CONCLUSION

Toddy was a culturally significant beverage, intricately embedded within the socio-cultural framework of the period. Its consumption transcended social hierarchies, being widely embraced by individuals across various strata, including men, women, traders, bards, and warriors. Beyond its role as a source of enjoyment, toddy functioned as a vital symbol of hospitality, representing warmth and goodwill in social exchanges. Drawing upon literary evidence from Sangam literature, the discussion highlights toddy's integral role not only as a commonly consumed beverage but also as a powerful cultural symbol. It was enjoyed by individuals across the social spectrum—from noble kings to ordinary citizens—underscoring its function as a unifying social drink. The article also explores how toddy featured prominently in various social rituals, gatherings, and expressions of hospitality, illustrating its embeddedness in the everyday life and cultural consciousness of the period. Through this lens, toddy emerges not merely as a drink, but as a significant element in shaping the collective identity and social cohesion of Sangam society.

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