

# Kongunadu: A Tapestry of History, Culture and Legacy Synopsis

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## Abstract

Kongunadu, a prominent region in Tamil Nadu, boasts a rich historical, cultural, and environmental tapestry. This synopsis delves into its multifaceted aspects, including geographical features like Kurinji, Mullai, and Marut, which contribute to its fertile land and abundant water sources. Known as the 'country of Kongu,' it is celebrated for producing precious beads and gems, symbolizing its wealth and natural bounty.

The term 'Kongu,' originating from Sangam literature, embodies various meanings—from honey and wine to forest, fragrance, and gold—reflecting the region's diverse resources and cultural significance. Additionally, Kongunadu serves as the eastern frontier (Kongu > Kongu), encapsulating its geographical orientation.

Culturally, Kongunadu is depicted as the 'shelter' of the Yavanas in ancient texts, highlighting its role as a cultural melting pot and trading hub. The Northeast Monsoon, locally referred to as 'Konga Rain,' plays a pivotal role in the region's agriculture and livelihoods, further shaping its socio-economic fabric.

**Keywords:** Kongunadu history 2. Sangam period Tamil Nadu 3. Kongu Nadu geography 4. Cultural heritage Kongunadu 5. Economic activities Kongunadu 6. Educational institutions Kongunadu 7. Natural resources Kongunadu 8. Literary contributions Kongunadu 9. Historical landmarks Kongunadu 10. Environmental diversity Kongunadu

## FOREWORD

Kongunadu is also proud of being one of the major regions of Tamil Nadu. Kurinji, Mullai, and Marut are interlinked, resulting in plentiful land and water. It also has a suitable temperature for human life. Known as the country of Kongu, the soil and mountains produce beads and gems. Sangam literature describes Kongu as the 'shelter' of the Yavanas. The term 'Kongu' was coined during the Sangam literary period, which produced the rare series 'Kongu Ther Jiyaga'. 'Kongu' has multiple meanings, including honey, wine, forest, fragrance, and gold. It also means eastern country (Kongu>Kongu). The Northeast Monsoon, referred to as 'Konga Rain,' is characteristic of the 'Me Kongu' people. The name may derive from the mountains and forests being surrounded by honey bees

## COUNTRY AND BORDER OF KONGUNADU: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the Sangam period, Tamil Nadu was divided into six subdivisions: Tulunadu, Cheranadu, Pandyanadu, Cholanadu, Thondai Nadu, and Kongu Nadu, as documented by Mailai Seeni Venkatasamy in "History of Kongu Nadu." References such as 'Kongku Puram' (Puram 373) and 'Konkar Kudakadal's Gnanarai' (page 160) authenticate the antiquity of Kongunadu.

The borders of Kongunadu, which have varied over time, are typically identified by significant geographical landmarks known as Kongu Mandal sathaks:

- **North:** Thalimalai and Perumbalai
- **South:** Varaga Hill
- **West:** Velli Hill
- **East:** North Coast and Kulutlai

Kowaikihar portrays Kongunadu as resembling a light bulb, with the region, except the southeast, forming a plateau surrounded by mountains. The Cauvery River flows through this landscape, nourished by its tributaries.

According to Sangam literature, Kongu is depicted as a land encircled by small rock piles, situated between the Western Ghats and Eastern Ghats, renowned for its fertile land and resources.

Approximately 1,800 years ago, during the Sangam era, Tamil Nadu comprised six states: Tulu Nadu and Chera Nadu on the west coast, Pandi Nadu in the southern peninsula surrounded by seas, and Chola Nadu and Arua Nadu along the eastern coastline. Kongu Nadu, located inland, is currently encompassed within the administrative circles of Salem and Coimbatore. However, historical accounts indicate that Kongu Nadu was significantly larger during the Sangam period compared to its present-day boundaries.

Vaṭakkut talaimalaiyām vaikāvūr terku

kutakku vellip poruppu kunru-kilakku

kalittaṅṅalai culum kāviricūḷ nāṭā

kulittan talaiyalavē konku

And

vaṭakku perumpālai vaikāvūr terku

kutakkup poruppuvellik kunru - kitakkum

kalittan talaimēvum kāviricūḷ nāṭtuk

kulittan talaiyaṅavē konku enrum kurukinrana palam pāṭalkaḷ.

## KONGU PRINCES

The Kongu country was initially ruled by several petty kings before being unified under the rule of the Kongu king. Among the notable petty kings who ruled Kongu, the most famous was the ruler of Tagadur, known as Dakhchim and Athiyaman. Tagadur, known today as Dharmapuri, was renowned for its formidable fortress, originally called Dhakchi Fort, later corrupted to 'Adaman Fort'. Located 29 miles north of Salem, in the Dharmapuri taluk of Salem district, it played a significant role in the region's history. Kolli Hill and its surrounding region in Kongu were ruled by King Ori. Vashullu, leader of the Adiyars residing in Kampur, was another prominent figure. King Kumanan, known for his generosity towards poets and others, is celebrated in the songs of Perunchitranaṅar found in Purananuru.

The Vichy Hill and its associated territory were governed by the ruler known as Vichico. Another part of Kongu was governed by hereditary kings known as Lords of the Kingdom since ancient times. The town of Mutiram, renowned for its horses, was ruled by Prince Pitangkotan.

The kings of Kandira, known as Kandirako, ruled another part of Kongu, with Nalli being one of them. Ptolemy, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, mentions Punnat in his writings as located in the northwest of Kongunath. The kings of Pun country were subjugated under the Kongu Cheras, ruling from the end of the Sangam period until the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD.

According to Sangam literature, the Kosar tribe lived in Kongu, known for their occupation in warfare.

### **CHERA RULE IN KONGU REGION**

During the early period, Palakong was governed by petty kings without a central emperor. The Chera dynasty exerted influence near the Kongu country. The Cholas and Pandyas attempted separate invasions and wars in Kongu, seeking to annex it into their respective kingdoms. However, the Kongu people fiercely resisted these attempts, engaging in prolonged battles. These conflicts continued for many years until around the beginning of the first century AD.

The Kongu kings eventually gained the upper hand, expanding their control southwards by conquering towns in the region. They first secured the forests of Yanimalai, passing through the Balaik forest pass. At that time, the Yanimalai area was known as Umbal Kadu (Elephant Forest), named for its dense forest cover and numerous settlements.

### **ANCIENT INDUSTRIES IN KONGU COUNTRY**

The Kongu country, characterized by its rocky terrain (Kuyal-Komma-Kongai-Kongu:Bawanar), was traditionally unsuitable for agriculture. Instead, its abundance of pebbles, moisture-retaining clay, and limestone-rich grasslands proved ideal for animal husbandry, which has been a cornerstone of the region's economy for millennia.

References in Sangha literature such as 'Ageklu Konkar' (P.Pattu: 22) and 'Konkar aa Parantanna' (P.Pattu: 77) attest to this ancient tradition. The Phulangurichik inscription from the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD mentions 'Konkanath Maavaru Karan Sabi, Kalasam, and Gardens', indicating a strong emphasis on cattle-based agriculture and plantations (Kalasam).

Archaeological findings further underscore the importance of cattle wealth in Kongu country's history. Ancient artifacts like a copper statue with a cow image found in Muttam and a cow-engraved amulet discovered in Vellalur, along with cow imagery on copper coins from the Kongu nation period, highlight the region's specialization in cattle breeding.

Additionally, the region has a historical legacy in jewelry-making, particularly with beads and gold. Herders' discovery of minerals facilitated bead mining, and excavations at Vellalur (ancient name Velil) have yielded gold coins. The Arunatar Hill Inscription mentions Karuvur Ponvanikan, and Sangha literature refers to 'Pon Nutai Nedunagar Potini' (Agam-1). Kodumanal has also been studied extensively for its rare beads and artifacts.

### **FOREIGN TRADE RELATIONS OF KONGU REGION**

During the Sangam period, just as Tamil Nadu engaged in maritime trade with foreign countries, the Kongu nation also participated in such trade relations. However, there is no explicit mention of maritime trade in Sangha literature concerning the Kongu country. The Sangam texts do mention the arrival of Yavana ships and merchants in ports like Musiri, Thondi, and Naravu, but there are no specific records of foreign traders engaging in commerce with the Kongu nation.

Nevertheless, ancient records from Yavanas (Greco-Roman civilizations) indicate trade relations between their nations and the Kongu region.

### **BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES**

The discovery of Roman coins in Kongunadu underscores its historical significance as a hub for trade in ancient times, particularly in Kongu beads. Around 80% of Roman coins found in India were discovered in Kongu, highlighting the region's thriving commerce from the 1st to the 3rd century AD. This period

saw Kongunadu evolve into a center for gold mining, facilitated by trade with the Romans. Historical records indicate the existence of numerous highways (24) in Kongunadu, facilitating extensive commercial traffic.

Gold mining was prominent, with historical references like Chola Paranthagan using 'Kongik Kanakam' to build the Natarasar temple in Chidambaram. The Tirumurugan Boondig inscription also mentions gold mining activities. Precious stones such as beryl in Padiyur and sapphire from Shiva Hill led to the area being known as Pon+Kal+Ur Nadu (Pongalur). Over 2000 carnelian beads have been excavated from the Kodumanal Perung Neolithic temple alone.

Today, Kongunadu remains a vibrant hub for diverse industries. Coimbatore, Erode, Salem, and Bhavani are renowned for millet and handloom weaving, while Tirupur dominates the global knitwear market. Coimbatore's favorable climate supports yarn production, earning it the moniker 'Manchester of South India'. Cement factories utilizing local mineral resources thrive in Madukkarai, Puliur, and Sankagiri. The region also played a pivotal role in Tamil Nadu's 'White Revolution'. Significant paper production centers in Pallipalayam, Bhogalur, and Madathukulam contribute to the economy, while Salem Iron Works continues the ancient tradition of iron manufacturing. Wind power generation is another burgeoning industry in Kongunadu today.

## **AGRICULTURE IN KONGUNADU**

Modern developments have transformed agriculture in Kongunadu, once reliant on rainfed crops, with the construction of new dams significantly enhancing irrigation capabilities. The Mettur Dam, dating back to the British colonial era, marked a turning point, followed by the construction of large-scale projects like the Parambikulam Aliyar Project and Bhavani Dam, which have further bolstered irrigation infrastructure. Unlike regions such as Vaigai, Borunai, and the Cauvery delta, Kongunadu has long practiced crop rotation, a method recognized in modern agriculture for its ability to enhance productivity. This system, documented in Colonel Reed's report around 1800 AD, continues to contribute to increased agricultural yields.

The Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, initially established in Kongunadu, now serves as a global research hub for agriculture. Similarly, the Forest College is renowned for training forest inspectors and officers, contributing significantly to forestry management. These institutions play crucial roles in introducing innovative cultivation techniques and new crop varieties.

## **A VARIOUS INDUSTRY**

In Kongunadu, like in other Tamil regions, various industries thrived despite its inland location. Being landlocked, Kongunadu relied on trade for seafood items such as salt, dried fish, and conch, which were brought from the western and eastern coastal areas. Salt merchants, known as Umans, transported bags of salt in bullock carts and sold them in the interior regions. This practice is also mentioned in Olavaiyar's writings (Umanar Olukaithu – Kurun. 388:4). The bells tied around the necks of the salt cart cows jingled along forest roads as they transported their heavy loads. Sometimes, due to the weight, carts would break down while navigating hilly terrain, prompting the use of spare parts to keep them operational.

## **WILD**

A significant portion of Tamil Nadu's forest resources lies within Kongunadu. The Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary, located here, provides protection to rare wildlife species including elephants, tigers, lions, and

monkeys.

The hilly forests of Kongunadu boast trees such as teak, sandalwood, and rare herbs, contributing to the region's biodiversity.

During the early days of British rule, forests were cleared in Kongunadu, leading to the establishment of tea and coffee plantations in areas like Valparai and the Nilgiris. This period marked substantial development in hill plantation activities in Kongunadu.

### **LITERARY WEALTH**

Kongunadu is renowned for its rich literary heritage, deeply influenced by Sangam literature. Over the ages, Kongunadu has nurtured poets from ancient times, beginning with Perungapiyam and extending to Periyasamithuran, celebrated for his contributions to Bharati poetry.

The emergence of Kampan and his epic Ramayana marked a significant milestone in literary history.

Vijayamangalam in Kongunadu was a flourishing center during the Tamil Sangam era. Tiruchengode proudly hosted the Kongu Pulavars, contributing to the region's literary prowess. Kongunadu is recognized for its significant contributions to Tamil grammar with works like Nikand, Nannul, and the Nallaar texts, as referenced in the Silapathikaram.

Throughout history, the Kongu region has made substantial contributions to literature, enriching Tamil culture.

### **POET STATUS**

During the Sangam period, education in Kongu was comparable to the rest of Tamil Nadu. Poets held esteemed positions and were respected across various towns and regions. They traveled extensively, gaining insights into the lives, conditions, and societies of different places.

Although education wasn't universally accessible, those with means and opportunities sought it out because the educated enjoyed higher status. Men, women, kings, merchants, and laborers alike were poets during this era. Poets of the time composed remarkable works on two main themes: inner feelings and outer actions. Love and heroism, often involving battles, were predominant subjects in Sangam literature. These themes are richly diverse, making them enjoyable to read even today. The Sangam anthologies provide valuable insights into the life histories of people from that period.

### **IN THE WAR OF LIBERATION**

Kongunadu played a significant role in history during the War of Liberation, fully committing itself to the sacrifice required. The people of Kongu made an unparalleled contribution to this noble cause, initiated by Theeran Chinnamalai.

Known for its patriotism, Kongunadu produced stalwarts like Tirupur Kumaran, who valiantly defended the flag. The region has also been the birthplace of great leaders such as Periyar, Salem Vijayaraghavachari, Rajaji, Coimbatore Ayyamuthu, and Ayya Avinasilingam. In subsequent generations, leaders like C. Subramaniam emerged from this region.

It was in Kongunadu that Periyar established a platform emphasizing social liberation as the primary goal, transcending the focus solely on national liberation.

### **EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES**

Kongunadu has served as a significant backdrop for the development of science and technology industries,

fostering numerous educational institutions. History highlights the engineering education revolution initiated by the P.S.G. Foundation, alongside landmarks like the Centenary Kanda Government College of Arts and the Agriculture College. The pioneering efforts of scientist G.T. Naidu in establishing the first engineering training institute are particularly memorable.

Ayya Avinasinganar's philanthropy, which integrated spirituality into the creation of educational institutions to promote knowledge, is noteworthy. Similarly, the remarkable educational contributions of Perur Chanthalingar Tamil College, which has illuminated the path of Tamil literature, are a source of pride.

In another significant aspect, Kongunadu distinguished itself by launching a dedicated journal titled "Science for Tamil". Under the guidance of G.R. Damodaran, 'Kalikadir' undertook crucial scientific endeavors of its time.

Today, Kongunadu boasts prestigious universities such as Bharathiar University, Agricultural University, Avinasingam Women's Postgraduate University, and Salem Periyar University.

### FEATURES ARE MANY

- An inscription from the 3rd century AD is available at Arachalur, featuring rare musical notes.
- Valluvar's threefold treatise, including the "Veeramudidayar Seppedu," "Palladam Seppedu," and "Sukar Manradiyar Pattayam," emphasizes his commitment to protecting the virtuous by criticizing unethical behavior.
- Sculptural marvels such as those found in Dharamangalam, Thadikkombu, and Perur.
- A 13th-century inscription discovered on Ponseri Hill near Mallur in Salem district references Thirukkural.
- Excavations at Noyal have unearthed insights into Sangam-era life.
- Vijayamangalam, a historical center where Jainism flourished.
- The Chittarasan Kalingarayan Dam across the Cauvery River, associated with the legend of refusing donated water and migrating.
- Figures like Valvil Ori, Dhakchi, Kumanan, Pagan, who embraced Tamil culture, are cherished as prideful representatives of the Sangam era Vallas.

### CONCLUSION

Kongunadu's history is marked by many distinct features. During the Sangam period, Tamil Nadu was divided into six subdivisions, according to Mailai Seeni Venkatasamy's "History of Kongu Nadu": Tulunadu, Cheranadu, Pandyanadu, Cholanadu, Thondai Nadu, and Kongu Nadu.

Over time, Kongunadu has witnessed migrations and regime changes under Nayak, Kannada, and Islamic influences. These changes have brought about new customs and linguistic shifts in Kongunadu. However, the region has managed to preserve its ancient cultures, unique language, and culinary traditions to this day.

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