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Literary Representation of Barter Economy in Sangam Society

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the literary representation of the barter economy in Sangam society, drawing on evidence from the all eighteen texts of Sangam literature (*Ettuthogai* and *Pattuppattu*). Sangam literature serves as a vital source for reconstructing the socio-economic life of early Tamil communities. The concept of Paṇḍam (commodity) and Paṇḍa-Matrru (barter) reflects a structured system of exchange based on ownership, value, and reciprocity rather than a primitive Tamils mode of trade. The analysis highlights how goods such as elephant tusks, calves, paddy, salt, fish, meat, and toddy functioned as key commodities within this exchange network. Literary references reveal that barter transactions were often carried out across ecological regions Kuriñci, Mullai, Marutam, Neital and Palai indicating regional specialization and interdependence. Liquor shops and market streets emerge as important centres of exchange, while salt-producing areas also contributed to inland trade. Importantly, the study foregrounds the active participation of women in barter and trade, as evidenced by their roles in selling goods and facilitating exchanges across regions. The texts further demonstrate that commodities carried both economic and cultural significance, embodying social values and everyday practices. Additionally, the presence of equivalence and negotiated exchange suggests an early understanding of value systems and transactional fairness. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this study connects literary analysis with economic and anthropological perspectives to reconstruct the dynamics of the barter economy in Sangam society. It argues that Sangam literature not only documents economic practices but also encodes the cultural logic underlying exchange systems, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of early Tamil socio-economic organization.



Keywords; Barter Economy Inland Trade, Ecological Regions; Kuriñci; Mullai; Marutam; Neital, Palai Women in Commodity Exchange, Cultural Economy

Introduction;

Early civilizations depended on it for both business and survival. Trade during the Sangam Era was mainly carried out through the barter system, in which goods and services were exchanged without the use of money. This system encouraged people, especially women, to step outside their homes and actively participate in trade. Such interactions not only involved the exchange of commodities but also promoted the sharing of ideas, helping society develop in a more connected and harmonious way. The barter system was one of the earliest forms of trade and existed long before the invention of money. The Sangam economy was simple and largely self-sufficient, with agriculture serving as the primary occupation. People cultivated crops such as rice, cotton, pepper, ginger, turmeric, Raagi, and sugarcane. Internal trade was carried out through carts and pack animals, while wholesalers, retailers, and hawkers played an active role in commerce. Traders openly announced the profits they expected from selling goods.

Evidence of the barter system during the Sangam period is found in classical Tamil literary works *Ettuthogai* and *Pattuppattu*. The verses in these anthologies contain references to the exchange of goods and reveal the important role barter played in the economic and social life of the Sangam people. In Sangam era salt and paddy were among the most important commodities used in exchange and even functioned as measures of value. In villages especially, essential goods were commonly traded through barter. At the same time, bazaars and markets also existed where monetary transactions took place. Farmers sold the products grown on their lands to neighboring regions.,

Kurietirppu:

Another form of barter known as deferred exchange, or *Kuri etirppu*, involved borrowing a fixed quantity of goods to be returned later. It was mentioned in the Thirukural. It resembles a form of “give-and-take” or exchange-based system of transaction. In the *Tirukkural*, this term appears in Kural 221 under the chapter on *Īkai* (charity). An old commentary explains “*kuriy-eṭirppai*” as “a reciprocal exchange in which something is given in return for a specified item The commentator Parimelalhagar further elaborates the term as “giving in return exactly what has been received, measured and specified in quantity.

Paṇḍamattu:

This resembles a form of exchange-based, or barter, system of trade. The word *paṇḍam* originally means “object” or “material.” Items that are prepared for consumption were called *tiṇ-paṇḍam* (edible goods). The



term *paṇḍam* also evolved into *pāṇḍam*, referring to objects made of clay, known as *matpāṇḍam* (earthenware). Thus, anything that is produced or made (*paṇṇudal* – to make) is considered *paṇḍam*. By analyse the term *paṇḍam*, it denotes both naturally available objects and those created through human effort. Therefore, the practice of exchanging goods produced, obtained, or cultivated in one region with goods produced, obtained, or cultivated in another region is called *paṇḍa-mārru* (barter or exchange of goods). In early communal living, humans gave the goods they possessed and received in return the goods they needed. As a result, when individuals exchanged their surplus goods for items they required from others, this system of trade, known as barter, came into existence. For barter (*paṇḍa-mārru*) to take place, it is necessary to have an understanding of the ownership of goods, their value (product value), and the principle of equivalence between different goods (reciprocal recognition). The people of the Sangam age were aware of the value of the goods available in their own regions and exchanged them on an equivalent basis with goods available in other regions.

Barter System in *Ettuthogai*:

Several references to the barter system can be found in the poems of *Ettuthogai*. One such example appears in *Kurunthokai* verse 221, where a heroine speaks to her friend while waiting for the Hero. In the poem, she describes a goat herder who brings milk to exchange for rice. This illustrates how people during that period depended on barter to obtain essential goods and fulfill their daily needs by exchanging the products they possessed.

He has not come back, but jasmine has blossomed.

Leaving others who carry palm

fronds as rain guards to care for their herd with young,

a goat herder comes with milk and leaves with milk-rice, and

all he has in his hair are tiny, fresh jasmine buds. (Kurunthokai 221, Mullai Thinai)

In the fine mountain country of the Pandiyan

king where wives of farmers who live in huge houses fill

white rice paddy harvested in fields near ponds, in the

baskets in which a hunter with fierce dogs presents venison,

and in the pots in which a cowherd woman bring curds! (Puranānūru 33)

Purananuru describes how the wives of farmers exchanged white paddy rice for curd obtained from cowherd women. This reflects the interdependence between pastoral and agrarian communities during the Sangam period. People engaged in cattle rearing had plenty of dairy products, while farming communities had access

to agricultural produce. By exchanging these goods through barter, both groups were able to satisfy their everyday needs according to their requirements.

*Oh man from a town
where a housewife gives large
quantities of harvested lentils
to the bard's daughter with sharp
teeth, in exchange for keliru fish
that she brings in her large bowl!(Ainkurunūru 47)*

Ainkurunuru verse 47 presents a vivid picture of the barter system practiced during the Sangam Age. The poem describes a housewife exchanging large quantities of green lentils for *keliru* fish brought by the bard's daughter in a large baskets. This simple transaction reflects the economic life of ordinary people, where goods were exchanged directly according to need and availability rather than through money.

*Oh man from a town where a wife
pours year-old white paddy
into a basket emptied of varāl fish
brought by the naive, white-toothed
daughter of a bard, handy with nets!(Ainkurunūru 48)*

Ōrampōkiyār provides an indirect yet meaningful reference to the barter system during the Sangam Age. The poem describes a wife who pours aged white paddy into a basket that had earlier carried *varāl* fish brought by the bard's daughter skilled in fishing. This exchange of rice for fish clearly reflects the practice of barter, where agricultural products and fish were traded according to people's needs without the use of money. The poem also highlights the interdependence between farming and fishing communities. Farmers had surplus paddy, while fishing groups supplied fish, and both relied on each other for essential commodities. The mention of women participating in this exchange shows their active involvement in economic activities. Although the central theme of the poem concerns the heroine expressing anger toward the hero for his relationship with another woman, the background imagery of barter realistically portrays the social and economic life of the Sangam society.

subdued the Mazhavars land, .his many warriors shooting
.with enthusiasm, without stopping, .arrows with fine lines and new bases,
from strong bows with firm ropes,.pressed on their chests, who seize
white tusks of noble elephants and barter liquor for rice and enjoy
.their days (*Akanānūru 61*)

A verse by Kallāḍanār describes a woman, whose feet resemble a mortar, capturing a young elephant, tying it with a rope made by stripping the fibre of the *veṅkaṭampa* tree, and leading it away to be given as a price

in exchange for toddy Through this account, it becomes evident that, in exchange for toddy, a hill-region animal such as an elephant from the Kuṟiñci landscape was offered as barter.

*arrogant young men capture a young male elephant in the forest,
as his young mother with legs like .pounding mortar screams,
and tie him tightly causing leg scars, .near the front yard of a fine house
where liquor is sold, in an old town with markets with tall flags,
with a thick rope made with white fibers from the thick barks of kadampam trees
with sturdy trunks. (Akanānūru 83)*

This verse from *Akanānūru* (83) vividly illustrates a scene that reflects both the ecological setting and the economic practices of the Sangam age. It describes a group of arrogant young men capturing a male elephant calf from the forest, despite the distress of its mother, whose legs are compared to a pounding mortar. The calf is then bound tightly with a strong rope made from the white fibres of the kadamba tree, leaving marks on its legs, and is brought to a bustling town. There, in front of a well-established liquor shop located in a market street marked by tall flags, the animal is offered as an item of exchange. The poem thus not only captures the emotional intensity of the act but also provides evidence of barter practices, where valuable forest resources like elephant calves were traded, likely in exchange for commodities such as liquor, highlighting the intersection of livelihood, environment, and economy in Sangam society.

*where rains have forgotten to fall, .bamboo has dried out, and young,
strong bandits who carry mighty bows .kill merchants, and as night arrives,
.their leader goes to houses where liquor .is sold by women with streaked arms
resembling bamboo and pale spots on .their stomachs, and unable to buy liquor,
.he rubs the parched head of his son playing in the town's common grounds and urges
.him to go and fetch the white tusks of forest .elephants with musth, pointing to where
.they are kept, to barter for liquor,(Akanānūru 245)*

The above verse by Marutan Iṅānākanār describes a ariyalaati women who, having no goods to exchange, goes to a shop to obtain liquor. She calls her son and asks him to bring the tusk of an elephant that had been kept in the house for ornamental purposes. This account confirms that elephant tusk was given in exchange for toddy (liquor) in a barter transaction.

Akananuru portrays the barter system in the context of a warrior society during the Sangam Age. The poem describes brave warriors who fought skillfully with strong bows and arrows. After their victories, they exchanged valuable elephant tusks along with liquor for rice. This illustrates how barter was widely

practiced even among warrior communities, where luxury or war-related goods were traded for essential food items. The verses highlights the economic value attached to elephant tusks, which were considered precious commodities. Rice, being a basic necessity, functioned as an important medium of exchange. The reference to barter in the poem reveals that trade during the Sangam period was based on mutual needs rather than money alone. It also reflects the interconnectedness of different social groups and the practical nature of the Sangam economy.

She is the loving daughter of a salt merchant who goes through
mountains cracked by the sun's heat, in his fast bullock cart, goading his oxen
with a stick, to sell his white grainy salt, made in the salt pans without plowing,
near the seashore in a small settlement of fishermen who hunt the huge ocean
for fish. She walks through the settlement with
salt, swaying her hands, jingling her round, bright bangles and shouting, "equal
measure of white grainy salt for rice paddy!" (Akananuru 140, 1-8)

Akananuru 140 gives a detailed picture of the barter system and trade practices of the Sangam Age. The poem describes the daughter of a salt merchant who travels through mountainous regions in a bullock cart carrying white crystalline salt produced in coastal salt pans. She moves through villages calling out that salt would be exchanged in equal measure for rice paddy. This clearly reflects the barter system, where commodities were directly traded without the use of money. The poem highlights the importance of salt as a major trade commodity in the Sangam economy. Coastal communities produced salt, while agricultural regions cultivated rice, creating mutual dependence between different geographical groups. The exchange of salt for paddy shows how value was determined through necessity and equal measure. The active role of the merchant's daughter also indicates women's participation in trade and economic activities. Overall, the poem realistically portrays the interconnected social and economic life of Sangam society through barter-based exchange.

*In the huge Chōla country with many small towns,
sturdy boats with paddy got by bartering salt,
are tied to posts on the shores of the backwaters,
like horses tied in a stable. (Pattinapalai, 28-33)*

Pattinapalai (28–33) presents a vivid image of the barter-based economy in the Chola country during the Sangam Age. The poem describes sturdy boats loaded with paddy that had been obtained through the exchange of salt. These boats were tied along the shores of the backwaters like horses secured in a stable. This imagery highlights the large-scale movement of goods and the importance of barter in trade activities.



The poem emphasizes salt as a valuable commodity that could be exchanged for rice, showing the economic interdependence between coastal and agricultural regions. Coastal communities produced salt, while inland areas supplied paddy, and trade connected these regions efficiently through waterways. The comparison of boats to horses in a stable also suggests the prosperity and active commercial life of the Chola country. Overall, the poem reflects the organized nature of trade and the significant role of barter in sustaining the Sangam economy.

They brought back elephant tusks belonging to enemy
kings, entered toddy shops with flags, and sold the
tusks for toddy. Will they live each day without fear and
in constant ecstasy, like the celestials in heaven? (*Pathitruppathu 68*)

It is stated that, after purchasing toddy from a flag-adorned liquor shop, elephant tusk was taken as the price in exchange for the liquor.

*In your pālai wastelands, hunters wearing glory lily garlands carry
murderous bows and slaughter wild cattle with perfect horns. They
barter the meat along with white tusks of wild elephants for alcohol,
in the gold-selling shopping districts of towns hugging the
mountains. (Pathitruppathu 30 9-13)*

It is understood that the people of the Kuriñci landscape, who lived in small settlements, used elephant tusk as a medium of exchange to obtain the food items they needed. Furthermore, there is evidence that the Kuriñci people, particularly the hunters, brought forest products such as wild cattle meat and elephant tusks to the market street and gave them as the price in exchange for toddy.

Barter System in Pathuppāttu:

Porunaratrappadai (214–217) vividly describes the barter system practiced among different communities during the Sangam Age. The poem states that people exchanged honey and yams for fish oil and toddy, while sellers of sugarcane and flattened rice traded their goods for deer meat and wine. These exchanges show how people directly traded the products available in their regions to obtain items necessary for their livelihood and enjoyment.

*People barter honey and yams for fish oil and toddy.
Those who sell sweet sugarcane and portions of flattened rice,
barter for deer meat and wine. (Porunaratrappadai, 214-217)*



The poem highlights the economic interdependence among agricultural, forest, coastal, and hunting communities. Each group specialized in certain products and depended on barter to access goods they did not produce themselves. It also reflects the diversity and abundance of commodities in the Sangam economy. Through these exchanges, the poem portrays a well-connected society where barter played an essential role in meeting both basic needs and luxury demands.

Conclusion;

The poems of Sangam literature vividly portray the barter system as an integral part of everyday economic and social life. Rather than merely describing trade transactions, these texts reflect a society built on mutual dependence, cooperation, and exchange. Through realistic imagery such as rice exchanged for fish, salt for paddy, and honey for toddy the poets document the occupations, resources, and lifestyles of diverse communities, including farmers, fishermen, salt merchants, hunters, pastoral groups, and traders. This literary representation highlights the self-sufficient nature of the Sangam economy, where goods were valued according to human needs rather than monetary systems. It also reveals the close interrelationship between the ecological regions *Kuriñci*, *Mullai*, *Marutam*, *Neital*, and *Pālai* each contributing distinct products that sustained interregional exchange and early trade networks. The barter system thus emerges as a structured and value-based mode of economic interaction. Importantly, the poems foreground the social dimensions of exchange. They illustrate the active participation of various social groups, particularly women, in trade and distribution. Barter is presented not only as an economic activity but also as a means of strengthening human relationships, community bonds, and cultural interaction. The movement of merchants across regions and the exchange of both essential and luxury goods further emphasize the interconnectedness of Sangam society. Moreover, Sangam texts capture the cultural meanings attached to commodities. Items such as paddy, fish, elephant tusks, and toddy carry symbolic as well as economic significance, reflecting the values and lived experiences of the people. In the absence of extensive historical records, these literary sources become crucial for reconstructing the socio-economic life of the period. They provide detailed insights into the functioning of barter what goods were exchanged, who participated, and how value and equivalence were understood offering perspectives that extend beyond archaeological evidence. Thus, the literary representation of the barter economy in Sangam literature offers a holistic understanding of early Tamil society by integrating economic practices with social structures, cultural values, and ecological interdependence.

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