

KEELADI EXCAVATIONS: HISTORY

NEWS: Keeladi excavation: ASI allows retired archaeologist Sriraman to prepare third phase report

WHAT’S IN THE NEWS?

Keeladi, a Sangam-era archaeological site in Tamil Nadu, reveals evidence of early urban Dravidian civilisation with literacy, trade, and planned habitation, challenging Aryan-centric historical narratives. Its excavation journey highlights both cultural significance and governance challenges in Indian archaeology.

What is Keeladi and Why It Matters

1. Location and Basic Information

- **Keeladi** is an archaeological site located in **Sivaganga district, Tamil Nadu**, near the banks of the **Vaigai river**.
- It is regarded as one of the most significant archaeological discoveries in recent Indian history, particularly for **Sangam-era cultural studies**.

2. Key Findings

- Excavations at Keeladi have unearthed:
 - **Remains of an urban settlement** (e.g., brick houses, streets, drainage systems)
 - **Pottery** with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions
 - **Graffiti marks** and **industrial remains** like furnaces and beads
- The findings indicate a **well-planned, literate, and industrialised civilisation** dating back to at least the **6th century BCE**.

3. Cultural and Historical Significance

- Establishes **urbanisation during the Sangam Age**, previously undocumented at this scale.
- Challenges the notion that urban centres first developed only in northern India.
- Demonstrates the **early development of Tamil script and literacy**, predating many contemporaneous sites.
- Suggests a **continuous cultural tradition** from the Iron Age to historical times in South India.

Timeline of Excavations and Institutional Involvement

Phase	Year	Lead Agency/Archaeologist	Key Findings
I–II	2015–2016	K. Amarnath Ramakrishna (ASI)	Brick structures, urban layout, graffiti
III	2017	P.S. Sriraman (ASI)	Claimed lack of structural continuity

Phase	Year	Lead Agency/Archaeologist	Key Findings
IV+	2018–2025	Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Dept.	Continued urban artefacts; now in 10th phase
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phase I–II (ASI-led): Established initial urban indicators. Phase III (2017): Sriraman’s report downplayed continuity, creating controversy. Phase IV onwards: State-led excavation deepened and validated earlier findings; more systematic and sustained. 			

Institutional Conflicts and Governance Issues

1. ASI Internal Conflict

- In 2017, **Amarnath Ramakrishna**, the lead archaeologist of breakthrough discoveries, was transferred to Assam—seen by some as politically or ideologically motivated.
- Later, he was asked to revise his reports. He **refused**, defending his original conclusions as academically valid.

2. Sriraman’s Report Controversy

- Claimed **discontinuity** between Phase III and earlier finds.
- Accused of **diluting the site’s significance**, possibly under bureaucratic pressure.

3. Current Status

- As of 2024–25, Sriraman has been permitted to complete his pending Phase III and Kodumanal reports.
- Ramakrishna maintains his earlier interpretations and academic position.
- Tamil Nadu State Department has completed **10 excavation phases** at Keeladi, continuing to document antiquities.

Comparison: Keeladi vs. Kodumanal

Feature	Keeladi	Kodumanal
Location	Sivaganga, Tamil Nadu	Erode, Tamil Nadu
Time Period	Sangam Age (~6th century BCE–3rd century CE)	Sangam Age, Iron Age
Specialisation	Urban structures, inscriptions, script	Bead-making industry, iron tools
Trade Evidence	Internal Tamil trade & early literacy	Roman trade links, exports of beads/tools
Current Status	10 Phases completed, hundreds of finds	Report pending (Sriraman’s team)

Governance and Systemic Challenges in Indian Archaeology

1. Conflict of Interpretation

- Archaeological narratives are often **shaped by institutional bias**, ideology, or bureaucratic preferences.
- Keeladi illustrates how **differences in interpretation** can influence public and academic perception.

2. Centre vs. State Dynamics

- Shift from **central ASI control to Tamil Nadu's State Archaeology Department** proved beneficial.
- **State-led exploration** enabled more committed and sustained work, reflecting **regional ownership of heritage**.

3. Reporting Delays

- Absence of **time-bound mandates** for excavation reports leads to:
 - Academic stagnation
 - Public misinformation
 - Wastage of archaeological potential

Implications for Indian Cultural History

1. Counters Aryan-Centric Historical Narratives

- Keeladi provides **evidence of early Dravidian urbanism**, challenging the notion that civilisation began only in the north post-Aryan arrival.
- Adds balance to **subaltern and regional histories** in Indian historiography.

2. Reimagining the Sangam Age

- Validates descriptions from **Sangam literature**—about cities, trade, governance, and literacy.
- Transforms Sangam writings from mythology into **historically grounded texts**.

3. Decentralised Heritage Preservation

- Keeladi showcases how **state-led archaeological efforts** can yield rich results.
- Sets a **model for other states** to take proactive roles in exploring their own cultural heritage.

Conclusion

Keeladi is not just an excavation site—it represents a **civilisational narrative** that redefines Tamil history and challenges dominant historical frameworks.

It also raises **critical governance questions** on how India preserves, narrates, and politicises its past.

The site exemplifies the need for **academic autonomy, decentralised heritage management**, and time-bound scientific reporting in Indian archaeology.