

# EVOLUTION OF TAMIL LANGUAGE: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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## Abstract

Tamil, recognized as a classical language by the Government of India, is the first recognized classical language in India. Tamil holds official language status in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry of India Union. Tamil is one among the 22 languages within 8th Schedule of Indian Union Constitution. Tamil is spoken by a significant minority in the four other South Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and the Union Territories of Puducherry along with the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Tamil is one of the world's longest-surviving classical languages. The word 'Tamil' is an anglicised form of the three-letter native name of the Dravidian language spoken mostly by people in Tamilnadu, an Indian subcontinent state. It is a Dravidian language from the southern branch. It is the official and administrative language of Tamil Nadu and the Union territory of Puducherry. It is one of India's twenty-two scheduled languages.

## Key Words

Tamil, Official language, Classical language, Vattezhuthu, Antiquity, Dravidian, Tamil Brahmi script, Agathiyam, Tolkappiyam, Sanskritisation etc.

## Introduction

Tamil belongs to the southern branch of the Dravidian languages, a family of around 26 languages native to the Indian subcontinent.<sup>1</sup> The earliest epigraphic records found on rock edicts and 'hero stones' date from around the 3rd century BC. The two earliest manuscripts from India, acknowledged and registered by the UNESCO Memory of the World register in 1997 and 2005, were written in Tamil.<sup>2</sup>

Tamil is one of the three official languages in Srilanka and also one of the four official languages in Singapore. In Malaysia Tamil is taught from primary school to University level. Many Universities at the global level hold Tamil Department separately or through South Asian/Indian language sections.

Tamil is one of the oldest languages which derived its root from many centuries of old grammar and literature. Tamil, as a language originated and developed from the southern part of the Indian Subcontinent, then known as Tamilagam and Eelam. Tamil people have their settlements in more than 175 countries that still hold Tamil as their mother tongue.

## Antiquity of Tamil Language

Tamil is a classical language, and it is popularly known among the linguistic scholars and researchers as one of the oldest languages which derived its root from many centuries old grammar and literature. Tamil, as a language originated and developed from the southern part of the Indian Subcontinent (Tamil Nadu and Eelam). In the modern world, Tamil people have their settlement in more than 175 countries still speaking and holding Tamil as their mother tongue.

Tamil is spoken for many centuries in Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, few centuries relationship with Burma, French Guyana. Out of 100,000 stone inscriptions found in India, more than 60,000 are found in Tamil Nadu, 95% of which are related to Tamil history and languages. Tamil speaking people of the colonial era immigration are spread over in the countries of Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Mauritius, South Africa, Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, and Vietnam. Tamil, along with English, Malay, and Mandarin, is utilised as a language of instruction in Malaysia. In Karachi of Pakistan, there is a good-sized Tamil speaking population, which comprises Tamil speaking Hindus, Christians and Muslims, including some Tamil speaking Muslim refugees from Sri Lanka.

Though the origins of Tamil, like the other Dravidian languages are unknown, unlike most of the other established literary languages of India, Tamil is independent of Sanskrit and has the oldest literature amongst the Dravidian languages. Literary works in India and Srilanka were preserved either in palm leaf manuscripts (implying repeated copying and recopying), or through oral transmission, making direct dating impossible. External chronological records and internal linguistic evidences, however, indicate that the oldest extant works were compiled sometimes in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.<sup>3</sup>

Tamil has changed very little in over 2 millenia, much in contrary to many other major languages. Thus, the 2000 year old Tamil classic, the famous *Tirukkural*, can be read by everyone, including the modern Tamil kids without much effort.

## Importance of Tamil Language

Tamil language is a member of the Dravidian language family, spoken primarily in India. It is the official language of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and the union territory of Puducherry (Pondicherry). It is also an official language in Sri Lanka and Singapore. The earliest Tamil writing is attested in inscriptions and potsherds from the 5th century BCE. Three periods have been distinguished by virtue of the analyses of grammatical and lexical changes: Old Tamil (450 BCE - 700 CE), Middle Tamil (700–1600), and Modern Tamil (from 1600). The Tamil writing system evolved from the Brahmi script. The shape of the letters changed enormously over time, eventually stabilizing when printing was introduced in the 16th century CE. The major addition to the alphabet was the incorporation of Grantha letters to write unassimilated Sanskrit words, although a few letters with irregular shapes were standardized during the modern period. A script known as *Vattezhuthu* (Round Script) is also in common use.

Spoken Tamil has changed substantially over time, including changes in the phonological structure of words. This has created diglossia, a system in which there are distinct differences between colloquial forms of a language and those that are used in formal and written contexts. The major regional variation is between the form spoken in India and that spoken in Jaffna (Sri Lanka), capital of a former Tamil city-state. Within Tamil Nadu are found phonological differences between the northern, western and southern speech. Regional varieties of the language intersect with varieties that are based on social class or caste.

Like the other Dravidian languages, Tamil is characterised by a series of retroflex consonants (/ɖ/, /ɳ/, and /ʈ/) made by curling the tip of the tongue back to the roof of the mouth. Structurally, Tamil is a verb-final language that allows flexibility regarding the order of the subject and the object in a sentence. Adjectives and relative, adverbial, and infinitive clauses normally precede the term they modify, while inflections such as those for tense, number, person and case are indicated with suffixes.

### **Influence of Tamil**

Tamil with its variations was widely employed as the primary language of governance, literature as well as in overall usage in the state of Kerala (erstwhile Chera Nadu) until the 12th century AD. During the same period Tamil scripts were mainly employed in stone inscriptions and copper plate grants. They were written in Tamil, *Vattezhuthu* (Malayalam) and Sanskrit.

A Brahmi Tamil inscription of the Sangam age refers to Tamil Genealogy. The Teresapalli Copper Plate of Ayyan Atigal Tiruvatikal (849 A.D.–the fifth regnal year of Emperor Sthanu Ravi) mentions the grant of a plot of land to the Terisapalli Church (Teresa Church) at Kurankkewni Kollam, in Kerala along with several rights and privileges.<sup>4</sup> The Paliyam Copper Plate of Vikramaditya Varaguna (885-925 A.D) records the grant of an extensive landed property in the south to the celebrated Buddhist temple at Srimula Vasam (Tirumalapadam).<sup>5</sup> This period is known for conversion of Tamil to *Vattezhuthu*, an earlier form of Malayalam.

Majority of the people in Tamil Nadu, Puducherry (in India), and the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka speak Tamil as their first language. Some minority communities in some Indian states such as Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, and also in some districts of Sri Lanka such as Colombo and the hill country speak the Tamil language.

### **Tamil in Literature**

The Tamil works which are of particular value in this connection are those of the Sangam Age which cover roughly the first five centuries of the Christian era. The most important Tamil works of the Sangam Age are the *Patthupattu*, *Ettuthogai* (which includes *Agananuru*, *Purananuru* and *Patithupattu*), whereas *Silapathikaram* and *Manimakelai* are post Sangam Tamil works. The *Patithupattu* is an anthology of 100 poems divided into 10 equal sections each of which composed by a particular poet in praise of a Chera king. The *Ahananuru* is a collection of 400 love poems of 19 to 31 lines each, while the *Purananuru* is a collection of 400 poems dealing with external

matters like war, government etc., each poem running into 4 to 40 lines. Periyapuramam of Sekkilar belongs to the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>6</sup> The popular poets of Sangam Age are Auvvaiyar, Paranaar, Kapilar, Nakkeerar and Pisiranthaiyar.

### **Current Status of Tamil Language**

Tamil is the official language of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is one of the official languages of the Union Territories, namely, Puducherry and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Tamil is one of the 22 languages included in Schedule 8 of India's constitution.

In 2004 Tamil was declared a classical language of India; it met three criteria: its origins are ancient; it has an independent tradition; and it possesses a considerable body of ancient literature. More than 66 million people were found to be Tamil speakers in the early 21st century.

Tamil enjoys the status of one of the official languages of Singapore. It is also one of Sri Lanka's official and national languages, along with Sinhala. Tamil was originally granted nominal official status in the Indian state of Haryana, presumably as a reprimand to Punjab, in spite of the fact that the state had no recorded Tamil-speaking population; it was eventually replaced by Punjabi in 2010.

### **Status of other Dravidian Languages**

The country between the Venkatam hills and Cape Comorin, bounded by the East and the West was called Tamilagam. or the Tamil speaking area.<sup>7</sup> The people who spoke Kannada were known as Vadugar and the Kannada (Karnataka) country was known as the land of an alien language (Mozhipeyar Desam). The Sanskrit statement “South of the Karnataka country lies the Tamil country” has risen out of the conditions of those days.

Kannada language is a member of the Dravidian language family and the official language of the state of Karnataka in southern India. Kannada is the second oldest of the four major Dravidian languages with a literary tradition. The Kannada script evolved from the southern varieties of the Ashokan Brahmi script. The Kannada script is closely related to the Telugu script, both emerging from an Old Kannarese (Karnataka) script.

Telugu language is the largest member of the Dravidian language family. It is primarily spoken in southeastern India, and it is the official language of the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The first written materials in the language date from 575 CE. The Telugu script is derived from that of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Chalukya dynasty and is related to that of the Kannada language.

Tulu language is a member of the Dravidian language family, spoken in southern Karnataka of India. Tulu has borrowed many words from the Kannada language, the official language of Karnataka, but they are not closely related. Tulu has a rich oral tradition, but little has been written in the language. Tulu was spoken by some two million people during the early 21st century.<sup>8</sup>

Malayalam is Tamil's closest significant cousin, and the two began splitting during the 9th century A.D., when Malayalam as a separate language developed. But the process of separating into a different language, Malayalam, did not occur until the 13th or 14th century.

## Origin of Tamil

The roots of Tamil language are in ambiguity, but unlike the majority of India's other recognized literary languages, it is independent of Sanskrit. Tamil has the oldest literature among the Dravidian languages in India and Sri Lanka. Literary works were kept either in palm leaf manuscripts (implying repetitive copying and recopying) or by oral transmission, making direct dating impossible. External historical records and internal linguistic evidences imply that the oldest existing writings were most likely written in the second century CE.

The Tolkappiyam, a treatise on poetics and grammar that portrays the language of the classical period, is the earliest existing Tamil document; the oldest pieces of this book may date back to approximately 200 BCE.

The oldest evidences of Tamil writing are rock inscriptions of the third century BCE, written in Tamil Brahmi, a modified variant of the Brahmi script. Several Sanskrit words were adopted by Tamil during the medieval period, which several 20th century purists, such as Parithimaar Kalaigiar and Maraimalai Adigal attempted to eradicate. The Mangulam Tamil Brahmi inscription in Mangulam of Madurai district in Tamil Nadu dates back to Tamil Sangam period (c. 400 BC to c. 200 AD). In Old Tamil language, the term Tamilakam (Tamilakam தமிழகம், Purananuru 168. 18) referred to the whole of the ancient Tamil speaking areas.

Tamil, like other Dravidian languages, ultimately descends from the Proto-Dravidian language, which was most likely spoken around the third millennium BC, possibly in the region around the lower Godavari river basin. The material evidence suggests that the speakers of Proto-Dravidian were of the culture associated with the Neolithic complexes of South India.<sup>9</sup>

Of all the Indian languages, Tamil has the most ancient non-Sanskritic Indian literature.<sup>10</sup> Scholars categorise the realm of the language into three periods: Old Tamil (600 BC–AD 700), Middle Tamil (700–1600) and Modern Tamil (1600–present).<sup>11</sup> In November 2007, an excavation at Quseir-al-Qadim revealed Egyptian pottery dating back to first century BC with ancient Tamil Brahmi inscriptions. There are a number of apparent Tamil loanwords in Biblical Hebrew dating to before 500 BC, which is considered the oldest attestation of the language.<sup>12</sup> It is known that Tamil was the *lingua franca* for early maritime traders from India.<sup>13</sup>

The strongest effect of purism in Tamil has been on words taken from Sanskrit. During its history, Tamil, along with other Dravidian languages like Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and others was influenced by Sanskrit in terms of vocabulary, grammar and literary styles, reflecting the increased trend of Sanskritisation in the Tamil country. Tamil vocabulary is least Sanskritised as compared to the other Dravidian languages, and it is quite possible to express complex ideas in science, art, religion and law without the use of Sanskrit loan words. In



addition, Sanskritisation was actively resisted by a number of authors of the late medieval period,<sup>14</sup> culminating in the 20th century in a movement called *Taṇit Tamil Iyakkam* (meaning "Pure Tamil Movement"), led by Parithimaar Kalaingar and Maraimalai Adigal, which sought to remove the accumulated influence of Sanskrit on Tamil. Due to this, Tamil in formal documents, literature and public speeches has seen a marked decline in the use Sanskrit loan words in the past few decades, which has fallen from 40 to 50% to about 20%. As a result, the Prakrit and Sanskrit loan words used in modern Tamil are restricted mainly to some spiritual terminology and abstract nouns.<sup>15</sup>

Words of Tamil origin occur in other languages. A notable example of a word in worldwide use with Dravidian (not specifically Tamil) etymology is orange, via Sanskrit *naranga* from a Dravidian predecessor of Tamil *narttankay* (fragrant fruit). Also, the origin of the word *anaconda* is the Tamil 'aanaikkonda' having killed an elephant.

The vocabulary of Tamil is mainly Dravidian. A strong sense of linguistic purism is found in Modern Tamil, which opposes the use of foreign loanwords. Nonetheless, a number of words used in classical and modern Tamil are loanwords from the languages of neighbouring groups, or with whom the Tamils had trading links.

## Syntax

Tamil is a consistently head-final language. The verb comes at the end of the clause, with a typical word order of subject–object–verb (SOV). However, word order in Tamil is also flexible, so that surface permutations of the SOV order are possible with different pragmatic effects. Tamil has postpositions rather than prepositions. Demonstratives and modifiers precede the noun within the noun phrase. Subordinate clauses precede the verb of the matrix clause.

Tamil is a null-subject language. Not all Tamil sentences have subjects, verbs, and objects. It is possible to construct grammatically valid and meaningful sentences which lack one or more of the three. For example, a sentence may only have a verb, such as *muṭintuviṭṭatu* ("completed"), or only a subject and object, without a verb such as *atu eṇ vīṭu* ("That (is) my house").

## Evolution of Chaste Tamil

After Tamil Brahmi fell out of use, Tamil was written using a script called *Vattezhuthu* amongst others such as Grantha and Pallava. The current Tamil script consists of 12 vowels, 18 consonants and one special character, the *Aaytam*. The vowels and consonants combine to form 216 compound characters, giving a total of 247 characters (12 + 18 + 1 + (12 x 18)).

Old Tamil is the period of the Tamil language spanning the 3rd century BC to the 8th century AD. The earliest records in Old Tamil are short inscriptions from 300 BC to 700 AD. These inscriptions are written in a variant of the Brahmi script called Tamil Brahmi.<sup>16</sup> The earliest long text in Old Tamil is the *Tolkappiyam*, an early work on Tamil grammar and poetics, whose oldest layers could be as old as the late 2nd century BC.<sup>17</sup> Many

literary works in Old Tamil have also survived. These include a corpus of 2,381 poems collectively known as Sangam literature. These poems are usually dated to between the 1st century BC and 5th century AD.<sup>18</sup>

Much of Tamil grammar is extensively described in the oldest known grammar book for Tamil, the Tolkappiyam. Modern Tamil writing is largely based on the 13<sup>th</sup> century grammar *Nannool* which restated and clarified the rules of the Tolkappiyam, with some modifications. Traditional Tamil grammar consists of five parts, namely *eluttu*, *col*, *porul*, *yappu*, *ani*. Of these, the last two are mostly applied in poetry.

Tolkappiyam, dating back to 200 BCE, is the oldest available work in Tamil, but not the oldest work in Tamil language, as claimed by many. Tolkappiyam itself is derived from Agathiyam. and Agathiyam is not with us now; Tolkappiyam refers to Agathiyam, but it is not found as yet. To boot, Tolkappiyam itself contains some words from Sanskrit. Agathiyar (Agasthya) is the only rishi who is mentioned in all four Vedas. His direct disciple Tolkappiyar penned the Tamil grammar, named Tolkappiyam, which is a regulated set of boundaries for the written format of Tamil language. Inscription findings and other validated evidences dates back further more. Agathiyam and Tolkappiyam survived the floods in the sea and guided the third Sangam scholars.

### Tamil versus Sanskrit

People who speak Tamil are about 200 million, not to mistake it for mother tongue. But Sanskrit with an equivalent antiquity (a little less than Tamil) hardly has only a few dozen speakers. Tamil survived because of its utility. Sanskrit is not a spoken language, whereas Tamil is. And since the oldest accepted and known source of Sanskrit itself has mentions of Agathiyar Maamuni Sithar, it is evident from many hailed records itself that Tamil is older than Sanskrit.

Rig Veda is the earliest form of Sanskrit found anywhere in the Indian subcontinent. But Rig Veda itself has about 40 loan words of Proto Dravidian (the parent of the Tamil language and other Dravidian tongues) origin in it. The following is an example of the Dravidian loanwords in Sanskrit/Prakrit and other later Indo-Aryan.

Eg. phala “fruit” - Proto-Dravidian “to ripen”, “old”, Tamil “ripe fruit”: பழம், பலம் (paḷam, palam). In the same way, *Mayur*, the Sanskrit word for peacock, has its origin from the Tamil word ‘Mayil’.

Tamil has its own mesmerism that has made it a living language of the world. The Vedas and Sanskrit need not be yardsticks for evaluating Tamil’s merits. The Rig Veda is not the oldest book, dating to 1500 BCE or so. Texts such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Pyramid Texts and more precede it by many centuries. The most important finding in Mehrgarh is the *Swastik*, which belongs to 6000 BCE to 7000 BCE. Tamil is currently attested from around 300 BCE, whereas Sanskrit is not attested in writing until several centuries later.

The answer is evident from the open visible fact that Rig Veda has borrowed Tamil words. It shows that Tamil is older than Sanskrit. Tamil was never in a need of borrowing Sanskrit words. In later days Sanskrit was

compulsorily thrust on Indian languages. All the 5000 seals and inscriptions, which are pure Tamil words published by Dr. Asko Parpola, have been deciphered. This proves the antiquity of the Tamil language as older than Sanskrit.

Apart from being the name of the language, 'Tamil' also means things like beauty, sweet and natural. Tamil is the only language to have several names like 'Kanni' Tamil, 'Inba' Tamil, 'Nat'amil, etc. which are basically variations of the word 'Tamil', each prefixed by its adjective. 'Senthamil', 'Paindhamil', 'Sanga Tamil' are also nomenclatures of 'Tamil' that add special emphasis on the salient features and specialties of Tamil as a language. One of the best names for Tamil is *Mutthamil*. The Tamil language has been divided into three important facets, namely, Iyal, Isai and Nadagam.

*Mozhi Varalaru* by Mu. Varadharasan (1954, Paari Nilayam), *Tamil Mozhi Varalaru* by Su. Sakthivel (2012, Manivacakar Pathippagam) and *Thamizh Mozhi Varalaru* by Prof. The. Po. Meenatchi Sundaranar (1965 (Saratha Pathippagam)) are significant works by Tamil intellectuals which illustrate the antiquity and evolution of Tamil language.

Bishop Robert Caldwell, the European missionary at Idayankudi in Tirunelveli district, first coined the term 'Dravidian' and his groundbreaking work, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages*, published in 1856, paved the way for assertion of the preeminence and richness of Tamil, independent of Sanskrit. This memorable work of Caldwell established Dravidian as one of the major language groups of the world, and is believed to have inspired the Non-Brahmin Movement which surfaced during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Conclusion

Tamil is one of the longest-surviving classical languages of India. The variety and quality of classical Tamil literature has led to it being described as "one of the great classical traditions and literatures of the world". About 60,000 of the approximately 100,000 inscriptions found by the Archaeological Survey of India are in Tamil Nadu. Most of them are in Tamil, with only about 5 percent in other languages. In 1578, Portuguese Christian missionaries published a Tamil prayer book in old Tamil script named *Thambiran Vanakkam*, thus making Tamil the first Indian language to be printed and published.<sup>19</sup> The Tamil Lexicon, published by the University of Madras, was one of the earliest dictionaries published in Indian languages.

In October 2004 with the creation of a legal status for classical languages by the <sup>Gov</sup>4ernment of India and following a political campaign supported by several Tamil associations, Tamil became the first legally recognised Classical Language of India. The recognition was announced by the then President of India, Abdul Kalam, in a joint sitting of both houses of the Indian Parliament on 6 June 2004.<sup>20</sup>

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Krishnamurti, Bhadriraju, *The Dravidian Languages*, Cambridge Language Surveys, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 19.



- <sup>2</sup> Memory of the World Register: India, UNESCO, retrieved 13 September 2012.
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