

# EPIGRAPHY AND SRI LANKA TAMIL DIALECTS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. It has been the practice among the Tamil epigraphists to declare, whenever they come across forms that do not conform to the traditional grammatical rules, that they are orthographic errors. The format of a typical article on Tamil inscription (editions) has always included a paragraph on orthography. We can at least pardon the scribe who was responsible for writing the inscriptions if the errors has occurred accidentally. But a student of epigraphy would have noticed that these errors are not accidental but they are consistent in a number of inscriptions and often over several centuries. Now Tamil epigraphists are beginning to think that these so-called errors may actually be the phonological features of the spoken language that was prevailing at the time the particular inscription was inscribed. There is a very good reason why Tamil epigraphists were misled by certain phonological peculiarities that have occurred frequently in Tamil inscriptions. Traditional Tamil grammarians seem to have concentrated only on the literary dialect of the Tamil Language. There is a strong tradition, which prevails even up to now, that the Tamil grammar is a description of the grammatical structures units, and functions of the literary language. The earliest Tamil grammarian, Tolkappiyar, in fact, mentions *valakku* (i.e. popular usage); but it is not explicitly stated and examples are very scarce. Thus, available Tamil grammatical treatises describe only the literary or written Tamil. Therefore, the early epigraphists who studied Tamil inscriptions had this grammatical bias. Since they were familiar with the traditional grammatical rules, they treated the peculiar phonological features, that occurred in Tamil inscriptions, either as orthographic peculiarities or as orthographic errors. Now, when the present-day epigraphists, who are aware of the principles of modern linguistics which treats both the spoken and the written language as equal, have begun to recognize that those phonological features are, in fact, evidence for the type of spoken dialect that was in vogue at that time.

An attempt is made in this paper to bring out some phonological features of Sri Lanka Tamil dialects as well as peculiar ones that are found either in Batticoloa Tamil or in Jaffna Tamil through the study of the Tamil inscriptions of Sri Lanka.

1.2. The data for the present analysis are the Sri Lanka Tamil inscriptions collected in the following works:

1. Indrapala, K. (ed)  
    *Epigraphia Tamilica (ET)*
2. Velupillai, A. (ed)  
    *Ceylon Tamil Inscriptions, Part I, 1971 (CTIi)*  
    *Ceylon Tamil Inscriptions, Part II, 1972 (CTIi)*

## 2. SOME COMMON PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES

2.1. In most of the South Indian Tamil inscriptions, we have found the tap/*r*/ being written instead of the trill/*R*/and vice versa.

The following will suffice as examples (cited from *South Indian Inscriptions* henceforth, *SII*)

<i>r</i>	<i>R</i>	
temmuracin	— temmuRacin	(SII, VOL. V)
pirinta	— piRinta	(SII, VOL. V)
irantavatu	— iRantavatu	(SII, VOL. VII)
	<i>r</i>	
aaRankam	— aarankam	(SII, VOL. V)

The scribe does not seem to have considered these two sounds as phonemic. Thus, in one inscription itself we find this habit of writing /*r*/ for /*R*/and *R*/ for / *r* /. But surprisingly this confusion does not seem to have occurred in most of the Sri Lanka Tamil inscriptions. The consonantal sounds / *r* / and / *R* / have merged into a single sound in Indian spoken Tamil. The presence of /*r*/-/*R*/confusion in the South Indian Tamil inscriptions shows the development of this phonological feature. It is probable that in the Indian spoken Tamil, the speakers may not have recognized two/*r*/sounds. Thus when they write, if they are not careful, the confusion between/*r*/and/*R*/ would have occurred. Even now we see many printing errors in connection with /*r*/ and/ *R* / in Tamil books printed in South India and in the writings of the Tamils of Indian origin in Sri Lanka. But in Sri Lanka Tamil, /*r*/and /*R*/ are phonemic. For instance, consider the following words; /*ka*r*i*/ 'charcoal'/ *ka*R*i*/'curry'. The phonetic description of /*R*/ in *ka*R*i* is as follows: The point of the tongue is curled upwards and slightly back and produces a quick succession of short taps. This quick succession of taps is called **trill**. Thus in Sri Lanka Tamil inscriptions, we do not find the confusion between /*r*/ and /*R*/. For example, the word **tarai** 'land' becomes **taRai** in Sri Lanka spoken Tamil. The word **tarai** occurs in the inscription from **Lankatilake Vihare ( CTLi: 77 )** and it has been consistently used eleven times in that inscription.

Kanāpathipillai (1936:13). in his study of the Tamil inscriptions of the 7th and 8th centuries A.D...noted that there was a confusion of the dental n and alveolar n in those inscriptions that belong to the Northern districts of the Tamil country. Velupillai (1972:4) while observing that during the period of the Second Pandyan Empire, the confusion on n and ṅ had become universal in the Tamil areas, tries to justify this development. According to him:

“During the age of the imperial Colas, there was political unity in the Tamil country and Tamil Grantha was the script, used in the middle and the northern districts till that time, came to be adapted throughout the Tamil country. Alveolar n had no place in the Grantha script while it had a definite status in Vatteluttu. Therefore the Southern districts which adapted the new script were led to confusion as there was only the dental n in Grantha.”

Although Velupillai's reason seems to be plausible, the n - ṅ confusion can also be explained in terms of the state of affairs prevailing in the Tamil dialects. Spoken Tamil seems to have lost the phonological identity between the dental n and the alveolar n. Among the languages that broke off from the Proto-South Dravidian only Malayalam recognizes n and ṅ as phonemic even now. The dental n must have been occurring only before its homorganic stop in Tamil. In other instances, in spoken Tamil, it must have been pronounced as an alveolar nasal. Some of the Tamil grammatical rules too suggest this. For example, Nannul sutra 237 says that the initial dental n changes into an alveolar n. As in Malayalam, the doubling of dental n is not observed in Tamil.

In the present day spoken Tamil. We observe only an alveolar nasal except where the dental homorganic ( i.e. [nt]) cluster occurs. Therefore it may reasonably be assumed that the spoken Tamil must have by then begun to lose the phonemic status of the dental n. This might have been the reason for the n - ṅ confusion in the Tamil inscriptions.

2.2 The Sri Lanka Tamil dialects do not consider /l/, a retroflex, fricative lateral as phonemic. It has merged with the retroflex lateral /L/. Even some of the spoken sub-dialects in South India too have been reported to have lost the distinction between /l/ and /L/ <sup>4</sup>. Sri Lanka Tamil inscriptions dating from the 12th century have instances where the letter l is written instead of l:

e.g	piLaiccaravar	( ET: 17 )	instead of pilaiccaravar
	KiLakku	( CTLii: 6 )	"    "    Kilakku
	piLaccaravar	( CTLii:34 )	"    "    pilaccaravar
	KiLamai	( CTLii:62 )	"    "    Kilamai

These instances suggest that the present state regarding l - l distinction in the spoken dialects of Sri Lanka must have started as early as the 12th century A.D.

2.3. The past tense suffix /-tt-/ or /-nt-/ of the literary Tamil becomes /-cc-/ or /-nc-/ respectively before /i-/ or /y-/ in all the Tamil dialects. Sri Lanka Tamil inscriptions exhibit this feature:

e.g	pitittu	piticcu	( ET: 12 )
	pilāittaravar	pilaiccaravar	( ET: 17 )
	vaitta	vaiicca	( ET: 27 )
	arintu	arinci	( CTIi: 53 )

In one instance it is interesting to note that the dental cluster /tt/ which is not a past tense suffix changing into /cc/. The word *virru* 'having sold' of the literary Tamil is normally rendered in the spoken Tamil as *vittu* ( this lexical item occurs in Sri Lanka Tamil inscriptions; ( cf. CTIi:35 ) But this form, in analogy with the palatalization of the past tense suffix /-tt/ before /i-/, has changed into *viccu* ( ET: 17 )

### 3. BATTICALOA DIALECT

3.1. Batticaloa Tamil possesses many unique linguistic features that are not found in other dialects of Tamil and has a different pattern of intonation and stress ( see, for further details Zvelebil 1966; Suseendirarajah, 1973; Sanmugadas, 1976 ). Tamil inscriptions that are connected with the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, for which Batticaloa is the capital, show a number of linguistic features of the Batticaloa Tamil.

3.2. An interesting phonetic feature in Batticaloa Tamil is the elision of the final vowel in certain words. The normal Sandhi rule in Tamil is that if two vowels co-occur in Sandhi, then either /y/or/v/ is inserted in between those two vowels in order to prevent hiatus. The only exception is the deletion of the shortened /u/ before any vowel. But in Batticaloa Tamil a unique feature in connection with these Sandhi rules is found. Consider, for example, the following expressions:

arici	—	ellaam
aacci	—	enka

In Jaffna Tamil, an insertion of an approximant /y/ is needed in the expressions just cited above:

arici	—	ellaam	—	ariciyellaam
aacci	—	enka	—	aacciyenka

But in Batticaloa Tamil, the hiatus filler /y/ is not found in such expressions. Instead, the final vowel is dropped:

arici	—	ellaam	—	aricellaam
aacci	—	enka	—	aaccenka

This is a unique feature that is found only in the Batticaloa Tamil and not in other dialects. The epigraphical record too confirms this linguistic feature. Campanturai Copper Plates ( CTLi: 63 ) has the following interesting expression, namely, *kacile* 'at Kasi'. The structural pattern of this expression in written Tamil will be:

kaci	—	il	—	c
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In Jaffna Tamil, the above expression will emerge as:

kaci — il — e                      kaciylile

Thus the above mentioned epigraphical record, which is being dated in the mid - 17th century, seems to have preserved a linguistic feature which is present even now in the Batticaloa Tamil.

3.3 In the villages along the Western coast of the Batticaloa lagoon, the Tamils speak a sub-variety of the Batticaloa Tamil. Certain peculiarities are found in this *patuvan karait tamil* (The Tamil of the sun-setting coast). For instance, /a/ and /i/ in the first syllable changes to [e] in almost all the words in this sub-variety:

tayir	—	teyiru	'curd'
kallu	—	kellu	'stone'
cilay	—	sele	'statuee'
narai	—	nere	'become gray'
vilay	—	vele	'price'

The change of /a/ or /i/ to [e], though restricted to the Western coast at present, must have been universal in the whole of Batticaloa region at one time. A Pillar inscription from Tirukkóvil of the 14th or 15th century (CTLI:2) and Campanturai Copper plates of the 17th century give a number of instances of /a/ or /i/ changing into [e]

kankai	—	kenkai	(CTIi: 26)
natcattiram	—	natcettiram	(CTIi: 62)
kitaitta	—	ketaitta	(CTIi: 63)
kankaiyile	—	kenkaiyile	(CTIi: 63)

#### 4. CONCLUSION

If this study is completed, it may be possible to draw many inferences and conclusions in relations to the linguistic features of the Sri Lanka Tamil dialects preserved in epigraphy and it may even be possible to fix the period when the principal dialects of Sri Lanka, i.e. Batticaloa Tamil and Jaffna Tamil) separated from the continental Tamil.

#### NOTES

1. A version of the revised paper presented at the Fourth Annual seminar on South Asian Epigraphy, Jaffna, March 1976, organised by the Jaffna Archaeological Society.
2. *Nalla Tamil Elutunkal* is a text book written for teaching grammar to Collegiate students. In their opening sentence, the authors of the book say "ilakkiyamum atanai iyakkum moliyum amaintirukka ventiya amaippu muraiyinai varaiyaruttuk kurum nule ilakkanam." According to them the grammar defines the language of the literature.
3. See, Sanmugadas (1972: 391-92) for details about *tap* and *trill*.

4. Meenakshisundaran, T. P., *Tamil*, Series Three, Monographs on Indian Languages, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, p.2.
5. *Nannul*, sutra, 162.
6. *Ibid*, sutra, 164.

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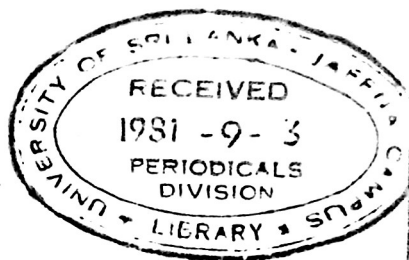
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## REVIEW

### MODERN SRI LANKA A SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

(eds: Tissa Fernando and Robert N. Kearney)

*Foreign and Comparative Studies / South Asian Series No. 1*  
*Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs,*  
*Syracuse University, U. S. A. (pp viii +297)*



### I

This is a study on Sri Lanka emanating from the Foreign and Comparative Studies Programme of the Syracuse University U.S.A., reflecting "the Maxwell School's continuing awareness of the imperative for attention to developments and circumstances outside the United States".

The work designed as it is to provide an introduction to the island, its contemporary problems and their historical roots, has, besides the introduction by the editors, twelve chapters (papers) dealing with the historical, social, economic, political and cultural developments and circumstances, most of them written by eminent scholars on Sri Lankan States (the editors themselves are respected scholars in this field) like Gananath Obeyesekere, Sri Gunasinghe, N. Balakrishnan and Swarna Jayaweera.

It is true that in a relatively slim and introductory volume like this "it is not possible to treat all facets of a complex, dynamic, pluralistic nation". Also each of the contributions, as they are written by eminent specialists in the respective field could and do stand "independently" as in-depth contributions.

The main value of the work as a volume would therefore depend on how the independent research pieces are brought together, that is, on the main theoretical framework within which these writings are presented.

It is the main aim of the authors to depict the contemporary scene - "also for the most part, the emphasis is on developments and circumstances of the nation today and in the immediate past, although certain contributions of necessity lead the reader back to the more distant past and even to antiquity" (p iii). Characterising the nation as a "pluralistic" one, the editors see Sri Lanka as a "society in transition", the changes being evident in "rising rates of literacy and levels of educational attainment, ... shift from subsistence agriculture to wage labour, ... soaring levels of popular participation in vigorously competitive election results and in many subtle alterations of aspirations and values" (p 22).

A close reading of the book reveals that the main theoretical framework that provides a perspective to the volume as a whole is manifest only in the writings of both the editors, in how they tend to characterise the transition in conceptual terms.

Tissa Fernando, one of the editors, in "Aspects of Social Stratification" sees as a sociologist, the transition as only from a caste based stratification system, adding that it must not be thought the transition is "either total or clear cut" (p 39). He concludes by saying "class had been superimposed on caste resulting in the highly complex stratification system of contemporary Sri Lanka" (p 40)

Robert N. Kearney views the change "as a cluster of interrelated societal transformations shared with many nations of Asia and elsewhere often termed "modernization". And modernization, he defines as "a complex web of changes in the way people live and work, in the values and beliefs they hold and in the wants and needs they feel". Modernization, as he himself accepts further down, is based on a tradition / modernity split.

No attempt has been made within the work to formulate in theoretical terms the identifying character of the transition and to relate the caste/class concept to the "modernization" concept. This seems to be in the main an editorial flaw. The very acceptance of the idea of the superimposition of "class" on "caste" would necessarily demand an analysis in terms of the socio-economic formations within the country. Such an analysis would have thrown some light on the modes of productions and thereby on the internal causes for those stresses and strains which the country is undergoing now. The absence of such an analysis of the underlying forces makes the work descriptive and not analytical.

As is now generally accepted the concept of modernization too cannot be of great assistance, for, the concept of modernization denotes a "total" transformation of a traditional or pre-modern society into the types of technology and associated organization that characterizes the "advanced", economically prosperous and relatively politically stable nations of the western world and "is predicated on the assumption that one can describe the general features of both 'traditional' and 'advanced' or modern societies and thus treat development as the transformation of the one type into another". (Norman Long. 1977 emphasis added). It is a Euro-Centric view which very often ignores the historical circumstances of the Third World countries to which it is applied.

A comprehensive editorial focus would have enabled a more meaningful reading of 'A Review of the Economy' for, though in cold objective terms,



it gives the facts relating to the conflicts the social and welfare and distribution policies of the consecutive governments had with the objectives of faster economic growth.

The absence of well defined theoretical framework leaves the reader with no clue to the socio-political reasons for adoption in and after 1977 (and this period is not covered in the book except for a reference to its constitutional framework by Kearney p. 69) an economic strategy based on export led growth, a strategy that relies mainly on foreign investment and liberalization of imports. In fact with the many changes that have occurred in each of the important sectors of social political and economic life of the country since 1977 this work reads more like a work of past history than on contemporary events.

The book also fails to give a true picture of the pluralistic character of the island. Having admitted that "ethnic and religious divisions continue to be of considerable social, political and cultural importance in Sri Lanka" (p 5), the editors have not gone for writings that would have fully reflected the nationality question that bedevils Sri Lanka now. The references to the non-Sinhala communities in the Introduction and to the political activities of the TULF are not enough to provide a comprehensive picture of the inter-nationality tensions that exist within Sri Lanka today. The editors cannot be blamed too much for this omission as there is paucity of real research work on these aspects of Sri Lankan political life. However, they could have provided the reader with some material on the culture and social life of the minorities - the Muslims and the Tamils. In fact such a provision would have thrown light on the basic socio-cultural inter-relationships that exist between the Tamil and the Sinhala peoples, which have been never highlighted.

The sociology of research in the Social Sciences in Sri Lanka reveals that most of the studies have been made on the basic assumption of communal conflicts and on the exclusiveness of groups. And such studies in turn have sharpened the existing conflicts.

Nevertheless the volume has very illuminating studies on various aspects of Sinhala life, culture and consciousness. It is not within the compass of a short review like this to go into the details of each of those studies, but, it should be stated that they do contribute to our knowledge in those fields. Special mention should be made of the contributions of Swarna Jayaweera, Donald E. Smith, John Ross Carter and Gananath Obeyesekere.

The work is of academic significance and deserves to be read by all interested in Sri Lankan studies.