



The Future of Tamil in India: Challenges, Identity, and Linguistic Sustainability

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Abstract

The Tamil language, also known as Tamizh, is a timeless symbol of cultural identity, historical nuance, and intellectual depth that goes beyond simple communication. This essay investigates Tamizh's ongoing vitality and tenacity in the face of contemporary linguistic influences and socio-political difficulties. With its roots in an unbroken literary history that stretches back thousands of years, Tamizh continues to be used in its social and holy contexts in addition to being spoken and written. The language has long been entwined with culture, science, and everyday life, as evidenced by temples that revere it as divine, great literature like Thirukkural that is admired throughout the world, and buildings like the Grand Anicut and musical temples that attest to the Tamizh people's inventiveness. However, the forced growth of Hindi and the supremacy of English in modern culture pose existential challenges. This essay contends that intergenerational transmission and diasporic pride preserve Tamizh language purity and cultural significance in spite of code-switching movements like "Tanglish". One contemporary example of the Tamizh people's solidarity in protecting their identity is the Jallikattu protests of 2017. In the end, Tamizh is not only surviving; it is changing, growing, and making its presence known throughout the world. Its soul is in its people's hearts, not only in books or temples.

Keywords: Tamizh language, Language sustainability, Diglossia, Language preservation, Indigenous languages, Cultural heritage, Thirukkural, Tamil literature, Linguistic purity, Language politics in India, Dravidian languages, Language and globalization.

Introduction

Language is not merely a tool of communication; it serves as a repository of culture, identity, history, and collective memory. Among the world's ancient languages, Tamil occupies a unique position due to its continuous literary tradition and living usage across generations. Recognized as one of the oldest surviving classical languages, Tamil possesses a rich heritage reflected in its literature, philosophy, architecture, and cultural practices. However, globalization, technological advancement, migration, and the increasing dominance of English and Hindi in education and public discourse have raised concerns regarding the future sustainability of regional languages in India. In contemporary Tamil society, the



emergence of linguistic practices such as code-switching and “Tanglish” has generated debates regarding language purity and cultural preservation. At the same time, language politics and discussions surrounding national integration have further intensified questions about linguistic identity. Against this background, the present study examines whether Tamil can sustain its place in future India by analyzing its historical strength, cultural significance, current challenges, and the socio-political factors that influence its survival. It argues that despite changing linguistic realities, Tamil possesses strong cultural foundations and institutional support that can ensure its continued relevance and growth.

Review of Literature

Scholars have extensively examined Tamil language, culture, and linguistic identity from historical, sociolinguistic, and political perspectives. E. Annamalai in *A Perspective on Tamil Language and Culture* (2010) discusses the intimate relationship between Tamil language and cultural identity, emphasizing how Tamil extends beyond communication and functions as a marker of social and emotional belonging. He highlights the resilience of Tamil despite external linguistic influences.

Bhadriraju Krishnamurthi’s *The Dravidian Languages* (2003) provides a comprehensive linguistic analysis of the Dravidian language family and situates Tamil within a broader historical framework. His work traces the evolution and structural uniqueness of Tamil while examining its influence on regional linguistic development.

Thomas Lehmann in *A Grammar of Modern Tamil* (2006) studies the grammatical structure and contemporary forms of Tamil usage. His work becomes significant in understanding the transformation of Tamil across historical and modern contexts.

Harold F. Schiffman in *A Reference Grammar of Spoken Tamil* (1999) explores the phenomenon of diglossia in Tamil society. He explains the distinction between formal literary Tamil and colloquial spoken Tamil and analyzes how these dual forms coexist within everyday communication. His study becomes relevant for understanding contemporary linguistic shifts and the rise of code-mixed language practices.

A. R. Venkatachalapathy, in his article “In Search of Tamil: Language Politics and Public Sphere in Colonial Tamil Nadu” (2001), investigates the political dimensions of Tamil identity and language movements. He demonstrates how language became central to public consciousness and regional identity formation.

Kamil Zvelebil’s *The Smile of Murugan* (1973) presents a detailed exploration of Tamil literary history and cultural tradition. His work highlights the continuity and richness of Tamil literature and its contribution to world civilization.

Although previous studies have examined Tamil from historical, grammatical, and political perspectives, limited attention has been given to the question of Tamil’s sustainability in future India within the context of globalization, code-switching, linguistic dominance, and contemporary youth



culture. Therefore, the present study attempts to address this gap by examining both the strengths and challenges influencing the future of Tamil.

Historical Significance of Tamil Language

To start with, “Of all the languages known, Tamizh is the sweetest”, Tamil is known to be the oldest among all the other languages till date. But on the other hand, we find another set of people who claims Sanskrit to be the oldest language. This debate is something that goes on without an end. If we provide a few proofs that state Tamil is the oldest, there are similar proofs for Sanskrit too. But leaving this aside, if we consider a language that exists since ages which is still being spoken and written, Sanskrit automatically gets out of debate because it isn’t being spoken now. Over the course of the day, Hindi has slowly taken the place to Sanskrit. On this note, we can proudly confess that Tamizh is the only language which was spoken around 1000’s of years ago and is still being spoken. Tamil is the first and only language to have personified as God. Everyone looks at a language as a tool for communication or something which they like in person. But, Tamil is the first language in this world which was stated to be ‘Tamizh thaa’ and had statues portrayed as god. There are templates in Madurai and Karur where Tamil is worshiped as a god which is exclusively happening till date.

Scientific and Architectural Contributions of Ancient Tamils

A temple near Coimbatore called Vadakkunnathan temple where we can find sculptures which shows the stages of pregnancy starting from foetus formation till the last trimester. This is one of the remarkable creations of the people which happened around 1000’s of years ago with not even basic technologies. This stands as a proof that the Tamizh people were highly knowledgeable in the field of medicine. When comes to the part of music, we have the Nelayappar temple situated at Thirunelveli which was built very long ago. The pillars of this temple are unique and special which is very famous from then till now. We all know that there are seven swaras in the Carnatic music which is known as the Sapta Swaras. This temple has a Manimandapam got its name from a hanging bell in the middle of it. Nindra Seer Nedumaran built two pillars around a single rock and each one having 48 sub pillars which produce musical notes when struck and were called as musical pillars.

‘Anything that is well understood can be controlled’ is something that everyone will surely accept. On that note, controlling one of the basic elements of nature is something that is really a very big task. King Karikalan of the Chola dynasty in c. 100 BCE – c.100 CE had this task perfectly done. Kallanai (also known as the grand anicut) is an ancient dam which was built across the river Kaveri flowing from Tiruchirapalli to the Tanjavur district. This dam is the fourth oldest water-regulator structure in the world and the oldest in India that is still in use which has a spectacular architecture to control the level of water and divert it to the needed area without wasting such a precious gift of nature. The proud historic creations of the Tamizh people and the connection of whatever they do with the



Tamizh language is completely limitless. We've just went through a very few notable and remarkable creations of the Tamizh people.

Diglossia and the Emergence of Tanglish

Getting into a deeper phase about the speciality, uniqueness and goodness of the Tamil language and its condition at present, Tamizh uses two dialects in general. When a language community uses 2 dialects it is known as diglossia. In linguistic parlance they are known as H or 'high' type and the L or 'low' type. The H type is found in literature, religious ceremonies and education as it is more formal, traditional and esteemed. The L type is used in everyday parlance. The 'high' type is found in ancient Tamizh texts which are considered as a storehouse of knowledge which have been translated and appreciated by people across the globe. And now, Tanglish is a Tamizh-English code-switching language strategy used primarily by youngsters. These processes lead to the fact that nowadays a rare native speaker can speak literary Tamizh correctly without inserting colloquial English words. As Tamizh speakers say it is difficult to speak pure Tamizh. Those who know it the best today are elderly people because they do remember literary forms and school children because they learn it at school. Unfortunately, pure Tamizh is only living with some politicians, poets and teachers. Currently Tanglish (code switching) is already showing its effects in Tamil Nadu. We know that language is the basic for everything.

Tamizh people have a very good culture, which is getting affected directly and indirectly due to the emergence of Tanglish. Speaking different type of Tamizh in different geographic areas is fine. Having a difference between speaking and writing Tamizh is also fine because it is done by nature. Besides, now Tamizh people are hungry for something else: English. English words are scattered across Tamizh. It is something that we need to worry because people neither know English nor Tamizh very well and get by only with a limited mash-up of the two. Using any other language along with Tamil language is just like wearing a garland made of chillies instead of flowers, said one of the great Tamil personalities. It has a deep meaning because it reveals how irritating it is when we wear a garland of chillies. An equal or even higher irritation and discomfort is what we get when we merge any other language with such a pure language like Tamizh. Though it feels comfortable to use it in such a manner, it affects the beauty and purity of the ownness that any language has. This is something that we have to pay a lot of attention and importance.

Literary Richness and Uniqueness of Tamil

Everything has its very own uniqueness which must be left untouched in order to let it stay with its precious individuality. On this point, knowing about the individuality and uniqueness of Tamizh language, Thirukkural is a classic Tamizh language text consisting of 1,330 short couplets or kurals of seven words each. Thirukkural certainly has the noble purpose of teaching the world on how to lead a noble life. The foremost unique character of Thirukkural is its universality and timelessness



transcending time, national boundaries, races, religions and languages. Though there are a number of literatures given by various set of people, Thirukkural stands at an irreplaceable position across the globe and hence called “Ulaga Podhu Marai” (the Universal scripture). Tamizh people speaking about the greatness of Tamizh and praising Tamizh is something common. But, the German born, Nobel prize winner, Dr. Albert Schweitzer describes the kural thus: “On the most varied question concerning the conduct of man to himself and to the world, Thirukkural’s utterances are characterized by nobility and good sense. There hardly exists in the literature of the world a collection of maxims in which we find so much lofty wisdom”.

Global Presence and Linguistic Influence of Tamil

Apart from these, Tamizh is an official language of 3 countries: India, Srilanka and Singapore. It is also the official language of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and the Union Territory of Puducherry. It is used as one of the languages of education in Malaysia along with English, Malay and Mandarin. In Malaysia, 543 primary education government schools are available fully in Tamizh medium. Tamizh is the first Indian language to be printed and published. The Tamil Lexicon, published by the University of Madras, was one of the earliest dictionaries published in the Indian languages. Tamizh gave not only words but the grammar to almost 400 languages. Root words of many languages are from Tamizh. In Egypt more than 4000 town names are in Tamizh. In ancient period, Tamizh is the only language to have a separate community named as Mudhal Tamizh Sangam and was ruled by 89 kings, 4400 years ago. Call it a coincidence or intentional, the name Google matches with its phonetic Tamizh name koogil, where koovu(one meaning is to call) and kill is killudhal(which means to search or analyze). So Google in Tamizh phonetical word koogil logically gives the same meaning call and search. It is remarkable among the lesser known yet interesting facts about the Tamizh language. Actually, Tamil is pronounced as Tamizh. The ‘zh’ has to be pronounced properly. It is the unique alphabet in the world and no language has the equivalent of that.

Language, Identity, and Naming Practices

The Tamil people are special in context to their names too. None of the Hindi speaking people has a name called Hindi or Malayalam speaking people has Malayalam as their name. Not even 1% of people who has a mother tongue other than Tamizh has their language as their name. But Tamizh people can proudly say that they keep names such as Tamizhselvi. Tamizhkumaran or even just Tamizh. That is how connected are people with their mother tongue. They don’t just see it as a language, but as their soul. Tamizh has all these proudness in it and it always will. But for a language to stand and survive, it becomes the responsibility of its people. Over the course of the day, we find people getting gradually detached from it. We find some languages such as English and Hindi which is kind of getting influential and dominant.



English Dominance and Linguistic Perception

The Tamizh people consider speaking English as a pride and it is something that everyone would agree. People are caught under a myth that if they know English, speak English fluently, they are people with great knowledge and power. But they fail to understand that white is just a color and not beauty. Similarly, English is just a language. It is acceptable to know or learn or speak English because it is a language which is going to help us communicate across seas. It is something like an extra support for everyone to get connected in terms of education, work and so on, but it must stay within limits which is fair and good to everyone.

Hindi Imposition and Language Politics

On the other hand, Hindi is something that is trying to get a force fit into the Tamizh people. Many personalities are trying to bring one language, Hindi, to be the main and dominant language all over India which is completely unfair. They add up stuffs like this action must take place to unite India which is inappropriate. India is already united though diverse. Hindi has nothing more specific to help the already united nation. Even before independence, India was united and is still the same. So, a language, that too which is trying to get a force fit will nowhere try uniting a nation. In contrast, it'll surely bring conflicts. It is not that Tamizh people hate Hindi. But the problem arises when someone forces to learn it stating it is the only language that'll unite you and is the only thing that'll help you survive and grow. This is not at all into a political point of view. Because Hindi is just another language.

People in Delhi, Mumbai, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Bihar and some others speak and learn Hindi. All these people have their own mother tongue too. But over the course of days, it is getting unused where Hindi dominates. And there are few people who still confess that Hindi is India's National language. But the fact is that India does not have anything called a National language. As already mentioned, Tamizh is the official language for 3 countries. But when comes to Hindi, it is an official language only in India. But surprisingly, only the Indian state Tamil Nadu is the state of Tamizh. While even in Srilanka and Singapore, they find learning Tamizh to be more than enough. In that case, forcing people of Tamil Nadu to learn Hindi is not fair in any means. No one has a highly valid reason to say that it is a must to learn Hindi. People are surely going to learn it whenever necessary. Though there comes a need to get out of country for any kind of reason, we have our solid English for the purpose of communication.

Tamil Identity and Cultural Resistance

Tamizh is not just a language; it is a way of life. It is a culture. Beyond culture it is also the set of people who are associated to it. They call themselves Tamizh. Everything is just Tamizh for such people. Tamizh people have never forced anyone to learn their language or culture. Many of the North Indians and foreigners speak Tamizh. But no one has ever forced or insisted them to learn Tamizh as a language or as a subject in their schools or colleges. When there arises a need, learning of a language happens on



the flow. India is called a land of diversity where we still find unity in it. Here, Tamizh is going beyond religion. People of Tamizh has their own festivals; Malayali's have Onam as their festival. These are treated as a devotion that they have over their language. On this point, it is a must to mention that the Tamizh people have Pongal as their festival. The 2017 pro-jallikaattu protests, were leaderless apolitical youth protests which took place in January 2017 in large groups in several location across the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and overseas is such a remarkable one where people protested against the Supreme Court's order to ban jallikattu, a traditional Tamizh bull taming sport. This movement for Tamizh youth is both protest and celebration of their power. There was no visible single organizer for the protest. This is one of the best example to show that, Tamizh people will never give up for their culture and festival. Similarly, there may be languages that emerges to stand as a competition to dominate Tamizh. There may be people who'll keep trying to force to learn other language. But above all, when there comes a problem for the survival and sustainability of the language Tamizh, people will never get back and just look at it. It is a sure thing that the people of Tamizh, wherever they may have been settled, will come together to fight against such dominance and influences. And even a bit higher, some people won't even let for a question to arise about the survival of the language Tamizh. Tamizh stood, stands and will always stand special and unique forever and ever. Tamizh is not just a language; it is an emotion. Tamizh is an identity. Tamizh is a pillar of strength to its people. Tamizh is the soul of every Tamizhian. Tamizh will never ever be just a language that is written in history because it does will not have an end. People of Tamizh always has this in their minds; 'Yaadhum Oore Yaavarum Kelir', meaning 'We harbour a feeling of kinship for all places and all people are our own; And finally Tamizh people will never be against any language and at the same time will never let down their language at any cost. Lastly yes, Tamil language will exists in future India and will continue to spread its uniqueness globally also.

Conclusion

Tamil has survived for centuries not merely because of its age but because of the deep emotional, cultural, and social attachment of its speakers. The language has demonstrated remarkable adaptability while preserving its literary and cultural richness. However, the contemporary rise of English influence, increasing code-switching practices, and debates surrounding linguistic dominance present significant challenges to the maintenance of linguistic purity and cultural continuity. Nevertheless, the survival of a language does not depend solely on preserving its traditional form; it also depends on its ability to evolve and remain relevant in changing social contexts. Tamil continues to possess strong institutional support through education, literature, media, and governmental recognition across multiple countries. Furthermore, Tamil identity movements and cultural consciousness among speakers indicate that the language remains deeply rooted within its community. Rather than perceiving multilingualism as a threat, it may be understood as a reality of modern society, provided it does not erase linguistic identity.



Therefore, Tamil is unlikely to disappear in future India. Instead, its future depends upon balancing preservation with adaptation and ensuring that younger generations continue to engage with the language not only as a medium of communication but also as an enduring symbol of identity and culture.

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