

**EVOLUTION OF THE TAMIL SCRIPT FROM
10TH CENTURY TO 16TH CENTURY THROUGH
TEMPLE INSCRIPTIONS**

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CERTIFICATE

This Dissertation entitled, “**Evolution of Tamil Script From 10th Century to 16th Century Through Temple Inscriptions**”, submitted by **A. Jagathesh Kumar**, Centre of Linguistics and English, School of Languages, Literature and Cultural Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of any University. This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Human organisations, i.e. societies, require communication. In pre-historic societies, communication was made mostly through oral sounds and gestures, which was limited by space and time. Man conveyed his thoughts and ideas through these means of communication. To transcend the limitations in communication, Men started writing in the form of visible signs or pictures with the use of available materials. These signs were drawn or carved on solid substances like Stones, Metals, Woods and even bark of the trees. It was not clearly known, whether these pictures were intended for expression or communication or probably for some sympathetic magic and ritual practices.

Men know the best way to understand and develop “things” is to precise them. So, he made the pictures short and small and these, with certain limitations, later on came to be called “scripts”.

In India, the earliest script was the one associated with Indus Valley civilization. The basic root for the creation of the scripts of the modern Indian languages were excavated in the Indus Valley cities, Harappa and Mohenjadaro.¹ The pictures and letters on the copperplates which were

¹ Jayaswal, *Palaeography of India* (Delhi, 1977), p. 24.

found in these cities played a great role in the development of the scripts of almost all Indian languages. In India, after the Indus Valley script, there appeared a writing known as Brahmi script in the 3rd century B.C. The word Brahmi was associated with Brahma, the God, the creator of the world, which had a mention in the writings of Vedic literature. Brahmi script appeared as a fully evoked alphabet in the edicts of the well known Mauryan Emperor Asoka in the 3rd century B.C.²

The oldest source available which gives details about the Indian scripts were two early Jaina works Samavayanga Sutta (300 AD.) and Pannavanna Sutta (168 AD.) which have a mention of eighteen types of scripts in vogue in ancient India. Lalitavistara, a Buddhist treatise on the other hand speaks of the prevalence of as many as sixty four scripts during the days of the Buddha. Of all the scripts mentioned in these works, only four scripts seemed to be important and historically true.³ They are 1.Bambhi or Brahmi script, 2.Kharotti or Kharosthi script, 3.Yavananiya or Yavanaliya script and 4.Dravidi or Damili script.

² T. P. Verma, *The Palaeography of Brahmi Script in North India* (Delhi, 1971), p. 8.

³ T. Subramaniam, "*Tamil Nadu*", in *Encyclopaedia of India*, (New Delhi, 1994), vol. XXVIII, p. 130.

Damili script was considered as a vital source in the origin and evolution of the Tamil script. This Damili script was perhaps the script which had been used for writing Tamil while Brahmi was the universally known script in ancient India from the days of Asoka. Some historians propounded that “the existing Tamil script used for writing the inscriptions was a derivative of Brahmi script’.

Tamil language is considered as the best and more refined language in the Dravidian family of languages. It is the oldest of the Dravidian languages spoken in India. The other Dravidian languages are Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. Amongst these four South Indian languages, it is only the Tamil which is fully developed with a comprehensive and well worked out grammar. *Tolkappiyam*,⁴ a great literary text which many scholars consider the extant which belongs to the 2nd century B.C., mentions the rule governing formation of the letters of the alphabet. This text was written by *Tolkappiyar*, one among the twelve disciples of sage *Agastya* and tradition avers that *Agastya* learnt Tamil direct from the God, *Siva* himself. The Tamil word “*eluttu*” means “letters” occur so often in this work. This clearly shows that the Tamil language has a script of its own pretty early in its evolution.

⁴ S. Pillai Vaiyapuri, *History of Tamil Language and Literature* (Madras, 1956), p. 14.

Tamil language has its relations in all Dravidian dialects and also in different parts of the world from Basque in northern Spain, to the Middle East, Baluchistan and Chottanagpur.⁵ Tamil is the oldest living language in India. The word Tamil means “sweetness and clarity”.

In the history of languages, before the origin of Sanskrit, before the origin of English or French, Tamil existed as a language which had developed a script and literature very much earlier than other languages. Tamil had a distinct script from very early times. Historians do not know of a time when this language did not have a script.

There are two views concerning the origin and the evolution of the Tamil script. The first view is that the Tamil script in the form of Vatteluttu was derived from the Brahmi script which in its turn was imported with the Mauryan King, the Asoka from North India. The other view is that the Tamil script has evolved from Vatteluttu which has an indigenous origin and is not derived from a common source.

The beginning of the 5th century BC marks a new epoch in the history of the Tamil scripts as Inscriptions in Tamil were found in this period. The first Tamil inscription was discovered by the Epigraphy Branch of the Archaeological Survey in 1903 at Kilavalavu in Madurai city. This was soon

⁵ C. Sivanarayanamurthi, *India Epigraphy and South Indian Scripts* (Madras, 1973), p. 88.

followed by the discovery of another by L.A. Commiade in 1906 in the natural cavern at Marugaltalai, near Putukkotai in Trinelveli district in Tamil Nadu.⁶

There are different kinds of sources of information which help to reconstruct the history of the Tamil scripts. One such great source is the Temple inscriptions. The civilization of a language of any age determines what kind of historical information they leave behind in what manner. These temple inscriptions are such historical evidence or documents were incised on the walls of the temples in the form of letters for the purpose of information or preserving a record.

Tamil Nadu is known as the land of Temples. A number temples are found all over Tamil Nadu. Some of the great old temples were built by the famous Kings under the titles, Pallavas, Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas, who ruled the ancient Tamil country through many centuries. There is a proverb in Tamil, “Kovil ella uril kuti yerukka vendam”, means “Don’t live in a place where there is no temples”.⁷

Temple is essentially a vehicle of religion, built for the fulfilment of the spiritual desires of the people. Although primarily the temple was the centre of worship, it also had wider socio-cultural dimensions in the Tamil

⁶ Thirugna Sambandan, *Origin, Evolution and Reform of the Tamil Scripts* (Seminar Papers), (Madras, 1966), p. 12.

⁷ S. Bagirathi, *The Language of the Tamil Inscriptions* (Chidamparam, 1961), p. 52.

country. As the temples were the centre of many social gatherings and activities, temple inscriptions evolved to record these activities apart from recording the achievements of the benefactors of the society or religious teachers or political conqueror and the names of the Kings, and donors who have contributed liberally to the temples for daily worship as well as for the annual festivals.

These inscriptions on the temple walls not only reveal the story of the people who lived in those days but also the story of the Tamil script from its earliest to the contemporary age.

In the Tamil country, most of the temple inscriptions were written mainly in three forms of scripts. 1.Vatteluttu, 2.Tamil script and 3.Grantha script. After Damili and Tamil Brahmi scripts, Vatteluttu appeared as a script in the beginning of the 5th century BC. The letters in this script had a rounded shape, so that it had acquired that name. Vatteluttu means “rounded letters”.⁸ After Vatteluttu, Tamil script which had its origin and base in the old Damili script appeared in the beginning of the 9th century BC. Due to the onset of the Bhakti movement and an increase in priestly activities, the letters in the Tamil script were found inadequate to represent all the Sanskrit phonetics, so a new script greatly resembling Tamil script was created and was called the Grantha

⁸ R. Krishnamurthy, *Pirkalaththu Vatteluttu* (Madras, 1985), p. 7.

script. Later on the Tamil script as at present, got formed. This Tamil script underwent a lot of change from the early Pallava period to the mid of the 20th century BC.

The scope of this dissertation is limited to the role of the temple inscriptions which belong to the Middle Tamil period, i.e. from 10th century BC to 16th century BC in the evolution of the Tamil script.

A famous historian, James Prinsep, was the first person to study the origin and development of Indian inscriptions. He also found out that the history of India can be known by studying the inscription.

The historical development of any script is generally divided into two major periods viz,

1) The recorded history which explains the development in the structure of the language from the period of the earliest written document to the modern period.

2) Pre-history which explains the special developments that have taken place in a language which is capable of differentiating it from other generally related languages.⁹

⁹ A.C. Burnell, *Elements of South Indian Palaeography from Fourth Century to the Seventeenth Century* (Delhi, 1968), p. 34.

This dissertation deals with the recorded history in the form of temple inscriptions which clearly delineates the evolution of the structure of the script from the early 10th century BC to the late 16th century BC. This period was chosen for study because, a lot of changes occurred in the development of the Tamil language, especially in its script. The construction of Stone temples were at its peaks in this Middle Tamil period. This period also marked the emergence of three mighty kingdoms, the Cholas, the Pandyas and the Cheras.

This mainly deals with the inscriptions of the temples which were written in the Tamil script as the most of the inscription were in the Tamil script in the Middle Tamil period. This study had a limitation as it was restricted to the evolution of only the Vowels and the Consonants of the Tamil Script through the temple inscription.

The total number of letters in the Tamil alphabet are thirty. It consists of twelve vowels and eighteen consonants. In Tamil, the vowels are called Uyireluttu (soul) whereas the consonants are Meieluttu (body).

Transliteration of the Modern Tamil alphabets

Vowels

அ	ஆ	இ	ஈ	உ	ஊ	எ	ஏ
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	e	ē
ஐ	ஓ	ஔ	ஔ				
ai	o	o	au.				

Constants

க	ச	த	ப	ற
Ka	ca	ta	pa	ra

CHAPTER TWO

CHRONOLOGY OF THE TEMPLE INSCRIPTION

In the history of Tamil language, the period 10th century BC to 16th century BC is considered as the Middle Tamil period. A chronological order of seven inscriptions of seven different temples were given in this chapter.

The inscriptions of the following temples of Tamil Nadu were studied.

- 1.the Saptashivara Temple at Lalgudi in Trichirapalli.
- 2.the Brahadisvara Temple at Tanjore.
- 3.the Sriranganatha Temple at Srirangam in Tiruchirapalli.
- 4.the Siva Temple at Thirvannaikaval.
- 5.the Kayanismalesvara Temple at Attur in Salem.
- 6.Sri Varadarajaswami Temple at Srirangam.

The inscriptions of these temples were an essential material records marking the definite stages in the evolution of the Tamil script. These inscriptions form an important part of Tamil language heritage.

1. Saptashivara Temple inscription at Lalgudi

The first inscription studied was taken from the famous Saptashivara temple at Lalgudi in the Trichirappalli district. A large number of inscriptions are found in the walls of this temple.

This inscription registers a gift of money made by the Pallava King Nandipottaraiyan who fought the battle of Tellany and gained victory in it. This inscription belongs to 10th century BC and was written in the Tamil script.

The following inscription was incised on the north wall of the Saptashivara Temple.

பெரியம பிநகநக நகலகிசு கலகலகலகல
பிவந கபபபப பபப பபபபபபபப
பபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபப
பபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபபப

திசைவாடு உமபகவும குடுரினாச பினகக
 திவதிடியை அமைவலாடுவ காகசுடககவ வ
 ஓய சூப்பதினாகமுடி லபினாதும உடக'னா
 மகரிபகவாகி ருடரது மலலசூடயபிம
 மெயமமனாலகால உமதய மகரினாடு
 உமதினாவுமபிமககசு கடுகால
 பினகக அகசு பிவகசூடு சடுகல மலவது
 பபலசது மினசூடகசுலினகக
 எவகரினாடு மகரினாடு மலலம
 உமகக

As the study is confined to the evolution of the vowels and consonants of the
 Tamil script, the vowels (Uyireluttu) and Consonants (meieluttu) of this inscriptions are

inscription refers a list of gold images, vessels and ornaments which the King himself presented to the temple of Rajarajasvara and it also has a reference on the parts of gifts taken from the treasures of the defeated Kings of Cheras and Pandyas.

1. புலபியத்தகரையே
 → புலபியத்தகரையே புலபியத்தகரையே
புலபியத்தகரையே புலபியத்தகரையே
புலபியத்தகரையே புலபியத்தகரையே
புலபியத்தகரையே புலபியத்தகரையே
 → புலபியத்தகரையே புலபியத்தகரையே
புலபியத்தகரையே புலபியத்தகரையே
புலபியத்தகரையே புலபியத்தகரையே
புலபியத்தகரையே புலபியத்தகரையே
புலபியத்தகரையே புலபியத்தகரையே
 → புலபியத்தகரையே புலபியத்தகரையே

Vowels and consonants which were taken from the inscription of Brihadisvara

Temple are

Vowels

ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	e	ē

Consonants

ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ka	ca	tha	ta	pa	ra
ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	nā	nā	ra	na	ma	na
ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ya	ra	la	va	lā	lā

3. Ranganathaswami Temple at Srirangam

The third inscription was taken from the famous Sriranganathaswami temple at Srirangam in Trichirappali district. It is one of the very important Vaishnava temples of India. It lies on an islet formed by the twin rivers Kaveri and Kollidam, three miles north of Trichirappali. There are inscription ranging from 10th century BC to the recent times, were engraved on the walls of the shrine. These inscription throw a valuable light on the religion, culture and history of Tamil Nadu. These inscriptions cover a period of over a

thousand years. The inscription studied was engraved on the north wall of the south entrance of the central shrine, under the supervision of the famous Chola King, Kullothunga Chola III (1178 - 1218). The technique of engraving on temple walls was well advanced during Kullutunga Chola III period

The following inscription refers to an order issued by the king to his revenue officers to settle the boundary dispute between the Srirangam and Jambesvaram temples.

3L k k r k 1 2 2 v d l n t h m k f k d k 1 6 p r k l l o
 k t r u i d v n n t t d k k r u p k 1 l m p l k p k k k k t
 v r t l l l
 k p t t t t t i p 1 n n n v l l 1 n n n m r e d t u p l m
 n n
 1 t t n r u p p t t t t t v 1 1 k k t t t t t k t t t t t t
 t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t
 t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t
 t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t
 t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t
 t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t
 t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t t

4. வலவியத்திடை அபயபுலவியம் அயய
 பகபசுதரபல வியத்த மது சூசுதரபுலவியம்
 * திசை

Vowels and consonants of this temple inscription

Vowels

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 a ā i ī u ū e ē

Consonants

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
 ka ca ta tha pa ra
 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24
 ya va la va lā lā

4. The Siva Temple of Jatavarma Sundara Pandya

The 13th century inscription was found in a Siva temple at Thiruvannaikaval in Trichirappali. This place is near to Srirangam. It is a prominent Saiva centre dedicated to

the God,Siva. This temple inscription belonged to the great Pandya ruler, Jatavarma Sundara Pandya I who ruled the city from 1251 to 1275 BC.

This inscription was incised on the west wall of the central shrine. It refers to the construction of the Mandapam (portico), Pinnacle and Maligai (sanctuary) of a religious sect, Alvars. It also has a reference to the charity of Vanedutta Kaiyalagiyar alias Pallavarajar a native of Tunjalur in the Pandya mandalam.

The inscription found in this temple

உறு உய ஸ்ரீ உயுபாருடை ய
 ஸிபி னா ழ ம தீரு மண ட ய ழ ம
 டி னி னை க ய ம பி னா ட ம ண ட
 ம லை க க ள ள கி து ரு
 ஸி ரு த ப ரு த க ரு ன னு வ ன ன்
 கி து ள ள ள ட ய ன ஸி ரு
 ஸ ரு த ன க ய ழ க ட ி ள ள ப ள ள ன
 ஸ ள ள

ತಿಲೋಬಾಚಾರ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ
 ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ
 ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ
 ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ

ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ
 ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ ಶಿಷ್ಯ

Vowels

ಅ ಆ ಇ ಏ ಉ ಊ ಋ ೠ
 a ā i ī u ū ṛ ṝ

Consonants

ಕ ಖ ಗ ಘ ಙ ಕಾ ಖಾ ಗಾ ಘಾ ಙಾ
 ಚ ಛ ಜ ಝ ಞ ಚಾ ಛಾ ಜಾ ಝಾ ಞಾ
 ಲ ವ ಷ ಷ ಷಾ ಷಾ ಷಾ ಷಾ ಷಾ

5. Kayanishmalesvara temple at Attur

The fragmentary inscription edited below is an excerpt of the 14th century inscription from the temple of Kayanishmalesvara temple, located at Attur in Salem district. As most of the parts of the temples were ruined, the name of the king who built the temple was not known.

This inscription registers a provision made for the daily supply of different varieties of paddies for the holy puja in the Vishnu temple of Tirumerrali-Nakkar at Malaiyaman, Arrur. It also has a reference on some persons names who are stated to be the collectors of tolls in the region.

உயர்வாகுபுரிகைதீபுதிகை
யானைதுபதுமலி-குதுதுது
யானைமலையகையுதுதுதுதுது
துதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுது
லயுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுது
துதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுதுது

TH- 8281

DISS
1,31(1)
N9



உலகத்தின் அனைத்து மொழிகளையும்
 உருவாக்கிய அரிசனரின்
 கருமலையின் அடிப்படையில் உருவாக்கப்பட்ட
 கல்வெட்டுகளில் இருந்து கிடைத்திருப்பதாக
 அறியப்படுகிறது. இவ்வெழுத்துகள்
 கருமலையின் அடிப்படையில் உருவாக்கப்பட்ட
 கல்வெட்டுகளில் இருந்து கிடைத்திருப்பதாக
 அறியப்படுகிறது.

The vowels and consonants taken from this inscription are

Vowels

அ	ஆ	இ	ஈ	உ	ஊ	எ	ஏ
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	e	ē
ஆ	ஓ						
ai	o						

Consonants

க	ச	ட	த	ப	ந	ka	ca	ta	tha	pa	na
நு	கு	ண	நு	ம	ன	nā	nā	na	na	ma	na
ய	ர	ல	வ	ழ	ள	ya	ra	la	va	ta	la

7. Srirangam Inscription of Achyutaraja 1539 BC

This 16th century inscription is found on the east wall of the second prakara in the Sriranganatha temple at Srirangam, a place of pilgrimage in Trichirappalli, specially sacred to the Vaishnavas. It is dated in the reign of Vijayanagara King Achyutaraya Maharaja in 1539 BC.

The records which are engraved on this temple walls are in Tamil and Grantha script. The inscription which was studied contains an introductory portion in Tamil which stated that, on the occasion of the King's performing a tulaghana ceremony, his Rajamahishi Thirumalaideva Ammanarvargal composed two Sanskrit songs and engraved this in several holy places and Srirangam was one of those holy places.

The following inscription has a record of a celebration in the temple during the reign of the King, Achyutaraja.

சிபம அஸ்து கவஸ்தி சகிப தப தேன மலசைலா
 தின ந விகாரி சமவகரிததுப தா பாட மி சக்து யுப
 பககதது
 துருத திரம ம்ரிபகரிபு னனி ய சைரிபலக

சுகரி சுக்தத மரைபு மரிசுக்தம யுக துராண டால
 துககஸனகட திரிரியா யி உடைய சுகனக்தில
 உளவா கய சாபபகுமரை பிரததயிராஜம
 பண்ணு யிர களன நு பெருமாள ம்ரிபகரிபு
 சுக்தியல சில சிரணம பண்ணைபடி சுகசுகிர - ரிச
 அமம்கைகுகிரபுனிஸுகிய விலவாசுகிபக்து
 ம்ரிபகிரி கதப யுரைசு துகம திவிடன காணதயான...

The vowels and consonants which were taken from this inscription are

Vowels

அ	ஆ	இ	உ	ஊ	எ	ஏ
a	ā	i	u	ū	e	ē
ஐ	ஓ					
ai	o					

Consonants

க	ச	ட	த	ப	ஃ	ka	ca	ka	tha	pa	rā
நீ	கு	ண	ந	ம	ன	nā	nā	nā	na	ma	na
ய	ர	ல	வ	ய	ள	ya	ra	la	va	la	la

This chronological order of the temple inscriptions which were written in the Tamil script throw a sumptuous light in differentiating the shapes of different letters engraved on the inscriptions, which is essential in knowing the evolution of the Tamil script of the temple inscription through many centuries.

CHAPTER THREE

PALAEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES OF THE TAMIL SCRIPT

Palaeography is considered as the branch of knowledge which deals with the formal development of individual letters or signs.¹

Palaeography of a script means the “art of writing” which distinguished man from animal in his march of civilization. It provided men with an instrument for conservation, augmentation and transmission of racial traditions from generation to generation. The art of writing was one of the momentous invention which have shaped the destiny of man, because it has proved the most stable medium of the propagation of knowledge and the diffusion of human culture.

The Palaeography of the Tamil script is vast and varied. This chapter is confined to the palaeographical treatment of vowels and consonants of the Tamil script of the temple inscriptions from 10th century BC to 16th century BC. It also concentrates on the forms of letters which explain their connection with corresponding forms of the previous period and also the lines of further development.

¹ Raj Bali Pandey, *Indian Palaeography* (Varanasi, 1957), p. 10.

Most of the temple inscriptions of the Middle Tamil period (10th century to 16th century BC) were well written. The sculptors of these period followed a special technique in engraving the letters of the Tamil script on the walls of the temples.

The temple inscription had a unity of purpose and singularity of inspiration, consequently establishing a standard for the Tamil script through many centuries. Eventhough the forms of the letters of the Tamil script of the temple inscription changed from 10th century to 16th century BC, the general format of the individual letters did not change much. The face of the letters differed a bit from inscription to inscription mainly due to the technique employed by the engravers who engraved the Tamil letters on the walls of the temples.

Some scholars were of the opinion that a secondary writing might have followed a primary writing in the temple inscriptions in order to engrave the letters perfectly. The writers were mainly responsible for the shape and the style of the letters of the temple inscriptions.

The shapes and forms of the Tamil letters of the 10th century inscription of Ssptaishivara temple at Lalgudi and the 11th century inscription of Brihadisvara temple at Tanjore and the 12th century inscription of Sriranganatha temple at Srirangam are more or less similar. There is not much of a change in the letters. A slight variation had occurred only in a few letters of these temple inscriptions.

Considerable change had occurred in the shapes of consonants of the Tamil script in the 14th century and 15th century inscriptions of the Kayanismalesvara temple at Attur and Sri Varadarajaswami temple at Kanchipuram respectively. It looks in the 16th century inscription the letters of the Tamil script had acquired a full form.

In the 9th century BC, Vatelluttu dominated in almost all the temple inscriptions. In the period of Chola, this Vatelluttu vanished from the temple walls and Tamil script occupied its place.² So, the temple inscriptions were written in the Tamil script as the art of writing had become very popular during the reign of the Chola Kings. Thus, the 10th century and 11th century were marked by the movement towards the popularisation of the Tamil Script which was entirely different from Vatelluttu in its characters. A lot of scripts can be ascribed to the close of the 15th century BC, which marked the transitional period in the evolution of the Tamil script.

In these seven centuries, from 10th century to 16th century BC, the vowels of the Tamil script of the Temple inscription had not undergone a lot of change whereas the consonants underwent a considerable change in its form.

² R. Krishnamurthy, *Pirkalaththu Vatelluttu* (Madras, 1985), p. 37.

The following table would help in identifying the variations in the vowels and consonants of the Tamil script of the Temple inscriptions from 10th century BC to 16th century BC.

Palaeographical feature of the vowels






As already mentioned, there are twelve vowels in the Tamil script. These vowels can be classified as Short vowels and Long vowels.

The shapes of the short vowels are the basic forms from which the long vowels are evolved.

The short vowel a (அ) was indicated by a horizontal dash attached to a vertical line at the end, in the 10th century inscription. The vowel did not change in its shape till the 15th century BC. A semi circle was added to the horizontal line in the 16th century. Only in the 16th century it acquired a little change because the semicircle had a small round in the beginning, (அ).




The long vowel (ஆ) was different from the short vowel (அ) as it had a small curve at the bottom of the vertical line. This letter was also not changed much till the 15th century BC. Only in the 16th century, a small round was attached to the curve, (ஆ).

The Short vowel (ஊ) had not changed a lot in these seven centuries. There was a little development in this letter in the 16th century inscription, as it




became more round (). The long vowel () was not a prominent letter. It was used less in the inscriptions. There was not much of a development in the letter () and () from 10th century BC to 16th century BC. The letter **ai** () were not used in the inscriptions studied. Overall, the forms of the short vowels and the long vowels remained the same from the 10th century BC to 16th century BC.

Consonants of the Temple Inscriptions:










Gutturals

The first and foremost letter in the consonants of the Tamil Script is ka, (). In the early Tamil Script this letter had a shape of plus mark +. This letter had developed a lot from the 10th century BC to the 16th century BC. The 10th century Ka had a form like (), a slightly curved straight line which was attached by a vertical line in the middle, a small dash was also joined at the top end of the vertical line. This letter attained the shape () in the 16th century BC. The curve of the straight line formed a semi circle at both the ends of the vertical line. It evolved gradually in these seven centuries and looked to have attained a complete form.





Palatal

This letter Ca () had a form () in the 10th century BC. It had developed considerably in these seven centuries. It had a form () in the 16th century BC, like Ka this letter also attained its full form in the 16th century.

Dentals

The consonant ta (), in the 10th century had a shape (), this slanting line became completed horizontal towards the end of the 15th century BC. The horizontal line was longer than the straight line which was attached to the left end of the horizontal line. Thus, the shape of this letter in the 16th century was (). Among the dental consonants the shapes of na (), na () had a small change in the course of their development. These letter had a curve in their form in the 10th century BC. But in the 16th century BC the curve had become straight.   became  and 

Lingual

The lingual tha (), like ka () underwent a change in the course of its development. The 10th century '  ' attained the form '  ' in the 16th century BC.

In the Tamil Script, the consonants are classified into three types.

1. Strong consonants

2. Medial consonants

3. Soft consonants

The Strong consonants are ka (க), ca (ச), tha (த), ta (ட), pa (ப)
ra (ர).

The Soft consonants are ya (ய), ra (ர), va (வ), la (ல), la (ள), la (ழ)

The Strong consonants pa (ப) and ra (ர) did not undergo a considerable change from the 10th century BC to 16th BC. The soft consonants ya (ய), ra (ர), va (வ), la (ல), la (ள) and la (ழ) underwent minor change in the course of the evolution from the early 10th century to 16th century. The 10th century ya which had a shape 'ய' become totally changed in the 16th century BC. It acquired the shape 'ய', the small round was omitted, instead a vertical line was attached.

The letters la (ள) and la (ழ) were a distinct feature of the Tamil Script of the temple inscription. No other Indian language has these letters.

There were no punctuations or interpolation in the Tamil Script of the Temple inscriptions.

The Palaeographic features of the Tamil Script of the Temple inscriptions had its own limitations. Because engraving on the Temple walls was not the

primary use of the Script. Engraving appeared to have been a secondary process for which inscriptions were first written in ink or chalk on the temple walls.

Gelb, a famous historian describes “the investigation of writing from the formal point of view is the prime domain of Palaeography”..

CHAPTER FOUR
OTHER DETERMINANTS OF THE EVOLUTION
OF THE TAMIL SCRIPT

This chapter is concerned with the factors which an important role in the evolution of the Tamil script through temple inscriptions. It also describes, how and why the letters of the Tamil script, especially the vowels and consonants of the temple inscriptions underwent a change from 10th century BC to 16th century BC. It mainly concentrates on the social, political, religious and economical factors which brought out a change in the shapes and the forms of the letters of the Tamil script.

Writing is an item of culture and has its origin and history in a particular cultural context.¹ Many cultures, at one stage or the other stage of their development, used some devices for recording their language. Sometimes existing writing system are adopted by a people to write their language and sometimes the knowledge of the existence of such a useful device inspires people to create a new script for their speech. Tamil was one of the earliest known scripts which had been deciphered and read. It had a long history and had passed through many stages of development due to various factors.

¹ Velu Pillai, *A Study of the Language of Tamil Inscriptions* (Madras, 1972), p. 43.

In the Middle Tamil period, from 10th century to 16th century, the temples were the centres of many social activities. Almost all kinds of temple festivals and important functions were held in the temples. During those festival time, people gather in large number in the temple arena to worship God and to take part in the festivities of the temple. As temples were one of the main meeting places for the people, the temple inscriptions on the walls served as a medium to convey the news of the incidents and activities occurred in the temples to the people.

The spoken language of the people had an impact on the scripts of these temple inscriptions. Engraving letters on the stones was considered as an art in the Middle Tamil period. The Chola Kings and Pandya kings built temples with stones and inscribed their deeds in the form of scripts on these stones, which were indestructible and survives longer. To certain extent social activities played a role in the evolution of the Tamil script as most of the contents of the temple inscriptions were the records of the activities of the Kings and the society.

During the 12th and 13th century, the ancient Tamil country was primarily affected by the political and cultural contacts with the nearby provinces.² This had an influence on the Tamil language considerably. Due to the cultural and linguist contacts of the Tamil people with the North Indian people, the language,

² R. Sundarajan, *Ancient Tamil Country Its Social and Economic Structure* (New Delhi, 1991), p. 40.

Sanskrit had an impact on the Tamil script. The influence of Sanskrit letters were found in almost all the inscription of the temples of the 12th and 13th centuries. The first two lines of the Brahadisvara temple inscription were written in Sanskrit. In the inscriptions of Kullutunga Chola III, too, the Sanskrit letters were prevalent.

Until the end of the 14th century, the Tamil script evolved not with many changes but on the old traditional lines established during the time of the King Rajaraja I. Its growth was neither fast nor slow. There was a change in the characters of the letters of the inscriptions also due to the materials the engravers used and technique of writing they followed. Introduction of new tools with which the writers engraved letters on the temple walls contributed a bit in the evolution the letters of the Tamil script.

In the Middle Tamil period, a small simple tool, Uli was used to engrave letters on the stones which gave the lines of the letters uniform width and breadth. In the course of the development of the script, constantly there occurred a simplification and elaboration of the shapes of the letters, so that the letters look so elegant and attractive. Through many centuries, the diffusion of the knowledge of writing and the degree of practice in using the tools, differentiated an inscription from the other.

The 10th century temple inscriptions without doubt reflected the ripe political conditions for scriptural adaptations and development. Only in this period, the Tamil script occupied the temple walls instead of the Vatelluttu. Vatelluttu was so prominent till the 9th century BC. The famous Pallava ruler, Mahendravarma I was the first King to build temples with stones.³ While building those stone temples he recorded the important events took place in the temples on the walls as inscriptions. Thus the temple inscription started flourishing from the 9th century onwards, and the letters recorded in the temple inscription acted as a visual form to express the spoken form of the language. Temple inscriptions got popularised as there was an urge to express spoken words in concrete visual forms.

The Tamil script of the temple inscription had impacts of the old Damili script as well the Asokan Brahmi script. These Brahmi script were found in the neighbouring regions which were ruled by Satavahanas and the Ikshvakus from the early centuries of the pre Christian era to the 3rd century BC. Because of the political contacts of the neighbouring states the Tamil script accommodated some of the letters of the Sanskrit in the temple inscriptions.

³ T.V. Mahalingam, *Inscriptions of the Pallavas* (New Delhi, 1988), p. 32.

The hard surface of the temple walls also played a role in the evolution of the letters of the Tamil script. In the temples of Tamil country, the engravers before engraving the letters on the walls they smoothed and chiselled the surface. As the engraving was on different surfaces of the stone walls the Tamil letters might have undergone a little change.

The changes which took place in the letters of the Tamil scripts were mainly due to the fact that the art of writing was becoming known to more and more persons with increase chances of introducing individual mannerisms and personal habits through many centuries.

The inscription of the 15th century temple of Sri Varadaraja at Kanchipuram shows up a substantial change in most of the forms of the Tamil script from the 11th century inscription of the Brihadisvara temple at Tanjore. There was not much change in the forms of the vowels, but the consonants had changed considerably in these five centuries. Thus the 15th century was the most important period of the history of the Tamil simply because the changes occurred or introduced at the beginning of this century proved to be the turning point, paving the way for accelerated changes and consequently developing into a nearly perfect script.

Some of the process involved in the evolution are along known lines such as the desire for change and economy. Change was witnessed by turning the lines

into curves (e.g.) the letter ka () of the 10th century acquired the shape of () in the 16th century. Economy was applied by using the running hand without taking off quite often. The differences in the manner and timings of these processes had resulted in the development of the Tamil script of the temple inscriptions.

The salient feature of these temple inscriptions even after the influence of social, political and economical factors, was that the Tamil script had a standard form. None of the vowels or the consonants of the temple inscription had changed completely from the 10th century BC to the 16th century BC. Even though the letters of the Tamil script of the temple inscription had undergone a considerable change in these seven centuries, the basic forms of the letters remained the same.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Through this study, we get to know that Tamil Scripts of the temple inscriptions were one of the earliest epigraphic records in Tamil Nadu other than a few which were Tamil Brahmi Script, Vatteluttu and Grantha Script. This Tamil had its origin in the Damili Script and changed into a form of Vattellutu and later attained a form of Script called Grantha. The modern Tamil Script was considered to be influenced by the Tamil Script of the middle Tamil period rather than Vattelluttu or the Grantha Script.

Tamil Script has its own history of development as it is seen through the temple inscription. As it is possible to trace forward the history of Tamil Script, so also it is possible to trace back its history from almost any stage or period.

The period of experiments with the Tamil Script did not end with the end of the 16th BC rather it continued on a bigger scale till the mid of the 20th century BC. The main impulse to this accelerated development came with the attempt to make Tamil more and more convenient for the people.

From the 10th century BC to 16th century BC, the script of the temple inscription was a thing of the kings who built the temples. But in the later years, this script was handled and popularised by many other people. The truth of this statement can be realised from the fact that there were not many temple

inscriptions after the end of the 17th century BC as not many great temples were built after this period, because of the British invasion. However, in the later period of 18th century BC and in the beginning of the 19th century BC more and more writers emerged to make their contribution to the Tamil Script.

Not many temple inscriptions were engraved after the end of the 18th century BC. In this period the kings of India were dominated by the British East India Company who did not give much importance to the temples or for that matter temple inscriptions.

In the 20th century, some events or incidents or the donation made by the people to the temples all recorded in the temples but not as inscriptions. No inscriptions, no Tamil letters are engraved on the walls of the temples, instead they record the events in neon bulb or Boards. These neon bulbs with Tamil letters are hanged in front of the temples or on the temple walls, which are not constructed of stones or rocks but cements and bricks.

Temple inscriptions literally vanished from the walls of the new temples after the conquest of British over India. In this modern period, there are no great temple inscriptions. This art has lost its value.

The introduction of Printing Press in India by the British in the middle of the 18th century also played a role in destroying the art of engraving letters on the walls of the temples.

These temple inscriptions of the 10th century to the 16th century BC served as pioneers in the field of Tamil Script apart from rock inscriptions, copper plates and coins.

Temple inscriptions are more reliable than the literature and provide much useful information regarding the history of the evolution of the Tamil Script.

Apart from the temple inscriptions the course of the evolution of the Tamil Script can be determined by materials used in writing viz, copper plates, cave inscriptions, coins and the iron stylus.

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