

## TAMIL AND SANSKRIT

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This French scholar was in fact a physician in Paris and worked there between 1930 and 1947. Also a scholar in Sanskrit, Pali and Tamil. *Studies in Asokan Inscriptions* and French translation of *Tirumurugatrupadai* are a few of his works. His scholarly ideas on Sanskrit and Tamil are reproduced here.

These two languages belong to different linguistic families, but both are Indian and have developed in close contact. Both have been the means of expression of large original literatures. Both have been regularly taught through the centuries according to an early fixed tradition of grammar and rhetorics. From the cultural point of view, the main difference between them lies in the fact that Sanskrit has been an All – India language, a general means of communication, like Latin in Europe. This has been the case not only in the various countries of India, but also abroad, in every country where Indian peoples have been established. Tamil remained the language of Tamilians in India and also of Tamil groups overseas. It is for these reasons that many educated men in Tamilnad have enjoyed two cultures at the same time. Sanskrit, as well as Tamil, and many authors have enriched both Sanskrit and Tamil literatures.

On account of its comparatively limited use, and also because the double literary knowledge of Sanskrit and Tamil was highly appreciated, Tamil, even, in Tamilnad, has often been somewhat undervalued. On the other hand, as it belongs to the Dravidian linguistic family, it has also been regarded as a language of low peoples, as contrasted with Sanskrit, the most ancient Indo –

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\* Source: *Proceedings of the Third International Conference, Seminar of Tamil Studies, Paris 1970*. Pondicherry: French Institute of Indology. pp.107-110

European language and the alleged mother to tongue of the Aryas. So the racial prejudice developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has affected the appreciation of Tamil and the Tamilians. It has been assumed that Tamilians or, more generally, Dravidians were the *Dasas* or *Dasyus* referred to in the Veda as aborigines conquered and civilized by the Vedic Aryans. So Tamil literature has been often considered as a vernacular imitation of Sanskrit literature.

Following a strong reaction against these ideas some authors have claimed a prodigious antiquity for the Tamil language and for its literature. They have considered Sanskrit language and culture as foreign intruders in Tamilland and resolved to expel them.

Both are wrong. From the scientific point of view, we must leave out any racial or communal prejudice. In the present state of our knowledge, we can only start with the most ancient sources that are actually available.

The first fact we have to note is the coexistence and the intermixing of Sanskrit and Tamil cultures all through their joint history. In consequence of this fact, it is evident that Tamil language and culture has always been so strong in its originality that it has not only survived in spite of the permanent pressure of Sanskrit and other Indo Aryan languages and cultures, but also has always developed parallel with the other languages and cultures.

The first historical reference to Tamil tradition is in the fragments of the work of Megasthenes on India. Megasthenes tells the story of Pandaia, daughter of the Indian "Herakles", queen of Madurai and of the coast of pearl fisheries. As Megasthenes never visited the South, this reference is an evidence that this Tamil story had already spread to the court of Candragupta. Intercourse between North and South had already developed at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B. C

In the middle of the 3rd century. B.C. the reference in the Asoka's Rock inscription II to Cola, Pandiya and Keralaputra among the independent kingdoms is well known. At that time from the North – Western regions as far as the North of Maisur, the current language was Prakrit, with different linguistic features in the various regions. Sanskrit, of course, had been in use for a long time for religious, scientific and also probably literary purpose, if Sanskrit lore had already been known in Tamilnad thanks to the intercourse between North and South, it cannot at this time have had much influence on Tamil culture.

Unfortunately we have no precisely dated Tamil texts from this period. But the poems that were later gathered into the famous collections of “Sangam literature” supply us with evidence of numerous and deep relations between Northern and Southern cultures in the period of composition of these poems. Vedic lore and practices were in use at least before the Kalabhra interregnum (C. 400 A.D). In spite of this fact, it is well known that loan – words from Sanskrit are not numerous in the oldest poems of Sangam literature, whereas the picture in later literature is quite different. Borrowing from Prakrit, however, must be taken into consideration. They have been adopted into Tamil in the period before the generalization of the use of Sanskrit as a *lingua franca* for All – India.

The beginning of this development takes place in the first centuries A.D., with the appearance of Sanskrit epigraphy and of Hybrid Sanskrit both in Epigraphy and in Buddhist texts. The pressure of Prakrits in Tamilnad continued, as Jains using *ardhamagadhi* and Buddhists using Pali were strongly established throughout the South at least from the third century B.C. But the development of Sanskrit as a language of general communication has superseded the influence of Prakrits and led to the introduction of many Sanskrit words in the Dravidian language or to the sanskritization of other words. This development was made necessary by the progressive differentiation of the Prakrits leading to an increasing difficulty of mutual understanding. Sanskrit was the only available language that was classically fixed and taught everywhere in India and even in the countries in close contact with India. It cannot have been known by everybody , but it alone was understandable by some people in every country, just as English is now. So it was not confined to religious, scientific or literary uses. It served also for general purposes as it is evidenced by two facts, first, the vocabulary of modern Indo – Aryan languages, in spite of the fact that they fundamentally derived from the Prakrit and Apabhramsa, is mainly Sanskrit, not from Prakrit , except in countries following the Theravada school of Buddhism, where Pali words have also been borrowed.

In these countries Sanskrit inscriptions are very numerous and the older literature has also been influenced by Sanskrit, but the Sanskrit words adopted in the colloquial languages cannot have been taken only from inscriptions or Kavyas. Their common occurrence in the language supposes their use by interpreters and translators from Sanskrit into vernaculars.

Tamil inscriptions are also to be found in South – East Asia and there are Tamil loanwords in the language of the countries of this region.

They prove (along with other evidences) the presence and activity of Tamilians in South – East Asia, but the Sanskrit predominance is so clear that it is certain that Tamilians also used Sanskrit in the text they have composed in these countries. The oldest Indian inscription in Indochina, the so called Vocanh inscription, is in literary Sanskrit verses though it alludes to a king who was most probably a Pandiyan, named as Srimara.

If Sanskrit has been so popular in Tamilnad not only in literary circles but also among the people, it is not because it was imposed from the North by political power or social conquest or literary superiority. Otherwise Tamil would not have simultaneously flourished so strongly right up to the present. It was because Sanskrit was freely accepted by Tamilians, without any prejudice to their own culture, as the best means of diffusion of this very culture in educated circles both of Tamilnad and of All - India. That is why Ramanuja, for example, who followed the ideas of *Nammalvar*, wrote his works in Sanskrit.

Sometimes the dominance of Sanskrit has also been exaggerated in some Brahmanical circles of Tamilnad. This is clear if we consider legends like that of the teaching of Tamil grammar by Agastya, coming from the North, to the Tamil poet Nakkirar. It is apparent too in the story of how Sarasvati was compelled to be reborn 46 Tamil *pulavar* representing the letters of Sanskrit, including those which do not exist in – Tamil.

The vogue to Sanskrit grammar also led sometimes to composition of grammars, such as the *Viracoliyam*, after the Sanskrit pattern, which is not as suited to the Tamil language as was the model followed by the *Tolkappiyam*.

Some scholars among the Tamilians who were proud of their proficiency in Sanskrit have unduly underestimated their mother tongue and its masterpieces, but generally Tamil – and Sanskrit cultures have not been in rivalry. They have been harmoniously combined by the genius of so many Tamil *pulavar* who had at their disposal the two richest literary means of expression of India over a period of more than twenty centuries.

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