

## Introduction

There are a number of language families in the world. Tamil belongs to the Dravidian language family. Classical Tamil is considered the earliest Dravidian language, and more than eighty million people worldwide speak modern Tamil. Tamil is regarded as one of the four major literary languages of the Dravidian family and, in spoken form, is the predominant form of communication in Tamil Nadu in south India. The literary heritage of this South Asian language is very rich. The Sangam literary classics that were written between 300 BCE and 500 CE are masterpieces. This literary tradition embodies the richness and beauty of the Tamil language. A grammatical tradition dates to the third century BCE and is considered one of two grammatical traditions that arose concomitantly, the other being Sanskrit.

The Tamil language is tied to the cultural traditions in Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu has an area of 50,193 sq. miles and has a population of over forty-three million people. This southern state is situated at the southeastern tip of the Indian peninsula. Tamil Nadu has been referred to as a temple state because the area is rich with temples. The architecture of the temples and the sculptures that adorn their walls are both magnificent. This is a land of art, music, and dance as well as rich language. The language is also the medium of instruction at different levels of education. At the higher level of education it is used along with English. Tamil is widely used in mass media, the judicial system, sciences and areas of technology. Tamil is the language of the state administration and is recognized as one of the official languages of India.

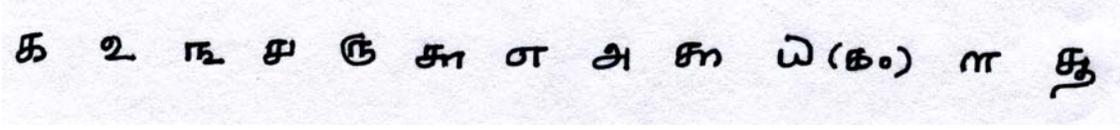
Tamil is also spoken in other parts of the world. It is spoken in Sri Lanka and the East Asian states of Singapore and Malaysia. Furthermore, a sizable population speaks Tamil in the Fiji Islands, Mauritius, Trinidad, Madagascar, and South Africa.

There are thirty characters in the Tamil writing system. They are twelve vowels and eighteen consonants. The Tamil alphabet is syllabic, in that each letter denotes a syllable. A syllable may be formed by a vowel or by a consonant followed by a vowel. Vowel letters occur only in the initial position as it is. When a vowel occurs after a consonant in the middle or at the end of a word, the vowel and consonant are expressed as one letter. For example, in the case of short vowel that follows a consonant, the symbol for 'a' is not expressed in writing because all consonants, unless designated, have an inherent 'a'. The remaining eleven vowels are written as characters when following a consonant. A consonant without a short vowel 'a' is denoted by a corresponding letter with a dot above (pure consonant). The three dotted sign ( ூ ) is called 'aayudam' in Tamil and denotes that velar sound /x/ precedes a consonant. However, this sign is not generally used in the modern Tamil. In addition to the traditional alphabet, there are five sounds borrowed from other languages. These sounds, which have a representation in the Tamil script, are known as Grantha letters. These Grantha letters are used in Tamil predominantly when writing the name of a person or of a place. The letters also appear in borrowed words.

The Tamil numerical system is written with the Tamil alphabet, but this is not the only means by which numbers are conveyed. The Arabic numerals and Roman figures are widely used, though; one may come across the use of Tamil numerals in older Tamil print. In modern Tamil, the numerals of the earlier forms of Tamil are no longer in use.

The Tamil numerals and their Arabic equivalencies are given here for an easier understanding:

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    100    1000



This manual is an introduction to reading and writing the Tamil script. The manual employs the strategy of heightening pattern perception and contrastive observation. This manual is partially self-instructional in the sense that the manual will enable one to read and write the Tamil script. The sound values of the Tamil letters are explained through a phonetic comparison with Roman script. In all cases, the points of articulation in the oral cavity and the manner of articulation are detailed.

This manual introduces the Tamil characters based on shape similarity. This makes learning the script fluid and easy. While learning to write the script, the learner will also begin to acquire vocabulary. This will make the process of learning Tamil easier. In order to gain the maximum benefit from the manual, the learner is advised to practice writing the letters and the words.

This manual emerged from the author's personal experience as a Tamil instructor. The setting for the instruction was primarily the classrooms of the university system in the United States, with students who wanted to learn Tamil as a second language. This manual has been written for the heritage and no-heritage Tamil students alike, all those who wish to learn this beautiful language.

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