

## **SOCIAL HIERARCHIES AND LINGUISTIC MARKERS IN MEDIEVAL TAMIL NADU, INDIA**

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### **Introduction**

Language is a complex and multifaceted tool for communication that plays a central role in human culture and society. The Dravidian language family is a fascinating and significant group of languages predominantly spoken in South Asia. This family is notable for its historical depth, rich linguistic diversity, and cultural significance. Their origins are thought to predate the Indo-European languages in the Indian subcontinent. Primarily spoken in southern India, they are also found in central India, northeastern Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and in diaspora communities worldwide. The major Dravidian languages include Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. As Subramanian (2005) observes, "The Dravidian group of languages is widespread in its occurrence practically from Spain in the west to South India in the east. Most of the people in South India speak one or other of the Dravidian languages with the exception of the Maharashtrians who speak a Prakrit, Mahratti and the Oriyan who speak Oriya. But in Tamilnadu, the dominant language group is Dravidian, Tamil and other sister Dravidian languages being spoken in varying proportions by different sections of the people. Before 8th century A.D. Malayalam had not evolved as a distinctly separate language. Before then a dialect of Tamil peculiar to the South-Western coast was spoken in that region. Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil are the Literary Dravidian languages of South India" (17)

Non-literary Dravidian languages spoken in South India include Kudagu, Badugu, Irula, Korava, Toda, and Kotta. Traditionally, it was believed that Dravidian languages were limited to India, similar to Gondi in the North and Brahui in Baluchistan, apart from the Dravidian languages spoken in the southern region. However, recent linguistic research has revealed the presence of Dravidian languages in South-West Asia and other regions. Also, Lahovary's comparative tables indicate the likelihood of an Eastern Mediterranean origin for the Tamils (Subramnaian, 2005:17).

In Medieval Tamil Nadu, India, language played a crucial role in establishing and

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reinforcing social hierarchies. This research article aims to explore on the connection between social hierarchies and linguistic markers during this period. During Medieval period, society was stratified into various social classes, including the ruling elite, nobility, merchants, and commoners. Language was used as a symbol of social status and served as a clear marker of distinction between these classes. The linguistic practices and variations within the region reflected the complex social structure and power dynamics of the time.

The focus of the study offers a rich and nuanced understanding of how language functioned as both a reflection and a reinforce of the social structures of the time. In this historical context, language was not merely a tool for communication but a significant indicator of one's position within the intricate social hierarchy.

### **Research Questions**

The researcher has endeavored to address the following key questions related to the topic.

1. How did linguistic markers vary among different social classes in Medieval Tamil Nadu?
2. What role did language play in maintaining or challenging the caste system during this period?
3. What was the impact of religious and cultural texts on the linguistic landscape of Medieval Tamil Nadu?

They aim to uncover the intricate relationship between language, social structure, and culture, providing a deeper understanding of the historical context and its lasting impact on the region's linguistic heritage.

### **Discussion**

The medieval period of Tamil Nadu spans a significant era characterized by dynamic cultural, religious, and political developments. This period, roughly from the 6th to the 16th century AD, saw the rise and fall of several powerful kingdoms, the flourishing of literature and art, and the spread of religious movements. The primary language spoken in Tamil Nadu is Tamil. Tamil is not only the official language of the state but also holds the distinction of being one of the oldest living languages in the world. Its history spans over 2,000 years, with a rich literary tradition that dates back to the Sangam period (around 300 BCE to 300 CE), "There is no doubt that the culture of the Tamils belongs to the great and immortal treasures of the world's civilization" (Zvelebil 1956). During the medieval period, Tamil go through significant developments, and its usage in various domains provides insights into the linguistic markers of that era. It reflects a period of dynamic linguistic evolution, characterized by a rich interplay of classical and colloquial styles, the influence of religious

movements, social hierarchies and the integration of external linguistic elements. This period laid the foundation for the modern Tamil language, preserving its ancient roots while evolving to meet the changing cultural and social dynamics.

Tamil Nadu, like many parts of India, was characterized by a well-defined social structure, influenced by various factors including religion, caste, and economic status.

**Caste System:** The caste system played a pivotal role in defining social hierarchies in medieval Tamil Nadu. Society was divided into various castes, which determined a person's occupation, social standing, and the rituals they could perform. The Brahmins, considered the highest caste, were typically priests and scholars. Below them were the Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (laborers). Each caste had its own set of duties and responsibilities, and there was limited mobility between them. Raychoudhary (2005) points out that, "The Brahmins enjoyed the highest status in the society. As the people were unable to understand the Vedic texts, and perform other complex religious ceremonies on their own, a professional class of priests emerged, who were popularly termed as Brahmins. These priests explained the Vedic texts and performed the complex ceremonies and came to occupy a high position in society. The Brahmins not only performed yajnas but also imparted education to the children. They enjoyed supremacy in the spiritual sphere, but were subordinate to the king in secular matter" (48).

Next, the Kshatriya class primarily constituted the ruling and warrior segments. This class included kings, chieftains (amirs), and various officials, who bore the crucial responsibility of upholding peace and stability within their realms. Their duties encompassed safeguarding the nation against foreign incursions and ensuring the fair and just administration of laws and justice.

They also engaged in intellectual and philosophical pursuits. Historical records and texts reveal instances where Kshatriyas, through their profound learning and wisdom, attained positions typically associated with the Brahmins. The Vaishyas mainly consisted of the common people of the Aryan stock. They did not enjoy the privileges enjoyed by the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. One of the passages in AitareyaBrahmana (an ancient Indian collection of sacred hymns) says that a Vaishya is "to be lived on by another and to be oppressed at will." The lowest strata of the society were the Sudras. According to the AitareyaBrahmana, "The Sudra had no right of property against rajanya, especially the king. They did not enjoy any right to receive education, nor could they hear or learn Vedas.

Religious Influence: "South India particularly Tamilakam offers the most fascinating and pre-eminent forms of the regional pattern of the Puranic process and the resulting synthesis of the Northern and Southern traditions in the development of

religion and its social base" (Ganga and Vanaja 2022). Hinduism was the predominant religion and greatly influenced the social structure. The principles of Dharma (duty) and Karma (action and its consequences) played significant roles in maintaining the social order. Additionally, the Bhakti movement, which emphasized personal devotion to a deity over ritualistic practices, began to challenge the rigidities of the caste system during this period.

**Economic Status:** The unequal distribution of wealth was a significant feature of Tamil society from the beginning. The richer people could be found in the royal court, in the merchant quarters and among the warrior class. Wealth did not mean the same thing then. Trade and agriculture were the mainstays of the economy. The prosperity of a region or a community often influences its social standing. Merchants and landowners, for example, could attain significant social status due to their wealth, despite not belonging to the higher castes. Irrigation facilities were made available by the rulers and the aristocracy of the land. The maintenance of that amenity was facilitated by suitable taxes.

**Linguistic Variations:** The Tamil language, with its roots in the Dravidian language family, exhibits a rich tapestry of linguistic variations shaped by historical, geographical, and social factors. Its evolution from Classical Tamil in Sangam literature to the modern forms spoken today mirrors a journey influenced by regional dialects across Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, marked by distinct differences in phonology, syntax, and vocabulary. These variations are further nuanced by the divide between the literary and colloquial forms of Tamil, reflecting different social strata and educational levels. The language has also absorbed influences from Sanskrit, Telugu, and, more recently, English, leading to a dynamic linguistic landscape that continues to evolve in the context of globalization and digital communication, illustrating the vibrant and adaptive nature of Tamil across different communities.

The initial mentions of geographical dialects in Tamil, focusing specifically on regional variations, are documented in the ancient text *Tolkaappiyam* and in early Tamil grammar commentaries. Detailed explorations of these variations, particularly in terms of vocabulary, were conducted by scholars such as Kamil Zvelebil in 1959, T.P. Meenakshisundaram in 1964, G. SrinivasaVarma in 1978, and S. Sakthivel in 1981. It's important to note that these early references primarily address differences in lexicon, rather than in phonology or grammar. Medieval Tamil Nadu boasted distinct regional dialects: the mellifluous tones of the Pandya country in the south, the robust cadences of the Chola heartland, and the lyrical inflections of the Pallava realm in the north. Each region added its unique flavor to the Tamil tongue. K. Zvelebil's *The Smile of Murugan: Tamil Literature of South India* (1973) discusses how the interaction with Sanskrit during the medieval period led to substantial changes in Tamil.

During medieval times, a significant number of Tamil words were substituted with words borrowed from Sanskrit, leading to the obsolescence of many native Tamil terms. This period saw the integration of numerous Sanskrit words into the Tamil language, resulting in the original Tamil equivalents, which were prevalent in earlier Sangam literature, being used minimally or not at all in both medieval and modern Tamil contexts. Below are examples of commonly used Tamil words and their corresponding Sanskrit replacements.

Original Tamil word	Sanskrit word	Nativized word	Meaning
cinam	gøba	køpam	anger
makiñcci	santøsa-	cantøcam	happiness
ariññan	uttama	uttamar	Noble person
uyantøn	adhipati	atipati	leader
en	gani	kani	calculate

(Source: VasuRenganathan)

The use of Sanskrit loanwords, the rise of the Manipravalam (mixture of Sanskrit and old Malayalam) language style, and the development of an agglutinative structure in word forms are key features distinguishing three distinct periods in the Tamil language: old, medieval, and modern.

**Regional Variations:** Studies by T.P. Meenakshisundaram and others have documented the regional dialectical differences in medieval Tamil Nadu. These variations were more pronounced in this period due to lesser mobility and communication among different regions. The regional dialects enriched the language with diverse expressions and idioms. However, they also posed challenges in developing a standardized literary language, which later scholars and grammarians attempted to address.

The linguistic landscape of medieval Tamil Nadu was vibrantly diverse, with regional variations. The Pandya Country (South) was characterized by mellifluous tones, softer consonant sounds, and distinctive vowel pronunciations. Examples include the use of "aa" instead of "a" and "e" instead of "ai." (V. I. Subramaniam, *Evolution of Tamil Dialects*). Chola Heartland (Central) was renowned for its robust cadences, stronger consonant sounds, and a preference for short vowels. Examples include the use of "a" where the South might use "aa" and the emphasis on guttural consonants. Pallava Realm (North) was distinguished by its lyrical inflections, influenced by Telugu and Kannada. Examples include the use of "u" where the South might use "a" and the presence of borrowed vocabulary from neighboring languages. (T. V. Mahalingam, *South Indian Epigraphy*).

The language used by elites and administrators was characterized by heavy Sanskrit

loanwords, intricate grammatical structures, and elevated vocabulary. Examples include extensive use of compound words and a focus on elegant diction. The Bhakti Movement was a literary revolution that employed regional dialects and everyday speech to connect with the masses. Examples include Andal's lyrical verses in Pandiya dialect and Manikkavasagar's powerful narratives in Chola-influenced Tamil. (K. N. Subramanian, *Bhakti Movement in South India*). Sanskrit's influence enriched Tamil vocabulary, grammar, and literary forms like Champu, which intertwined the two languages. Examples include loanwords like "raja" (king) and "grantha" (book).

Trade with Southeast Asia and beyond introduced loanwords from Malay, Pali, and even Arabic, reflecting cultural exchange. Examples include "palayam" (field) from Malay and "kapal" (ship) from Arabic. (A. P. Chettiar, *Maritime Trade of South India*). These linguistic variations offer a window into the social, cultural, and political landscapes of medieval Tamil Nadu, enriching our understanding of its vibrant history.

## **Results**

In medieval Tamil Nadu, the social structure was complex and hierarchical, with different social groups occupying distinct positions in society. These groups included Brahmins (priests and scholars), the ruling class (kings and warriors), merchants (traders and business people), and lower castes (workers and laborers). Each of these groups had its own customs, traditions, and, interestingly, linguistic markers. Brahmins often used Tamil which incorporated a significant amount of Sanskrit words, especially in contexts related to religion, philosophy, and learning. For example, words like 'Dharma' (duty, moral law), 'Karma' (action, deed), and 'Yoga' (discipline) are Sanskrit terms that were common in their speech. The speech of Brahmins was more formal, adhering closely to the grammatical rules. They might have used classical Tamil forms that were less conversational and more structured. Specific terms related to rituals, Vedic texts, and scholarly pursuits were prevalent. Words like 'Yajna' (sacrificial ritual), 'Veda' (sacred knowledge), and 'Acharya' (teacher, scholar) are examples of this.

The language of the ruling class was formal, reflecting their status and authority. This included the use of honorifics and specific terms related to governance and nobility. Their dialect likely included specific vocabulary related to administration, law, and military affairs. Words like 'Arasu' (kingdom), 'Senai' (army), and 'Kattalai' (order, command) exemplify this. In the courts of kings, a more refined and sophisticated form of Tamil was used, possibly mixed with Sanskrit and Prakrit terms, reflecting the influence of various cultures and the diverse origins of court members.

The merchants' dialect was rich in vocabulary related to trade, commerce, and navigation. Terms like 'Vanibam' (trade), 'Nagarathar' (merchant community), and 'Kaasu' (money) were likely common. Due to their trade networks, merchants have incorporated words from other regional and foreign languages into their Tamil dialect, reflecting their extensive trading connections. As merchants interacted with diverse cultures, their language would have been influenced by cultural exchanges, incorporating elements from other languages and dialects they encountered.

The lower castes would have spoken a more colloquial form of Tamil, possibly with regional variations. This form of Tamil would have been more direct and less influenced by Sanskrit. Their language would have included terms specific to their daily work and life experiences. For instance, agricultural terms include 'Vayal' (rice field), 'Kalappai' (plough), and fishing-related terms for coastal areas. Their language was rich in folklore, proverbs, and oral traditions, which played a significant role in their cultural expression. These linguistic differences were not just about vocabulary but also pronunciation, intonation, and usage in different social contexts.

The linguistic differentiation acted as a marker of caste identity, reinforcing social boundaries. The use of Sanskrit and high Tamil in religious and scholarly contexts by Brahmins meant that access to religious texts and advanced learning was often restricted to the upper castes. This helped maintain the Brahmins' position at the top of the social hierarchy.

One of the most significant ways language challenged the caste system was through the Bhakti movement. This religious movement, which gained momentum in medieval Tamil Nadu, promoted the use of local languages (like Tamil) for religious and poetic expression, rather than Sanskrit, which was traditionally used by the upper castes. Many Sanskrit words particularly related to religion, philosophy, and learning, were integrated into Tamil. This led to a form of Tamil that was used in scholarly and religious contexts, enriched with Sanskrit vocabulary. Works like the Thirukkural by Thiruvalluvar, and the Sangam literature, a collection of secular and religious poems, greatly influenced the Tamil language. These texts, which cover a wide range of themes from ethics and morality to love and valor, not only enriched the language but also reflected and shaped the values and thought processes of Tamil society. The proliferation of secular literature and the rich tradition of folk tales and songs in Tamil also played a vital role in shaping the linguistic landscape. These works often used colloquial and regional variants of Tamil, contributing to the language's diversity. The religious and cultural texts were central to education and learning in medieval Tamil Nadu. The study of these texts in traditional 'gurukulams' (schools) and temples played a

significant role in the preservation and propagation of the Tamil language.

The use of different linguistic styles in religious and cultural texts also served as markers of social identity. For example, the classical style of Tamil was often associated with the upper castes, while the colloquial forms were used more widely by the lower castes. The patronage of Tamil literature by kings and chieftains of medieval Tamil Nadu was also a political tool. It was used to assert cultural identity and sovereignty, especially in the context of the larger Indian subcontinent. The texts not only enriched the Tamil language but also played a key role in cultural, social, and religious practices, influencing the very way in which society was structured and functioned.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study elucidates the intricate relationship between language and social stratification during this period. It highlights how linguistic markers were instrumental in both reflecting and reinforcing the prevailing social hierarchies. The research provides a nuanced understanding of how language, in its various forms and practices, played a pivotal role in the social dynamics of Medieval Tamil Nadu, offering valuable insights into the socio-linguistic landscape of the era. This study not only enriches our understanding of historical Tamil society but also contributes to the broader discourse on language's role in social structure.

The research faces potential limitations, primarily in the availability and interpretation of historical linguistic data. Future exploration could delve into a more comprehensive analysis of diverse sources, including oral traditions and archaeological findings. The broader significance of this study ties into the wider historical and anthropological discourse on the interplay between language and social stratification, offering comparative insights with other global contexts and enhancing our understanding of the socio-linguistic dynamics in historical societies.

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