

## **Innovative Contemporary Forms of Tamil Expression**

When one of my colleagues claimed that the oldest languages on the planet no longer left significant imprints upon the vast, interlinking cultural landscape that blanketed the Earth's inhabitants—in his exact words, were “dead”—I could feel my eyes rolling into my skull, a mixture of irritation and amusement overtaking me at this common, yet incorrect statement. My hand inched towards my phone, my fingers itching to prove him wrong in three seconds by pulling up the Vikatan website, before he unceremoniously switched the topic to religious strife in Iraq. Though my colleague was wrong that day, I later realized he was hardly at fault, as Tamil's presence in the modern world is an extreme exception to the fate many dead languages—Latin, Ancient Greek, and Biblical Hebrew, for instance—have faced for the most part. After all, what other classical languages dating back to millennia before Christ's birth continue to be spoken by 100 million people today?

Not only has the language of Tamil survived for so long, but it also continues to thrive in today's rapidly globalizing society, along with the fascinating culture interwoven into it. It has been able to harness tools offered by modernizing technologies and societal practices to both adopt new forms of expression and expand on existing ones.

Poetry, prose, and other written forms of Tamil, while comprising what is perhaps the oldest element of the language, have experienced innumerable forms of improved expression with the advancement of both time and society. As a language, it has existed in both India and Sri Lanka since prehistoric times. The close match between elements of modern Tamil and its primordial form can be accredited to the ancient preservation practices of the language's earliest speakers, without which over 50% of Tamil's ancient vocabulary wouldn't have been integrated into its modern form.

The original scope of early diffusion of the language chiefly encompassed oral practices, including rigid, rote memorization and oral rendition, such as bards passing on ancient stories and legends in the region of Ponnivala. In the long term, these methods were unreliable, as they relied on the power of the human mind to commit precise details and nuances of the language to memory—however, the practice of

inscribing Tamil scriptures on palm leaves and stones soon emerged, with the first records of lithic inscriptions of Asokan Brahmi scriptures dating back to 200 B.C. After these developments in transcription, more complex expressions of Tamil arose in the forms of poetry and prose, notable examples including poems from Sangam literature and couplets in the Thirukkural.

Today, these gems of Tamil literature have been made accessible to the modern world. The efforts of scholars like Tamil Thatha, Ue.Ve. Sa, and C.W. Thamotharampillai, known for converting palm leaf inscriptions into printed books, allow anyone to read and understand ancient adages. Sangam poetry has been compiled into a nine-book set by Vaidehi Herbert and published by Thirumurthi Ranganathan. Previously regarded as too difficult for modern Tamil speakers to interpret, the poetry has also been translated into English by Vaidehi Herbert, enabling both speakers and non-speakers to relish the cultural beauty depicted by the poems. Not just ancient writings have been modernized—the Legend of Ponnivala, originally an epic that was transmitted orally by the singing of bards, has as well. With the assistance of modern technology and the work of experienced linguists, writers, and artists, it was revived in the form of comic books to be enjoyed by members of the 21st century, even being publically available as a series of eBooks with immersive animations and voice-overs. As shown, technological advancements such as printed books and eBook platforms have not only allowed pieces of salvaged Tamil literature to be shared with the world; they have also enhanced cultural immersion by filtering out the obscurities of their ancient forms.

Technology doesn't stop at changing the cultural expression of Tamil in terms of ancient literature—with the recent surge in popularity mobile apps, computers, and the internet have seen over the past decade, modern elements of Tamil culture are exchanged, expressed, and integrated into the global culture at a faster pace than ever before. Tamil's entrance into a worldwide digital realm that circulates around many of its speakers' daily lives has solidified its significance, eliminating the risk of it decaying as either a language or a culture. For instance, though the initial portion of Tamilians that used the internet widely consisted of amateur writers and bloggers, popular writers have started to use the internet as their primary writing platform in the hopes of rapidly gaining an international audience. Tamil writer Jeyamohan is a prime example of this

recent trend; he had first published works such as “Aram” and the “Venmurasu” series on the web, only later having them published as physical books. Twitter is a popular internet platform in particular, used for succinct expressions of Tamil rather than complete stories and articles—in fact, popular Tamil tweets have both been republished by Anantha Vikatan and compiled into books for entertainment purposes. Perhaps the most prominent example of digital technology helping Tamilians is WhatsApp, which, apart from connecting Tamils all over the world in general, was used to organize rescue efforts this winter during the Chennai floods.

Just as literature and general usage of the Tamil language comprise a large portion of the ways Tamil is expressed as a culture, art is an important component of the cultural identity all Tamils share. Many historical sculptures and paintings that depict Tamil culture, created in conjunction with the language itself, are still preserved in temples, Tamil Nadu, and other areas in the world. Every aspect of Tamil art has evolved, to both subtle and enormous degrees, as a result of the increasing access artists have had to digital tools and social media to share their work. Rather than being carved out of stone, for instance, sculptures have been made more permanent by being constructed from various metals following the diffusion of metallurgical practices. Paintings made by Tamilians were once done on leaves and canvases, but now, with the creation of illustration softwares, Tamil artists such as Marudu have been able to reinvent otherwise inaccessible ancient paintings and convert them into digital media. FaceBook enables these artists to share their pieces with other Tamils, receive feedback, and effectively revive Tamil’s artistic culture on a global scale. The uses of FaceBook’s social capabilities don’t extend to merely posting artwork and receiving comments on it, though—recently, Tamil artist Thiru Aras has used FaceBook to publish schedules for his email-offered art lessons.

A final element of Tamil culture morphed by advancements in technology and society, including all of its forms of expression, is the broad domain of Tamil drama and films. Many examples of film-related events intertwine with the Tamil culture on both a local and an international level—for instance, the film “Visaranai” has made well-known appearances at Tamil film festivals in various locations. On a more local level, FeTNA member Swarnavel has even been setting up a short film workshop. Originally, all Tamil dramas contained extreme exaggerations of scenes, usually consisting of 90% of songs

and 10% of actual dialogue. However, with British colonization came the diffusion of Western cinema from Europe, which sparked the spread of a new form of Tamil filmmaking characterized by no music and more plot. The movie that officially broke the former trend was the film “Andha Naal,” which contained no music, dancing, or stunts. The trend set by this film has steadily continued, with films gradually becoming more reality-oriented than based on exaggerated, unrealistic scenes. Additionally, the spread of the notion of Hollywood triggered the creation of Kollywood, a Tamil movie industry very similar to Hollywood in terms of commercialization and profit-based film production. While an old Tamil film may have been comparable to a musical, newer films—such as the recent cinematic hit “Baahubali”—are intensely promoted box-office hits that blend western movie making elements into an Indian storyline. Tamil movie industries have even begun to utilize 3D technologies to appeal to international audiences, and with expected advancements in technologies such as three-dimensional 360-degree movie-watching helmets, the amount of advancements Tamil films are capable of reaching will become limitless. They hold the potential to surpass Western movies in overall value, since combining elements of the Tamil culture dating back millennia with high-tech moviemaking technologies could produce breathtaking, culturally immersive experiences that the Hollywood industry would never be able to create.

Tamil culture in its purest form can be regarded as an unpolished diamond—palm leaf scriptures and stone statues, however culturally valuable, can only receive limited appreciation from those brought up in today’s modern world. However, advancements in contemporary technology have proven to be the secret to cutting and polishing the gem of Tamil culture until it shimmers indefinitely, its luminescence never fading away, available to be forever treasured, expanded, and enjoyed by Tamilians and non-Tamilians alike. In a sense, Tamil is a vast, never-ending canyon of rich culture, constantly expanding with each new gust of wind—getting more beautiful with time.