

## Tradition in Transition: Reinterpreting Tamil Identity in the Modern World

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### Abstract

Tamil literature is among the oldest and most extensive literary traditions in the world, with a continuous history spanning over two millennia. From the Sangam age to the modern period, Tamil literature has recorded the rise and fall of kingdoms, social transformations, philosophical thought, and religious traditions. Once revered as a sacred and divine language, Tamil evolved not only as a medium of artistic expression but also as a carrier of moral, cultural, and spiritual values. While religion and devotion played a significant role in shaping segments of Tamil literature, its scope extended far beyond theology into ethics, politics, love, war, and human existence.

The present study focuses on the transition of Tamil identity in the modern world, with particular emphasis on the Tamil diaspora, cultural transformation, and the changing status of Tamil literature. It examines the growth and global spread of Tamil culture alongside the gradual decline in everyday usage of the Tamil language and literary engagement over time. The research seeks to understand whether modernisation, globalisation, and rapid economic growth have contributed to the evolution of Tamil literature or accelerated its marginalisation.

A key concern of this study is the increasing tendency to treat language not merely as a mode of communication or artistic expression, but as a rigid marker of identity. Tamil, like many classical languages, is often overburdened with symbolic and political meanings, sometimes transforming it into a tool of exclusion rather than inclusion. This research critically analyses how the elevation of language as an identity marker can create discomfort, alienation, and even hostility, leading some Tamil speakers, particularly younger generations and diasporic communities, to prefer universal or global languages in order to avoid social judgment or cultural isolation.

By comparing older and younger generations, homeland and diaspora experiences, and traditional and modern cultural practices, this study argues that while preserving linguistic heritage is essential, using language to divide communities undermines its fundamental purpose. Language should remain a bridge for communication, creativity, and emotional expression rather than a boundary that separates people. In a world defined by diversity, coexistence, and interconnectedness, this research calls for a reinterpretation of Tamil identity, one that is confident, inclusive, and adaptive, allowing Tamil literature and culture to thrive without becoming instruments of division.

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## INTRODUCTION

Language is a key part of being human and how we live every day. It grew over thousands of years, mainly as a way for people to share thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Today, there are many languages around the world, and each one shows the history and culture of its speakers. Tamil, for example, is one of the oldest languages still around, with stories and writings that go back over 2,000 years.

This study looks at how Tamil ethics and writing have grown, and how being modern has changed Tamil stories. Tamil has a long, rich history thanks to poets, thinkers, and leaders who added a lot to its writing and culture. From old poems to books about morals and ideas, Tamil writing has played a big part in shaping what people believe, their culture, and how they think.

Even with this long history, Tamil use has slowly gone down in today's world. Being modern, fast economic growth, and changing school and job goals have changed which languages people like to use, especially among young people and those living in other countries. Though there have been efforts to keep Tamil language and writing alive, people aren't as interested in it, especially in reading. Tamil is now often seen as a sign of identity, which changes how people choose to use it or not.

When a language becomes a strict sign of culture or background, it can be harder for people to use it freely. If a language is closely tied to tradition, religion, or culture, it might stop people from using it, especially in diverse places. On the other hand, common languages like English seem more flexible and neutral, so people can use them without feeling culturally obligated. This openness helps them spread and be accepted around the world.

While a language's age shows its cultural value, it stays relevant if it's helpful, allows free expression, and includes everyone. Language changes in response to people's needs, making it valuable not just for tradition but also for communication, creativity, and mutual understanding. This research aims to explore how the Tamil language and writing can be viewed differently in today's world, beyond just being about identity, so they can continue to grow and remain important in a connected world.

Tamil literature possesses a continuous history spanning over two millennia. It has over 2,000 years of stories, poems, and ideas that touch on people's lives. From old poets to today's writers, stories cover the rise and fall of groups, social changes, beliefs, and life's struggles with religion and ideas. Tamil was once seen as almost sacred, like a way to pass on values, power, and culture. A lot of this writing came from religious ideas, but it has grown into politics, love, war, and humanity.

This research examines the transformation of Tamil identity in the contemporary world. Modern life depends a lot on Tamils living in other countries. Even with these groups around the world, there's a strange thing where Tamil culture is spreading but not used in everyday language and writing. The research asks if modern life has helped Tamil writing grow or pushed it aside.

Language use has become increasingly complex for individuals navigating multilingual and globalised environments. It's not just about talking or creating, but has become a way to show who you are. Common languages are chosen because they're accepted worldwide, not because people want to forget Tamil. The use of English is often perceived as a neutral linguistic choice that allows individuals to avoid identity-based expectations.

By comparing older and younger people, those in India and those outside, we can see how people try to keep their language and culture, but also how language can become a barrier. Language should bring people together for communication, creativity, and expression. It shouldn't be used

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to exclude people. In today's world, ideas have mixed cultures, and people are becoming global citizens. A language's identity shouldn't be used to divide. This research suggests a new way to keep Tamil culture through pride and flexibility in today's world, so Tamil writing can grow without creating division.

Tamil identity has a long history, but it's changing in big ways now. Tamil is thought to be one of the oldest languages still around. It has stories and traditions that have shaped Tamil people for a long time (Pan South African Language Board, 2025). From old poems from around 500 BCE to the Thirukkural, a book of ethics and philosophy, Tamil culture has built a legacy based on morals, society, and imagination (PANSALB, 2025).

But today, Tamil identity is being reshaped by things like globalization, people moving around, changes in politics, and new generations. This writing looks at how Tamil identity has grown over time. It also examines how things like the economy, media, the internet, and shifting values are changing the Tamil language and culture. It pays attention to Tamil literature and why young people don't seem as interested in them. It looks at things like what they want in life, how they feel about their identity, prejudice, and the need to make a living. Other language groups, like Welsh, Māori, and Telugu speakers, are used as examples to show wider patterns of language change around the world. But the focus stays on Tamil identity. Language is looked at as both a way to identify as a group and as a tool to communicate. Depending on the situation, it can make people feel strong or like they're carrying a weight.

### **The Roots of Tamil Identity**

Tamil is seen as a “living language” with a history of writing that goes back over 2,500 years (Pan South African Language Board, 2025). Tamil culture grew mostly in what is now Tamil Nadu and northern Sri Lanka. It created a unique culture with its own literature, philosophy, and art. Old Tamil writings, like the Sangam works, talked about values, nature, feelings, and how society should work through beautiful poems. Later on, religious poems, especially Bhakti poetry, made Tamil culture more accessible to everyone.

One of the most important Tamil books is the Thirukkural, by Thiruvalluvar (around the 1st century CE). It has basic ethical ideas that still matter today (PANSALB, 2025). Besides writings, Tamil identity was also shown through temples, rituals, music, dance, and statues, especially during the Chola period. These things made Tamil more than just a language. It became a symbol of civilization and a source of identity (Indian Journal of Innovative Research in Technology, 2025).

During the time of colonial rule and after, Tamil identity became more political. Groups like Dravidian nationalists saw Tamil as a way to resist colonial powers and what they saw as cultural control. Leaders like E.V. Ramasamy Periyar supported Tamil pride and the idea that non-Brahmins were different. They said Tamil culture was separate from North Indian influences. According to historical records, the protests against Hindi in the mid-1900s, especially in 1965, motivated Tamil youth and showed how much power the language had (Wikipedia, 2025). These events show how Tamil identity was defended as a right to language and culture when faced with outside pressures.

The Tamil people who moved to other countries also shaped Tamil identity. Under British rule, Tamil speakers from South India and Sri Lanka moved to places like Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, Fiji, and Mauritius, often as workers or traders. Even though they faced unfair treatment, racism, and being pushed to the side politically, they kept Tamil language and culture alive through religious groups, schools, festivals, and associations (PANSALB, 2025; IJIRT, 2025). This made Tamil identity in other countries something that was carefully preserved, often even

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more so than in India and Sri Lanka (IJIRT, 2025).

## **Tamil Literature and Cultural Identity**

### **The Importance of Tamil Literature**

The Tamil literature have long been a main part of Tamil identity. Old poems from the Sangam period, stories like Silappadikaram, and religious songs from the medieval period created the moral and emotional base of Tamil society (PANSALB, 2025; IJIRT, 2025). Tamil grammar, explained in books like Tholkappiyam, helped the language stay consistent for centuries. In the 1900s, a new wave of Tamil writing, including novels, short stories, and political pieces, expanded the language's reach. It dealt with issues like social change, caste, gender, and nationalism.

Tamil movies and music also brought stories and culture to the wider public. They became powerful tools for discussing social issues and forming identity (IJIRT, 2025). Together, these art forms not only kept Tamil heritage alive but also shaped how Tamil people saw themselves and their place in the world.

### **Making Tamil sources more flexible**

Despite these efforts, scholars and educators have observed a declining interest among younger generations in traditional Tamil literature. One proposed response to this challenge is the translation of classical and contemporary Tamil texts into other languages. Recent reports indicate that publishers and educational institutions in Tamil Nadu have increasingly undertaken initiatives to translate Tamil literary works for a wider audience. Although translation may not appear to be a direct solution to preserving linguistic authenticity, studies suggest that access to Tamil literature through familiar languages can serve as an effective motivational gateway. Such exposure often encourages readers to develop an interest in the original language, thereby fostering a gradual engagement with Tamil language and literature. The goal is to reach young people and those living in other countries who don't read Tamil well (Kabilan, 2022). Kannalmozhi Kabilan says that these projects want to promote Tamil literature to people who don't usually read Tamil, including Tamils who don't speak the language and people overseas. Translations of important books like Thirukkural and modern stories try to keep readers interested and the culture relevant. This is happening in a world where English is becoming more important. This shows a shift in how culture is passed down. Tamil identity used to be shared mainly through Tamil writings, but now it's often shared through global languages, especially English. This also shows that many Tamil youth see English as more helpful for getting a good education and job (Sriganesh, 2018). But the fact that these translations are happening shows that people still care about Tamil heritage, even when it's expressed in different languages.

### **How Globalization and Living Abroad are Shaping Identity**

Globalization has changed how Tamil identity is experienced. Tamil communities in other countries have become important keepers of Tamil culture, especially in places like Singapore, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and South Africa. In these places, Tamil identity is both local and global. People take part in local cultures while also trying to keep their language and traditions alive through temples, schools, cultural groups, and media (IJIRT, 2025). Festivals like Puthandu and Pongal are celebrated abroad to teach cultural values to young people. This creates a mix of old and new, balancing family ties with modern life.

Research shows that keeping culture alive is often a way to feel like you belong. Surveys suggest that many parents living abroad want their kids to be proud of being Tamil. However, they also encourage them to do well in English-speaking schools and workplaces (Simanjuntak et al., 2024). Sonia Das (2011) has seen that groups like the World Tamil Movement are working to

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preserve heritage. They are creating networks to support Tamil language and culture in different countries.

Technology has made this even easier. Online tools like apps, dictionaries, e-books, and social media provide access to Tamil heritage from anywhere in the world. Projects like putting old writings online and creating Tamil podcasts, YouTube channels, and streaming content have made Tamil culture more available to young people (IJIRT, 2025). Experts say that digital media now connects the old and the new, allowing Tamil identity to survive in a global world.

At the same time, globalization creates pressure. English-language education, international media, and global careers often pull young people away from Tamil. Studies show that English is increasingly used in schools and social settings, leading to a decline in speaking and writing Tamil (IJIRT, 2025). The cultural symbols are retained, but the language is lost.

### Changes in Language Use and How Young People Feel

One of the main things happening with Tamil identity today is that young people are using the language less. records from Singapore show that Tamil is being used less in Indian households. It's being replaced by English at home (Sriganesh, 2018). The value of Tamil in relation to jobs is doubtful. People feel like talking in other languages is more aesthetically pleasing, more choose other languages over the usage of Tamil is often because of the aesthetic advantages.

The same thing is happening in big cities in India, where English-medium schools are seen as better. surveys show that English has become dominant in education. Tamil is becoming more symbolic (IJIRT, 2025). In the Internet, there's not as much Tamil content compared to English media and here, we are not competing with the universal languages rather we are comparing the development of Tamil literature with other well-developed languages and the reason for the tremendous growth compared to the Tamil literature.

Some reasons are that English helps with jobs, alignment with global culture, families speak multiple languages, and Tamil isn't made more significant compared to other languages. It influences how youth speak and what language the youngsters in this generation prefer to use (Sriganesh, 2018). Surveys show that most young Tamil people are proud of that heritage, even if the economic benefits that English gives are comparatively more (Simanjuntak et al., 2024).

### Language as a Source of Pride and a Sign of Difference

Tamil is both a source of pride and a sign that you're different. Tamil identity, political talk, cultural festivals, and Tamil show its recognition (PANSALB, 2025). Studies indicate that Tamil speakers, particularly in diasporic contexts, have experienced stereotyping and social bias based on linguistic identity. (Simanjuntak et al., 2024; Christopher, 2022).

Tamil literature is far more intricate and layered than it is often perceived to be. However, the way Tamil is taught in schools and colleges fails to reflect this depth. The existing methods of instruction require significant change, as the mode of education plays a crucial role in shaping how Tamil literature evolves and survives in the modern era. People do not develop an attachment to a language by chance; they are drawn to it for specific reasons. A language attracts learners when it offers flexibility, expressive freedom, and a certain intellectual and cultural charisma. When teaching methods allow these qualities to surface, the language becomes something to engage with rather than merely study. Without such an approach, even a historically rich and powerful language like Tamil risks being perceived as distant or rigid, rather than vibrant and alive.

### Methodology

To see how Tamil identity is changing today, we chose to do an in-depth study using existing research. We look at language, culture, and identity as things shaped by society and history. So,

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we focus on understanding and explaining them, instead of just measuring things with numbers. We use history, books, language studies, and comparisons between cultures to really get how Tamil identity is changing in today's world.

### Objective of the study

This research is mostly about understanding and exploring ideas. We are not just counting how much the Tamil language is used. We want to know what shapes people's feelings about the language across generations and places. We believe language is not just for talking, but also a way to show who you are and where you belong.

We use an approach that includes different subjects to understand everything that affects Tamil identity. We combine ideas from history, literature, sociology, political science, and cultural studies. This helps me avoid seeing Tamil identity as just about language or politics.

This study is based on information from reliable sources, like:

- Old Tamil writings, like Sangam literature and Thirukkural, to understand the history and values of Tamil identity.
- Modern Tamil books and essays that talk about identity, moving to other countries, caste, gender, and modern life.
- Academic articles about language, diaspora studies, cultural identity, and language politics.
- Government documents and reports about recognizing languages, speaking multiple languages, and protecting culture.
- Surveys and studies about how young Tamil people and those living abroad use the language.
- Studies that compare Tamil speakers with other language communities, like Welsh, Māori, and Telugu speakers.

These sources were picked to give a good sense of history, solid theories, and information that's relevant today.

We use a historical approach to follow how Tamil identity has grown from its beginnings to today. This means looking at how Tamil used to be a key language and how things like colonialism, nationalism, and politics changed its meaning and importance.

We also look closely at different books, both old and new, to see how Tamil literature shows changing ideas about ourselves, society, and belonging. I treat these books as part of the culture and put them in their specific historical and social backgrounds.

My study is guided by these main ideas:

- Is language just a way to talk, or is it also a part of who you are?
- How do tradition and modern life affect Tamil identity?
- Is there pride or shame in Tamil culture?
- Should we focus on protecting the language, or should we let it change?
- How do globalization and local belonging play a role?

These ideas help me understand the information and texts, so I can have a clear and organized look at how Tamil identity is changing.

### Conclusion

In short, Tamil identity is at a turning point, balancing its history with today's changes. Everyone knows about its past, its rich literature, and how long it has lasted, but these things are being tested by things like globalization, the economy changing, the internet, and younger people growing up. Tamil used to be kept alive by families passing it down and being surrounded by the culture. Now, it's different because identity is worked out across different countries, websites,

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and what people think is important.

This writing has shown that Tamil identity is not just about where you live or how pure your language is anymore. Instead, it is being formed more and more by people living in other countries, what has happened in politics, and what is needed in modern life. People who have moved away from their home country have become both guardians and creators, keeping Tamil alive with schools, festivals, and education, while also changing it to fit in with different languages and cultures. At the same time, the internet and translations have changed how Tamil writings and culture are spread. They can now be reached outside of the usual language borders, but this also raises questions about being real, deep, and lasting.

The fact that younger people are not as involved in Tamil writings is not just because they don't care or have lost their culture. Instead, it shows a bigger change in how language is valued in today's world. In fast-growing economies, languages are being judged by how useful they are, how much they let you move around, and how much money they can make. English and other main languages are often seen as ways to get opportunities, while Tamil is pushed to the side as just about heritage, feelings, or symbols. This puts younger Tamils in a tough spot, forcing them to choose between their cultural background and what they need to do to survive.

At the same time, this writing shows that Tamil is still a strong way to show who you are, what you are proud of, and where you belong. But, when language is made too political or seen as a strict way to show identity, it can change from a way to communicate into something that causes worry, exclusion, or even anger. For some speakers, especially those in other countries or who speak many languages, showing their Tamil identity can lead to prejudice or feeling uncomfortable, causing them to avoid the language. This stress shows the problem with being Tamil today: language can be both empowering and make you feel weak.

If Tamil is only seen as something from the past, it could become something only used in ceremonies, not something used every day. Instead, Tamil's future depends on changing in ways that let it grow without losing its values and culture. This includes rethinking education, accepting people who speak many languages, encouraging creative writing, and accepting online and international spaces as real places for cultural expression.

Looking at the experiences of Welsh, Māori, and Telugu people supports this idea. Languages that last in today's world do so not by fighting change, but by dealing with it smartly—through government support, community involvement, and cultural change. Tamil's power lies in its past ability to change, which is clear throughout its writings and cultural growth.

In the end, Tamil identity is not going away; it is being changed. It is becoming more flexible, mixed, and open to discussion, showing the realities of a global society. The challenge, then, is not to protect Tamil from change, but to make sure that change does not take away its respect, depth, and availability. As the Tamil saying reminds us, “The wealth of home is the language of home.” But in a time where home itself has become global, carrying this wealth forward requires being open, adaptable, and understanding language not as a border, but as a link.

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