Sanskrit and Tamil

The six most ancient languages in the world are Sanskrit, Tamil, Hebrew, Arabic, Greek and Latin. All these six are classical languages as well. Of these six classical languages Tamil and Sanskrit are the two classical languages, which flourished in India since very ancient times. I will not give a very long lecture on these two great languages, but rather what I would like to call a bird’s eye-view of these two languages, to enable you to have a fleeting glimpse of greatness and glory of these two hoary languages which together constitute the pride of India.

Sanskrit, the mother of all European languages and of many Indian languages is as old as the hills. The exact antiquity of Sanskrit cannot be established with any degree of certainty. This is because, we have written records only for the past 5000 years. Therefore, history beyond that period is in the realm of fancy and conjecture. The Rig Veda, the oldest among the Vedas is said to be 10,000 years old, if not older. But, there are no written records to prove this fact. But, the fact remains that Sanskrit was the lingua franca of India for thousands of years.

Sanskrit is the foundation of Hinduism. In fact, it can be said without fear of contradiction that without Sanskrit, there is no Hinduism. The four Vedas and the Upanishads, the Brahma-Sutra written by Veda Vyasa, the two epics Ramayana and Mahabharata and the Bhagavad-Gita which forms part of the Mahabharata are all in Sanskrit. There are numerous devotional works and hymns in Sanskrit.

Sanskrit literature is one of the richest in the world. The number of standard works in Sanskrit is mind-boggling and runs into several hundreds. In ancient times, some Kings were also erudite scholars. For example, Harshavardhana who ruled a large segment of North India between 606 to 647 AD was an erudite Sanskrit scholar and wrote a number of literary works in Sanskrit like Nagananda, Rathavali and Priyadarsika. Small wonder that since not only scholars, but also some kings contributed to the growth and development of Sanskrit literature, that hoary language has prodigious amount of literature. Sanskrit grew from strength to strength, so long as India was ruled by Hindu Kings. It reached the pinnacle of its glory during the Golden Age of the Guptas. Indeed, the Golden Age of the Guptas was also the Golden Age of Sanskrit. Kalidasa, the tallest literary figure in Sanskrit and author of plays like Meghaduta, Abhijnana-Sakuntalam, Kumara Sambhava, Raghuvamsa etc. lived during this period. It is not only literature but also all forms of art and science had a luxuriant growth and development during the Gupta rule. Varahamihira, an eminent scientist lived during the Gupta age and wrote brilliant works on various faculties like astronomy, geography and botony. His brilliant works include Brihat Samhita and Loghu
jataka. Alya Bha, the great mathematician, laid the foundation of the number system. Zero was invented by him. He was also a great astronomer who wrote Surya Siddanta, in which he proved that the earth revolved round its axis. Many such examples can be cited to prove that it is not only art and literature, but also science and technology made rapid strides during the Golden Age of Guptas. Decimal system was invented during the Gupta period.

Sanskrit is a veritable storehouse of knowledge and there are standard text-books in it in all faculties or disciplines including science, technology, mathematics, astrology, astronomy, botany, medicine etc. So, it is not as if Sanskrit is literature alone, including devotional literature and nothing else. It is gratifying that the Government of India is doing its level best to promote the learning of Sanskrit in India, including spoken Sanskrit. Dr. Murali Manohar Joshi, Human Resources Development Minister is trying his level best to restore Sanskrit to its pristine glory. This is a good augury, because Sanskrit and Indian culture and civilisation have been indissolubly bound together, right from antiquity. However, this alone is not enough. The greatness and glory of Sanskrit must spread throughout the world. This is possible only if all the important works in Sanskrit are translated into English. Max Mueller translated the Rig Veda and the principal Upanishad into English. There are several English translations of the Bhagavad-Gita. What remains to be done is that the works in Sanskrit which have not been translated into English so far must now be translated.

I shall now give a brief resume of Tamil literature. If there is any Indian language which is equal to Sanskrit it is Tamil only and not any other Indian language for that matter. Sanskrit is a match for Tamil. Conversely, Tamil is a match for Sanskrit in grandeur and greatness.

It is difficult to say how old Tamil is. But, it is the considered opinion of Dr.M.Varadarajan, an outstanding Tamil scholar that it is 25,000 years old. It has a vast repertoire of classical works. The earliest extant classic in Tamil is, of course, Tolkappiam, which is said to be 5000 years old. But, there are references in Tamil literature about works earlier to Tolkappiam, but these have been irretrievably lost to posterity. Generally speaking Silappadigaram, Chintamani, Manimekalai, Valayapathi and Gundalakesi are considered as five great classics in Tamil literature, of which the last two have been lost to posterity. But, the greatest classic in Tamil literature is undoubtedly Kamba Ramayanam, an epic poem of around 12,000 verses, written in grandiose style. The number of literary works in Tamil is legion. And each literary work has a distinctive flavour of its own. For example, Villibharatam, excels in the use of choice diction and resonant rhymes while Kalingathu Bharani glorifies heroism on the battlefield. There are also several devotional works in Tamil like Devaran, Tiruvachagam, Thiruppavai, Tiruvembavai, Nalayirathu Divya Prabandam, Thiru Arutpa and Thiruppugazh, to mention only a few among them. This is because piety has been the hallmark of Tamils since antinquity.
One of the greatest works in Tamil which is of timeless value is, of course, Tirukkural, containing nuggets of wisdom. There are several commentaries on it, but that by Parimalazhagar is regarded as the best by erudite scholars. Modern students of Tamil literature can make profitable use of the rendition of the Tirukkural into simple prose by Dr.M.Varadarajan, a name to conjure with Tamil literature. His work Kallo Kaviyamo is a masterpiece, which has won wide acclaim.

The history of Tamil literature can be divided into two periods namely Tamil literature before the advent of British rule and Tamil literature after the establishment of the British rule in India.

Before the British set foot on our soil, Tamil literature had a stunted and lopsided growth. There was superabundant poetry, a small amount of turgid prose and little else.

The renaissance of Tamil language/ literature took place only during the British regime. New forms of writing in Tamil never known before, like skit, modern prose, article, essay, drama, one-act play, short story, novel, satire etc. blossomed only after scholars and writers in Tamil were exposed to English and its literature. Thus, English contributed to the variegated and multifarious growth of Tamil literature in no small measure. Those who inveigh against English and plead for monolinguism i.e. Tamil only must not forget this patent fact.

The twentieth century was a watershed in Tamil literature. There were hundreds of writers in Tamil who tried all forms of writing with success as explained earlier. Tamil periodicals like Ananda Vikatan, Kalki, Kumudam, Amuda Surabi and Kalaimagal gave a big boost to the prolific growth of Tamil literature notably novels, which were serialised and published as short stories and essays

Tamil prose and poetry also underwent a transformation during the 20th century. The trend-setter in modern Tamil prose was T.V.Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, affectionately known as Thiru-vi-ká, while the trend-setter in modern Tamil poetry was Subramania Bharathi. In short, the largest and varied output in Tamil literature came about only in the twentieth century, the Golden Age of Tamil literature.

The British regime also enabled foreign scholars to learn Tamil language and its literature, owing to which the greatness and glory of Tamil literature spread to many foreign countries. For example, Tirukkural was first translated into English by G.U. Pope. Subsequently, there were other translations of Tirukkural. Now, there is a Penguin edition of Tirukkural about which every Tamil can feel proud. Other foreign scholars who learnt Tamil include John Caldwell and Joseph Beschi, who changed his name as Veeramamunivar.
Thus you will understand that for the prolific and variegated growth of Tamil literature, a good command of English is absolutely essential. I hope that in the years to come many Tamil students will master English and translate all the important works in Tamil into English so that foreign scholars may know about the immensity of literary output in Tamil. Likewise, foreigners who want to learn Tamil must be provided all facilities in Tamil Nadu. Well, these are the two ways to spread the greatness and glory of Tamil around the world.

Till now, I have given you a resume of Sanskrit and Tamil literature. Now, I will dwell on the growth of both Tamil and Sanskrit literature in Tamil Nadu since ancient times.

The ancient Tamils regarded both Tamil and Sanskrit as their two eyes, as some Tamil scholars have stressed time and again. They learnt both these languages with equal fervour.

There is no poet without a patron. Therefore, if both Tamil and Sanskrit flourished simultaneously in Tamil Nadu from ancient times, it was only because Tamil Kings patronised both Tamil and Sanskrit without any discrimination. Kanchi was a great seat of learning Sanskrit in ancient times.

Many Tamil scholars were equally proficient in Sanskrit too in ancient times like Agathiyar, Tolkappiar and others. It is debatable whether Kambar would have written his magnum opus Kamba Ramayanarn with such unrivalled excellence, but for his commendable proficiency in Sanskrit. Some poets, as for example, Villiputhurar and Arunagirinathar blended both these languages in their poems judiciously. In fact, there was a time, not long ago, when only those who were proficient in both languages were regarded as scholars by the academicians. That was about 150 years ago.

But, four outstanding Tamil scholars namely Subramania Bharati and his friends and disciples Bharatidasan, Swami Vedachalanarn who changed his name into pure Tamil as Maraimalai Adigal and V.K.Suryanarayana Sastriar who changed his name into pure Tamil as Paridimaal Kalaignar fomented Tamil frenzy among the people of Tamil Nadu, through their speeches or writings or both. Some Tamil scholars like Na valar Somasundara Bharathiyar denigrated Sanskrit. As if this was not enough, there were some politicians who launched in season and out of season vitriolic tirades against Sanskrit and branded it as an alien language. Hence Sanskrit began to languish in Tamil Nadu since the dawn of the twentieth century after flourishing continuously for thousands of years in Tamil Nadu.

There are many Western scholars who learn Sanskrit even today and realise much to their pleasant surprise that it is a veritable treasure trove.
There are many Muslims who learn Sanskrit in India and abroad even today. Recently, a Muslim scholar had translated the Bhagavad-Gita into Urdu from Sanskrit. Mr. M. M. Ismail, former Chief Justice of Madras High Court, who is propagating the greatness and glory of Kamba Ramayanam is well up in Sanskrit and speaks fluently in that language.

When western scholars who are Christians and Muslims in India and abroad learn Sanskrit, there is no reason why Tamils should not emulate the shining example of their forbears and start learning Sanskrit right from now onwards. I hope you will ponder over this issue in all earnestness.

I have hitherto made a comparative analysis of Sanskrit and Tamil literature and explained with facts and figures as to how both Tamil and Sanskrit flourished in Tamil Nadu simultaneously since ancient times.

R.P. Sethu Pillai, a distinguished Tamil savant has said in one of his essays in Tamil that both Sanskrit and Tamil had a luxuriant growth by God's grace. It is hoped that both these ancient and classical languages will be learnt with avidity not by the people in India, but also by scholars in all countries around the world, so that India's priceless and peerless heritage may be known the world over, as a result of which India's prestige will soar throughout the globe.