

# Tamil Orthography Reforms

Jan Kučera

*Abstract.* In this paper, we look into two Tamil orthography reforms, one attributed to Constanzo Beschi, who wrote a Tamil grammar in 1728, and one attributed to E.V. Ramasamy, which was implemented by a government order in 1978. We evaluate their contributions to the reforms and introduce them in the contemporary historical and political context. This includes topics of *pulli*, distinguishing short and long vowels, and alternative forms of letters.

## 1. Introduction

The Tamil script is used to record the Tamil language in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, and Mauritius, but also other countries with Tamil diaspora. Apart from the Tamil language, it has also been used to write other languages, such as Arabic or various minority languages in the area (e.g., *baḍagu*, *irula*, *kōtta*).

Two successful orthography reforms have taken place during the development of the modern Tamil script. The first one is associated with the Italian Jesuit priest Constanzo Beschi (1680–1747), a missionary in South India. He is typically credited with introducing grapheme ꣳ *ē* for long vowels *ē* and *ō*, typographically differentiating ர *ra* from ர̄ *ā*, and marking the lack of implicit vowels in this abugida by using what is known as ீ *pulli*.

The second orthography reform was enacted by a government order in 1978. It is generally credited to a popular Indian activist E.V. Ramasamy, also known as Periyar, and it was introduced for the centenary of his birthday. The reform involved unifying the orthography of syllables with long ீ *ā* and ௐ *ai* (i.e., ௐ *nā* became ௐ *nā*, ௐ *nai* became ௐ *nai* etc.).

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Jan Kučera  0000-0002-0251-3227

Institute of Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, nám. Jana Palacha 2,  
116 38 Praha 1, Czech Republic

E-mail: jan.kucera@ujca.cz

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These two reforms could not be more different. While the former was practically single-handedly introduced owing to the small number of printers established by missionaries at the time, the latter spanned over 50 years of public discussion, conflicting interests and philosophies. In this paper, we look into the background and aftermath of these two reforms and recount the contributions of the people attributed as their creators.

## 1.1. Overview of the Tamil Script

The Tamil script has a long history developing from two branches of *brāhmī*. Some letters were taken from the *vaṭṭeḷuttu* script, which emerged from the Tamil-Brahmi variant, and some letters were taken from the *grantha* script, which developed from the Southern Brahmi variant. The modern letterforms started to take shape in the 14th century; see Figure 1.

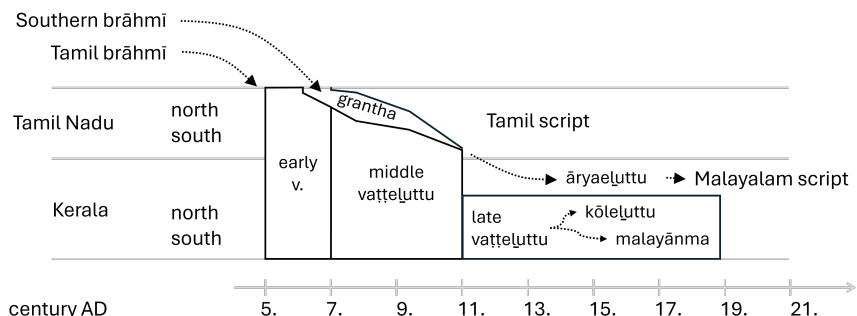


FIG. 1. Variants of *vaṭṭeḷuttu*<sup>1</sup>

Like other scripts developed from *brāhmī*, the Tamil script is a typical Indic abugida, where unmarked consonants represent syllables with an inherent vowel, and syllables with different vowels are marked using mostly consistent vowel marks, for example:  $\text{pa}$   $\text{pā}$   $\text{pi}$   $\text{pī}$   $\text{pu}$   $\text{pū}$   $\text{pe}$   $\text{pē}$   $\text{po}$   $\text{pō}$   $\text{pai}$   $\text{pau}$ . Pure consonants, i.e., consonant without any vowel, are marked by a dot above (*pulli*):  $\text{p}$ .

However, Tamil does not have aspirated or voiced consonants like *pha*, *ba*, *bba* etc., so the number of letters is significantly lower than in

1. Dating after Mahadevan (2021), Vielle (2008), 𑌕𑌕𑌕𑌕85, Sām (2006). The ratio of inscriptions written in *vaṭṭeḷuttu*, *grantha* and the Tamil scripts within the area of Tamil Nadu between 6th and 10th century AD after Govindaraj (1994, p. 14).

other Indic scripts.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other Indic scripts, the Tamil script also does not form conjuncts—pure consonants are always fully represented (e.g., க்க *kka*). The only exception is the conjunct க்ஷ *kṣa* from the *grantha* script used in words of foreign origin.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2. Printing Until 18th Century

Tamil is at the very beginning of the history of printing press in India. The first book printed in any Indic script, *Doctrina Christam en Lingua Malauar Tamul*, was printed in 1578 in Goa by the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries.<sup>4</sup> This printer was moved to Cochin (*kocchin*) shortly thereafter and ceased printing in a few years. In the 17th century, the Jesuits founded a Syrian press that eventually ended up in Ambalakad (*ampalakkātu*) as the only printer printing in Tamil at the time (Kalapura, 2007, pp. 445–7, சம்பந்தன் [Campantaṇ], 1980, p. 48). Finally, a Danish missionary established a printer in Tranquebar (nowadays *tarankampāṭi*) at the beginning of the 18th century. Its first publication in Tamil was a part of the New Testament printed in 1714, see Figure 2.

Figure 2 is a good example of the Tamil orthography in practice shortly before the changes introduced by Constanzo Beschi. Even though the letters have been slightly updated from the first prints in the 16th century, the orthography remained the same as in the early prints. The first row of green rectangles in Figure 2 is pointing out the lack of *pullis* to mark the pure consonants. In modern orthography, the line would read ஏகக்கிறீஷ்த்து *ēcukkiriṣttu*. The blue rectangle in the following row is marking two different letters that look identical, the first one being *ra* and the second one being the vowel mark *-ā*. In modern orthography, the line would read நாதரானவர் *nātarāṇavar*. Finally, the two red rectangles at the bottom denote vowels of different length. The first one is short, and remains ொ in modern texts, while the second one is long and is now written as ோ. These ambiguities alone mean that reading the text requires non-trivial language knowledge. According to Burnell, the orthography in this publication is identical to the one used in Tamil inscriptions of the 15th and 16th centuries (Burnell, 1968, p. 45).

2. On the other side, Tamil adds 4 letters of its own: ழ *ḷa* ள *ḷa* ழ *ḷa* ழ *ḷa* and ன *na*. For imported words, additional 4-5 *grantha* letters are usually listed as part of the modern Tamil alphabet.

3. There is also a fixed syllable ழ் *ṣṛi*. Note that Tamil used to join letters in the past, not only in handwritten manuscripts, but also in printed publications. Burnell (1968, p. 46) suggests mostly in the 16th century, rarely in the 17th century, but we can also see them later, e.g., on Figure 4 from 1809.

4. Available at <https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:53909112>. For the fascinating story of the early years of printing press in India see Priolkar (1958)

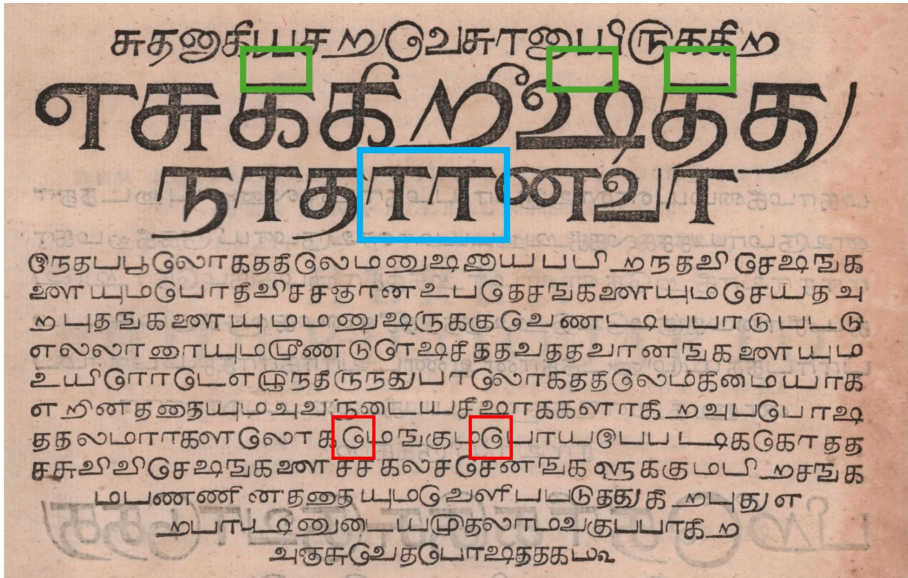


FIG. 2. The title page of New Testament, the first book of Protestant mission in Tranquebar (1714). From Tai (2021, p. 20) (cropped and annotated)

## 2. The Reform of Constanzo Beschi

Constanzo Beschi (Tamil name *vīramāmunivar*) was an Italian Jesuit who arrived in India in 1710 and eventually settled not far from Tranquebar (Blackburn, 2003, p. 45). In 1728, he composed a Latin-Tamil grammar, which also includes an introductory chapter on the number and form of Tamil letters. It was published in print in 1738:

1. To express *a* short, they add nothing to the consonant, and the same figure, viz., க, expresses both the simple consonant *k*, and the syllable *ka*; and so of the rest; which certainly cannot be approved, and will give no light trouble to beginners.

2. To express *ā* long, they add the figure ஁. [...] Yet since the said figure ஁, may also be the letter *ra* it is liable to become equivocal [...]; wherefore some to distinguish them, write ர, when the figure expresses *ā* long; but when it is to be taken for *ra*, they after [Sanskrit] fashion, slightly bend up the anterior stroke and write ர்.

But in their Grammar called நன்னூல் [*nanṇūl*], as well to distinguish *ā* long from the letter *ra*, as the simple consonant form the consonant joined with *a* short, they teach certain marks to be written over them, which they call புள்ளி [*puṇṇi*]; [...]. As regards the second æquivocation, if this figure ஁ is to signify *a* long, nothing will be superscribed; but if it is to express the short syllable *ra*, the mark is to be superscribed; e. g. the word தரம் without any mark you may read *tām*; with this mark தரம் you may read *taram*. [...]

In the same way when the figure expressing *e* short and *ē* long, *o* short and *ō* long, is the same, for the sake of distinction they direct that mark <sup>˘</sup> to be superscribed over the short letters, the long being left unmarked. Thus மெய்<sup>˘</sup> is read *mēy* long, [...] மெய்<sup>˘</sup> is read *mey* short [...].<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, excepting in some few expressions, I have no where seen these marks superscribed; which certainly would be very useful, especially to beginners, an omission arising perhaps from the laziness of transcribers. I also state that I have devised another and easier way of distinguishing *ē* and *ō* long from *e* and *o* short: viz., when the letter ட called *kombu* serves for both, if this is written in its simple form it will be *e* short and *o* short: but if it be turned in into the upper part, as I shall mention below of *i* long, in this way ே, it will be *ē* and *ō* long. Thus மெய், *mey* short; but ேமய் long. [...] Which plan has been approved by many persons who have not disdained to follow it. (Beschi, 1738, pp. 5–8), English translation by Mahon (Beschi, 1848, pp. 6–7), modern transliteration)

It should be noted that matters of non-standard orthography are very unreliably preserved in printed editions. Figure 3 shows several editions of this work, all using different type and different marks, in some of the cases making the text completely incomprehensible. Even more interestingly, important parts of the quoted text are not present in the handwritten manuscript of 1728 and appear only in print in 1738, as pointed out below.

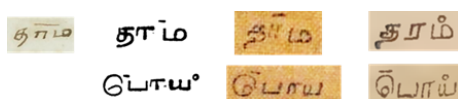


FIG. 3. Different editions of Beschi's introductory chapter. The first row shows the word *taram* in the text quoted above. The second row shows *poy* from the part explaining *pulli*. Note the different positions of the marks, the lack or addition thereof, and the modern form of ர at the top right. Right to left: English translation (Beschi, 1848), Latin reprint (Beschi, 1813), first edition (Beschi, 1738), original manuscript from 1728<sup>6</sup>

## 2.1. (Re)introducing *pulli*

Depending on the background of authors, Beschi is often said to have introduced or reintroduced the *pulli* into the Tamil script. There are several Tamil inscriptions already in both *brāhmī* and *vaṭṭeḷuttu* that use *pulli* for marking pure consonants, so there is no question about this practice

5. In the Latin edition of 1738, the marks are indeed printed right to the letters, with the only exception of ர (Beschi, 1738, p. 8).

6. Available at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10029450z/>.

predating Beschi by many centuries.<sup>7</sup> The *pulli* is usually not present on palm-leaf manuscripts, likely to avoid damaging the palm leaves with holes, and this concern is not applicable to printed publications.

A more interesting observation is what *pulli* means to Beschi. The word *pulli* can be translated not only as a dot, but also as a mark in general. Beschi is referring to a system of marks described in *nannūl*, a Tamil grammar from around the 13th century. As can be seen from the examples in the quoted text (which are present in the first printed edition but not in the hand-written manuscript), it not only includes the dot for marking pure consonants, but it also includes the line above to mark syllables with short *a*. Moreover, these marks are to be written if and only if there is a possibility of ambiguity, so even the dot is not used as often as in modern texts. We can see this system in practice, for example, in the Fabricius' Tamil-English dictionary published in 1809; see Figure 4.

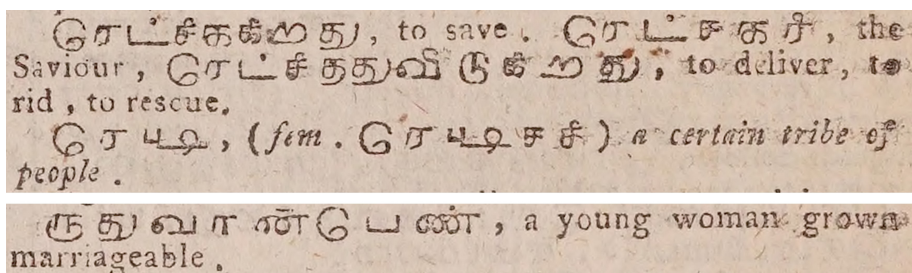


FIG. 4. Examples from the second edition of Fabricius' Tamil-English dictionary published in 1809 (Fabricius and Breithaupt, 1809, p. 169)

Note that the double consonants such as க்கி *kki* or த்து *ttu* do not carry dots, but த்சி *tsi*, as well as the final ர் *r* in the first row and the final ண் *n* in the bottom entry are marked.<sup>8</sup> The bottom entry also shows the line above ண *na* explicitly marking the short *a*: *rutuvāṇaṇ*, not *rutuvāṇṇ*.

Hence, Beschi's mention of this system does not seem to account for the modern usage of *pulli* as a dot on every consonant without an implicit vowel. Beschi himself notes that he has not seen this system used apart from a few exceptions, and while recognizing its potential for learners of the language, he rarely utilizes it in his grammar himself.

7. For a good reference on early Tamil inscriptions, see Mahadevan (2003).

8. Interestingly, only the letter ர் *ra* uses the ring form of the mark rather than a simple dot. We see a similar difference in treatment of ர் *ra* already in the 1738 edition of Beschi's grammar. As a sidenote, the second entry shows an example of a Tamil ligature of டி *ṭi* in print as late as 19th century.

## 2.2. Distinguishing *ra* and *-ā*

It is true that Beschi in his grammar systematically distinguishes *ra* and *-ā* by using ர and ா, respectively. He also clearly states that some to distinguish them, write [...], suggesting this had already been the practice of others before, and he should not be considered the inventor of the altered shape.

Some fonts include the bent anterior stroke only when the identity of the letter is unclear. When the *pulli* or some vowel marks are attached (such as in the case of ரி *ri* ரீ *rī*), it is clear the letter cannot be a vowel. Beschi does not seem to be consistent in this regard and the printed edition does not always match the handwritten manuscript; see Figure 5 for an example.

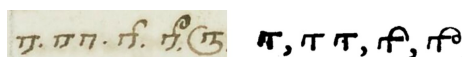


FIG. 5. Syllables ர *ra*, ா *rā*, ரி *ri*, ரீ *rī* from a list of syllables. Left: Beschi's handwritten manuscript from 1728. Right: First printed edition in 1738 (Beschi, 1738, p. 10)

The *ra* vs. *-ā* pair was not the only ambiguity in the script. There is also ள, which can be either *la* or the right part of the vowel mark for *-au*: கௌ *keḷa* (especially with the pure consonants unmarked, *keḷ*) but also கௌ *kau*. Beschi comments on this:

For the diphthong *au* they place ூ before each letter, and ள after: thus கௌ *kau*, தௌ *tau*, &c. But it might be read also *kēl*, *bear*; and *tēl*, *a scorpion*; wherefore this way of writing is seldom used; but in the place of the diphthong they write *a* short and add the consonant *v*. Thus the noun *kauvai* they seldom or never write கௌவை, but கவ்வை [*kavvai*]. (Beschi, 1848, p. 7, modern transliteration)

Consequently, no system was proposed to disambiguate this case by Beschi, but as we will see later, it became a point of discussion, a spelling reform and its retraction in the 20th century.

## 2.3. Distinguishing Short and Long Vowels *e/o*

The change clearly attributable to Beschi is the introduction of the grapheme ே to denote long vowels *ē* and *ō* (the *o* vowel consists of the vowel mark for *e* to the left and the vowel mark for *ā* to the right of the consonant). As quoted above, Beschi states he invented this distinction. More interestingly, there is no word to that effect or any usage of it in his 1728 handwritten manuscript; it appears only in 1738 in print.

Special attention should be paid to his explanation: if it be turned in into the upper part, *as I shall mention below of ī long [...]*. In the Tamil script, the long *ī* is usually distinguished by a curl at the end of the stroke: கி *ki*, கீ *kī*, நி *ni*, நீ *nī*, தி *ti*, தீ *tī* etc., but also ரு *ru*, ரூ *rū*, து *tu*, தூ *tū* etc. It is therefore quite natural to use the same idea of prolongation on the vowel mark for *ē*.

The modern form of *ē* has masked this origin with both loops being identical,<sup>9</sup> but with the above note, it is clear that while the lower loop constitutes the core identity of the vowel, the upper loop is just the prolongation curl. And indeed, the original shape of the long *ē* reflects this imbalance visually, except that not all printed editions managed to preserve it; cf. Figure 6.

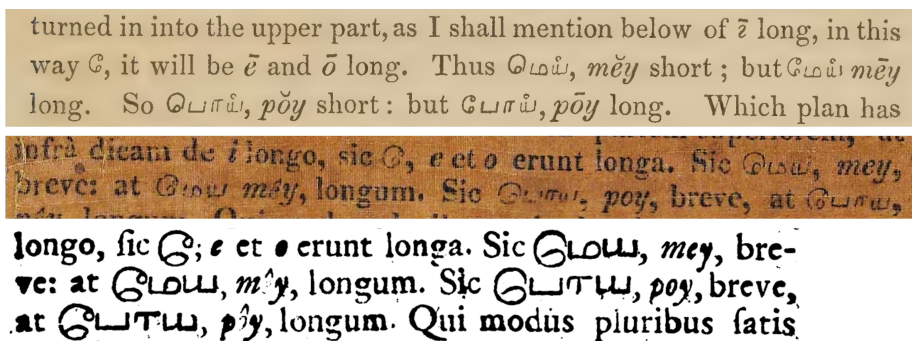


FIG. 6. Excerpt from the quoted text introducing *ē* in three different editions. Notice the different relative sizes of the upper and lower loops. Top: Beschi (1848, p. 7). Middle: Beschi (1813), Bottom: Beschi (1738, p. 8)

A similar topic re-emerges during the 20th century reform with regards to the initial vowel for *ī*. Tamil currently uses quite an unexpected *ī* form coming from the *grantha* script, but an alternative form exists that applies the same principle of a prolongation curl: இ *i*, இ *ī*. This form, sometimes claimed to be the native Tamil form, was occasionally used in publications in the 19th century. For an example, see Figure 7.

9. Such shape is shown in a type specimen as early as 1854 from the Vepery mission (Marr, 1969, p. lviii).

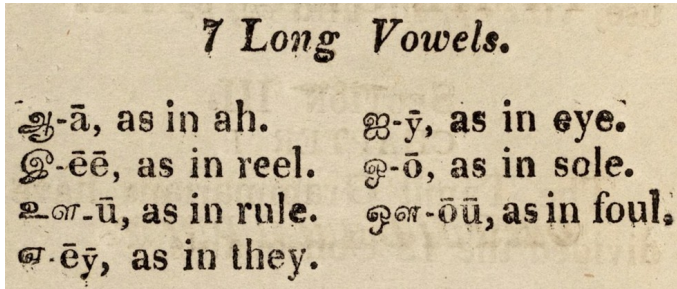


FIG. 7. An example of a publication using an alternative form of long *ī* (Rhenius, 1838, p. 2)

### 3. The Reform of E.V. Ramasamy

#### 3.1. Political Background

The 20th century was a fairly busy period for what is now Tamil Nadu, with many social and nationalist movements taking place. At the end of the 19th century, the classical Tamil works known as *Sangam literature* were rediscovered (Zvelebil, 1992, p. 46). That elevated the Tamil language to historical significance and resulted in Tamil becoming the second Indian language declared a classical language (after Sanskrit). That way the Tamils gained a sense of belonging to a literary, linguistic and religious past, which separates them from other Indians—especially Brahmins, who represent the northern Aryan culture, and who put Sanskrit and its importance above Tamil (Kailasapathy, 1979, p. 24).

In 1915, Vedachalam Pillai (*vētācalam*) founded a pure-Tamil movement with the goal of getting rid of any foreign words from Tamil, especially the Sanskrit ones. In the same year, a political party called Justice Party (*nītik kaṭci*)<sup>10</sup> was created with the goal to protect and promote the political interests of non-Brahmin Hindus. The movement and the party complemented each other in trying to become free from Sanskrit influences (*ibid.*, p. 29). The concept of clean Tamil applied to the script too: the Tamil letters are completely adequate to express all the required phonemes; therefore, there is no need for the *grantha* letters or any reforms introducing new letters.

In 1925, E.V. Ramasamy (*ī. ve. irāmacāmi*), also known as Periyar (*periyār*),<sup>11</sup> launched the Self-Respect Movement (*cuyamariyātai iyakkam*), fighting for equality of all castes. This was later merged with the Jus-

10. South Indian Liberal Federation at the time (*teṇṇintiya nala urimaic caṅkam*).

11. Literally Great Man, a title given to him by a conference of Tamil Women while he was in prison (Kandasamy, Smarandache, and Kandasamy, 2005, pp. 108–109).

tice Party and renamed to Dravidar Kazhagam (*tirāviṭar kaḷakam*). The Indian National Congress came to power in 1937, establishing Hindi as a mandatory language in schools, resulting in wide protests in Tamil Nadu<sup>12</sup> led by Periyar until the decision was retracted (i.e., 3 years). A similar situation repeated in the 1960s after India gained independence and Hindi was again to become the only official language of India. Periyar proclaimed that the only way to stop the attempts of Hindi domination was a separate country—originally Tamil Nadu, later Dravidistan, a country for all Dravidians—which became the main purpose of this movement (Hardgrave, 1965, p. 27).<sup>13</sup>

### 3.2. Early Attempts

Between around 1930 and 1980, discussions about Tamil script reform were taking place in Tamil Nadu as well as other countries with Tamil population, most notably Malaysia and Singapore. Eventually, the government enforced the reform on the 19th October 1978 by a governmental order No. 1875.

Even before proposals to change individual letters and syllables, some called for adjusting the script for functional reasons. In his 1914 book *The System of Writing and Pronunciation in Tamil* (*tamilil elutumuraiyum uccarippu muraiyum*) M. Rangasarya proposed to add three vowels to the Tamil script to record phonemes of the northern languages (பாலகந்தரம் [Pālacuntaram], 1982, pp. 2–3). Even Subramania Bharati, a prominent Tamil writer, wrote in 1915 that as the communication with the world increases, many new letters will be needed to write foreign names (சண்முகம் [Caṇmukam], 1978, p. 3). Since then, the society was split into those asking for new letters, mostly from the *grantha* script, and those like in the pure-Tamil movement, arguing that the current set is more than enough and preferring to remove letters.

The Tamil script reform as we know it today started in the 1930s. While it is usually connected to the name of Periyar who was trying to enact it and at whose centenary the government issued the order, we can find calls for these changes even before Periyar became involved.

The editor of the *Kumaran* weekly newspaper published an article *Reform in Tamil Letters* (*tamil eluttil tiruttam*), in which he points out several difficulties involved in learning the Tamil script: the differences between short and long initial vowels, the irregularity of forming syllables using *-ai* and *-ā*, and also the irregular form of the syllable கூ *kū*. He proposed

12. The state of Madras at the time.

13. The separatist tendencies diminished after the reorganization of India based on languages in 1956 and were eventually outlawed by the 16th amendment to the constitution in 1963 (Kothari, [1970?], p. 331).

a regular formation of syllables according to Table 1, and encouraged scholars, writers and editors to consider his proposal and publish their thoughts (முருகப்பா [Murukappā], 1930). The title page of that newspaper issue was published using the newly proposed orthography.

TABLE 1. Changes to the Tamil script proposed in the *Kumaran* weekly (1930)

|            | before | after |           | before | after |
|------------|--------|-------|-----------|--------|-------|
| <i>nā</i>  | ண      | ணா    | <i>no</i> | னெ     | னொ    |
| <i>rā</i>  | ற      | றா    | <i>ro</i> | றெ     | றொ    |
| <i>nā</i>  | ன      | னா    | <i>no</i> | னெ     | னொ    |
| <i>nai</i> | னை     | னா    | <i>nō</i> | னே     | னோ    |
| <i>lai</i> | லை     | லா    | <i>rō</i> | ரே     | ரோ    |
| <i>lai</i> | லை     | லா    | <i>nō</i> | னே     | னோ    |
| <i>nai</i> | னை     | னா    |           |        |       |

Half a year later in 1931, almost a full-page article was published in the same newspaper, titled *Letters and Their History* (*eluttukkaḷum avarriṇ carit-tiramum*) on writing scripts throughout history, supporting reforms as a natural part of their developments (ரத்னம் [Ratnam], 1931). The history of the Tamil script itself was the subject of essays of A.C. Suppaiya (*cuppaiyā*) published at the beginning of 1933 in a Singaporean weekly *Progress* (*munṇērram*) (பாலசுந்தரம் [Pālacuntaram], 1982, p. 8, சுப்பையா [Cuppaiyā], [1935], p. i).<sup>14</sup> Apart from the irregular syllables with *-ai* and *-ā*, complete abolition of the *ai* and *au* vowels was proposed, replacing them with *ay* and *av* respectively, effectively proposing a spelling reform as well. Finally, the author pointed out a still contemporary practice of using the old form of initial *ī* (i.e., இ instead of ஈ), not coincidentally, in textbooks for children (பாலசுந்தரம் [Pālacuntaram], 1982, Kandiah, 1986, p. 20). Even though the proposed changes were not motivated by technological reasons at this point, the author assured readers that on typewriters, space for any new letters can always be created by similar changes towards regularities in the script (சுப்பையா [Cuppaiyā], [1935], p. 36).<sup>15</sup>

The first discussions about a possible reform of the Tamil script took place at a conference of Tamil scholars at the Pachaiyappa's College in

14. Periyar published them later in a book called *The Study of Tamil Letters* (*tamiḷ varivaṭṭiva āraṅycci*), which became the first book on this reform of the Tamil script (சுப்பையா [Cuppaiyā], [1935]).

15. This recommendation came from Kuthoosi Gurusamy (*kuttūci kurucāmi*) who had already tried to suggest it on the previous conference in Trichy in 1932 and had been rejected (குருசாமி [Kurucāmi], 1935b in வேலு [Vēlu] and செல்வராஜி [Celvarāji], 1989, p. 85). Some sources suggest a report from this committee was published in the weekly *Rationality* (*pakuttarivu*) on 12th of December 1934. However, the issue number 16 was published on 9th of December and number 17 was published a week later, on 16th of December.

Madras on the 23rd and 24th of December 1933 under the auspices of the Ministry of Education (Kandiah, 1986; வேலு [Vēlu] and செல்வராஜி [Celvarāji], 1989).<sup>16</sup> One of the outcomes of the conference was the establishment of a committee to consider and report on the superfluous and missing letters (வேலு [Vēlu] and செல்வராஜி [Celvarāji], 1989, p. 52). A year later, an article called *The Reform of Letters* (*eḷuttīl cīrtiruttam*) appeared in the weekly of the Self-Respect Movement *Rationality* (*pakuttarivu*)<sup>17</sup>, in which the author describes how the languages and scripts around the world are developing, while in his country a religion of scholars turned letters into gods, so the nation is proud of pronouncing Vishnu as Vittnu or Vindu. He also reminded readers of an older form of *i* from about 70–80 years ago and mentioned that syllables with *-ai* and *-a* formed regularly would save 7 printing blocks and the need for children to remember the irregular forms.

Despite the need for many changes in the Tamil script, for now it is possible to make use of these small changes. This way of letters can be used in the next issue of *The Republic*.<sup>18</sup> (குருசாமி [Kurucāmi], 1934, p. 12)

A relatively noticeable announcement was published in the same weekly on the 6th of January 1935: not only would the upcoming, delayed issue of *The Republic* be using the regular *-ai* and *-ā* vowels, but several books would be published that way too (குருசாமி [Kurucāmi], 1935a). Indeed, one week later on the 13th of January 1935 the publication of *The Republic* was resumed using regularly formed syllables. Kuthoosi Gurusamy, who authored the previous articles in *Rationality*, praised the editors, pleased that someone was finally adopting his ideas and considered it a complete success (குருசாமி [Kurucāmi], 1935b in வேலு [Vēlu] and செல்வராஜி [Celvarāji], 1989, p. 86).

The first time Periyar himself commented on the Tamil script reforms was in the following issue of *The Republic* on 20th January 1935:

A long time ago, many have come to the conclusion that many changes are needed in the matters of Tamil script.

Like comrade Gurusamy wrote, many amongst great scholars have been speaking about the matters of script reform for a long time.

We have no doubts that, in the matters of Tamil letters, several changes need to be done, however the worthless scholars<sup>19</sup> philosophize about it. The older and more sacred the language, shapes [of letters] and other matters are, the more necessary changes they need. That is a true philosophy.

16. These conferences were not always peaceful; see reports from the meetings ibidem.

17. The editor of this newspaper was E.V. Krishnasami, brother of Periyar.

18. The publication of Periyar's weekly *The Republic* (*kuṭi aracu*) was planned to resume on the 6th January 1935 after an involuntary interruption.

19. அழுக்கு மூட்டைப் பண்டிதர்கள்

[...] (இராமசாமி [Irāmacāmi], 1935 in வேலு [Vēlu] and செல்வராஜி [Celvarāji], 1989, p. 87)

The article then continues on how the religion and some fanatics impede progress. The script needs to be adapted to the modern ways of writing (i.e., paper and print as opposed to engraving into stones and palm leaves). The argument to make it easier for children to learn to read and write falls into background as just another advantage of the reform. Periyar also proposes to unify the way syllables with *u* and *ū* are formed, e.g., கு *ku* and கூ *kū* (instead of கு *ku* and கூ *kū*, after ஜு *ju* and ஜூ *jū* and other similar syllables involving *grantha* consonants). Apart from making syllables with *-ai* and *-ā* regular, he also mentions replacing *ai* and *au* with *ay* and *av* (இராமசாமி [Irāmacāmi], 1935 in வேலு [Vēlu] and செல்வராஜி [Celvarāji], 1989, p. 93).<sup>20</sup>

Since then Periyar started publishing books and newspapers with regular syllables as per Table 1. The Justice party's biweekly *Freedom* (*viṭṭalai*) which started in 1935 was printed using the new syllables, hence the new regular forms of letters are sometimes called the letters of freedom (*viṭṭalai eluttukkaḷ*) (Kandiah, 1986, p. 6).<sup>21</sup>

### 3.3. Governmental Committees

Between the mid-1930s and the independence of India, the public discussions about script reforms subsided.<sup>22</sup> A Tamil literary conference was held in Madurai on the 18th and 19th January 1941, where it was agreed that a committee for the Tamil script reform will be formed (குழந்தை [Kuḷantai], 1968, p. 6). There do not seem to be any records of such a committee. On 14th and 15th of February 1948, the World Tamil Conference took place in Madras, which also adopted resolutions to lower the number of Tamil letters and to establish a committee for the Tamil script reform. Based on the decisions of this conference, the

20. In this article Periyar points out that *kau* and *kav*, and *kai* and *kay* are pronounced the same and this change could lead to lower the number of necessary Tamil letters even more. When he returned back from prison in 1934 where he was contemplating the script changes, he told the publisher of Suppaiya's essays that while the changes are necessary, it will be difficult to adapt to them—in contrast to the unification of syllables with *-ai* and *-ā* which are easily understandable for readers, and which can be immediately put to use both in books and newspapers (கப்பையா [Cuppaiyā], [1935], pp. ii–iii).

21. Periyar himself took over *Freedom* in July 1937 and started publishing it daily.

22. There were more important problems to deal with during this period. In 1937 Hindi was made mandatory in schools, against which protests have been held until the decision was retracted in 1940. Periyar was imprisoned again and the calls for a separate Tamil country and later Dravidistan emerged. There is also the World War II and the events leading to the independence of India.

largest Tamil newspaper *Swadesamitran* (*cutēcamittiran*) started printing the vowel marks for *i*, *ī*, *u* and *ū* separately, without connection to the consonant (குழந்தை [Kulantai], 1968, p. 6).<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, the government in Madras appointed its own Committee on Tamil in 1947, which prepared a preliminary report in February 1948 (Norman Brown, 1953, p. 4). The task of this committee was to prepare a reform of the Tamil script so that Tamil could be typeset on a new type of hot-metal press which could cast whole lines of text at once (until then, the typesetters had to manually place one character after another) ("Adapting Tamil Script for Lino Printing" 1948). The issue with these machines by Linotype Company (see Figure 8) was that they could only take 96 characters for fast typesetting (Ross, 1989, p. 129).<sup>24</sup>

On the 8th October 1949, the Minister of Information and Publicity presiding over the 17th annual day celebrations of *Swadesamitran*, Press Worker's Union, said that the disadvantage of Tamil press when compared to the English one was that it was not possible to create a Linotype machine for the current cumbersome alphabet and it is therefore necessary to make changes to the script in the interest of the development of the Tamil journalism as well as the language itself ("Evolution of Tamil Linotype Machines: Minister emphasises need" 1949). The government, having the report of the 1948 committee, asked the Society for the Development of Tamil (*tamiḷ vaḷarccik kaḷakam*) to review the proposed changes ("Reform of the Tamil Script: Changes Recommended" 1949). The society organized a conference for this purpose on the 21st December 1949 in Madras, in which many changes to the script were proposed, some of which were unanimously agreed upon.<sup>25</sup> The board of the society discussed the resolutions on the 11th January 1950 and decided to recommend to the government to implement a reform that would consist of switching to regular syllables with *-ai* and *-ā*, as well as detached vowel marks for *-i* and *-ī*, which would not interact with the consonants, as can be seen in Figure 9 ("Tamil Script Reform" 1950).

Based on the recommendations, the government expanded its committee, which eventually prepared its second and final report dated 16th August 1950.<sup>26</sup> The report states it is necessary to reform the Tamil script, both in the interests of mechanical efficiency and in the light of educational psychology. The proposed changes all pertained to the

23. This newspaper was often testing readers with various changes in the script.

24. In exchange for lower speeds and increased costs, this limit could be raised to 200. All these characters must also be available on the keyboard.

25. Including the letter *f* is one of the suggestions that were postponed. This conference also resolved to adapt the international (Arabic) numerals ("Reform of the Tamil Script: Changes Recommended" 1949).

26. Neither the preliminary report from 1948 nor the final report from 1950 were published. However, a summary of the second one was published in *The Hindu* on 13th July 1951 (Norman Brown, 1953, p. 4).

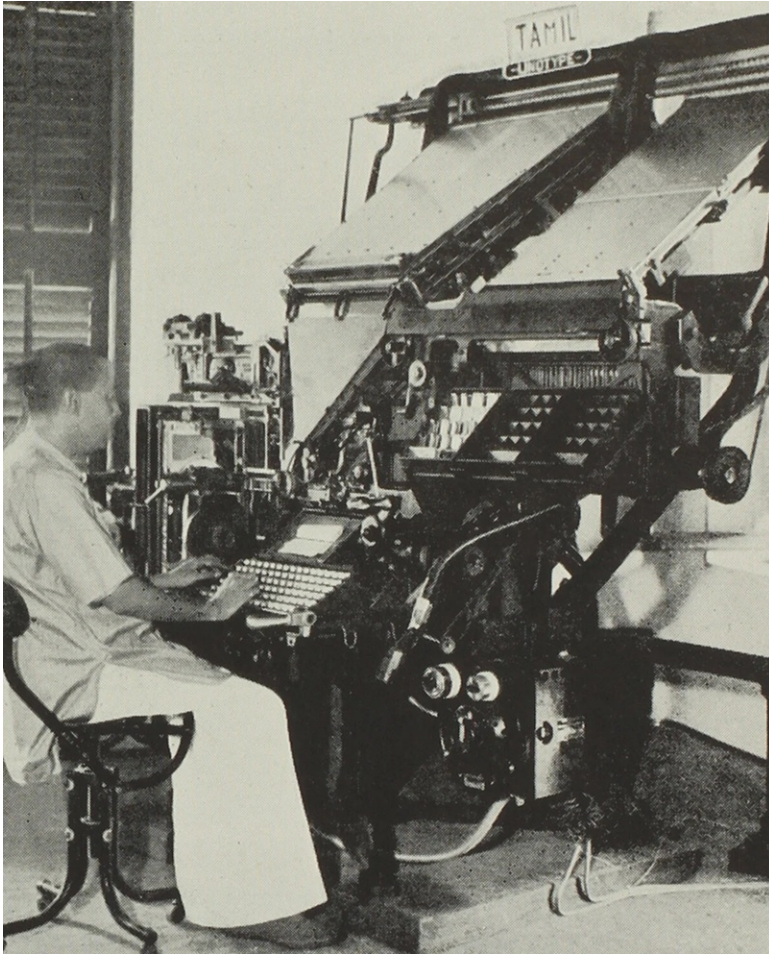


FIG. 8. The first Linotype machine for Tamil in the Linotype Company Madras office, 1936. From the private collection of Vaibhav Singh (L&M News, December 1936 in: Contextual Alternate, 2022)

vowels: the regular formation of syllables with *-ai* and *-ā* as in Table 1, detached *-i* and *-ī* as in Figure 9 and then two changes in initial vowels—the older form of initial *ī* and distinguishing the grapheme used for *la* and *au*; see Table 2 (Norman Brown, 1953, p. 5).

The committee was aware of the irregularities with *-u* and *-ū*, but it was also aware of potential controversy caused by any suspicion of trying

To separate the symbols ீ for all  
consonants like க ீ க ீ த ீ த ீ

FIG. 9. Proposed separate *i* and *ī* vowel marks (“Tamil Script Reform” 1950)

TABLE 2. Changes to the initial vowels recommended by the governmental committee in 1950

|           | before | after |             | before | after |
|-----------|--------|-------|-------------|--------|-------|
| <i>ī</i>  | ஈ      | இ     | <i>keḷa</i> | கௌ     | கௌ    |
| <i>au</i> | ஔ      | ஔ     | <i>kau</i>  | கௌ     | கௌ    |

to sanskritize the script, even if unfounded.<sup>27</sup> Since the above changes were technically enough to run the Linotype machine in fast mode, there was no reason to risk the reform failing due to unnecessary controversies (Minakshi Sundaran, 1953, p. 34). Similarly, amongst the considered barriers for children was the fact that some of the vowel marks are written to the left of or on both sides of the consonants. The committee also decided to avoid changing this practice, for the same reason that prevents them from switching to the Latin script:

any remedy will be only worse than the disease; because there is the great danger of making the handful of our literates in Tamil, illiterates, by introducing revolutionary changes. (ibid., p. 35)

### 3.4. Worldwide Adoption

The government accepted the recommendations of this committee in 1951 (Norman Brown, 1953, p. 5; Kandiah, 1986, p. 21).<sup>28</sup> *Swadesamitran* started to print part of its content according to these recommendations. On 28th October 1951 the Singaporean daily *Tamil Drum* (*tamiḷ muracu*) published an article in full support of the reform and noted that apart from the *Lady Tamil* (*centamiḷ celvi*) newspaper and another monthly magazine there were no articles against the reform (திருநாவுக்கரசு [Tirunāvukkaracu], 1951).<sup>29</sup>

In May 1952, a new government came into power that was not in favour of the reform. This could have been due to a large stock of already printed textbooks in the current orthography (Norman Brown,

27. The marks for ு -*u* and ூ -*ū* come from the *grantha* script used for Sanskrit.

28. It is worth pointing out that the proposed changes do not include replacing the diphthongs *ai* and *au*.

29. However, it does point out a disagreement in Malaysia. This newspaper printed the full recommendations of the committee (Kandiah, 1986, p. 21).

1953, p. 5). In any case, in July 1952, the government announced that due to a strong opposition to the reform it was leaving it up to the public to implement the changes that it considers necessary (Minakshi Sundaran, 1953, p. 28) and did not pursue the matter further.

Once again the script reform receded into the background, until the end of the 1960s.<sup>30</sup> In 1969, Singapore celebrated 150th anniversary of its foundation. For this occasion, the Tamil schools created a commemorative publication with an article about the Tamil script reform, in which they stated that even if Tamil Nadu did not unanimously accept the changes, it would not be a problem—once a student becomes versed in Tamil, they can learn the old letters and then study books in the old orthography too (Kandiah, 1986, p. 22). At both the 2nd world conference of Tamil studies in Madras 1969 and the 4th one in Sri Lanka 1974 the reform of the Tamil script was studied (பாலசுந்தரம் [Pālacuntaram], 1982, p. 23). Again the need for reform was put forward (இளந்திரையன் [Iḷantiraiyan], 1979, p. 16), and resolutions of support came from the Symposium of Tamil teachers of Indian universities (*intiyap palkalaik kaḷakat tamiḷācīriyar maṇṇa karuttaraṅku*) in Puducherry on 3rd June 1974 and a group of Tamil scholars (*tamiḷakap pulavar kulu*) on 2nd February 1975, including the reform of syllables with *-u* and *-ū*. In 1977, The Annamalai University organized a symposium on the script reform (பாலசுந்தரம் [Pālacuntaram], 1982, p. 23). June 1977 also holds elections in Tamil Nadu, and the DMK promises to introduce the reform in a way that everyone would accept it (**tam10**).<sup>31</sup>

In August 1977, the Prime Minister of Tamil Nadu and the Minister of Education received a letter calling for implementing the reform. It stayed unanswered, so the author tried again in January 1978 (இளந்திரையன் [Iḷantiraiyan], 1979, pp. 9, 15). In July that year, an article *The Tamil Government Seriously Considers Tamil Script Reform* was published. Furthermore, the government was preparing for celebrations of Periyar's centenary and the reform of the script is one of the reforms Periyar was pushing for (ibid., p. 18).

Finally, on the 19th of October 1978, the government issued an order number 1875, in which it implements Periyar's script and spelling reform (on request of the committee for Periyar's anniversary).<sup>32</sup> The new orthography was supposed to be used in the government, governmental organizations and schools with immediate effect. The government also

30. Meanwhile, the states of India were reorganized according to the language in 1956, resulting in the creation of the Madras state with Tamil as its official language. During 1963–1965, another wave of protests against Hindi were taking place as it was supposed to become the official language of India. Consequently, a faction of Dravidar Kazhagam, the DMK party, won 1967 elections in Madras.

31. The DMK was defeated in these elections.

32. For full text of the order, see e.g., இளந்திரையன் [Iḷantiraiyan] (1979, pp. 118–120), for commentary see சண்முகம் [Caṇmukam] (1978, pp. 218–234).

recommended that publishers follow the system in this order in Tamil newspapers, other periodicals and books. The substance of the reform is summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Changes to the Tamil script and spelling as per the government order from 1978

|           | before | after |            | before | after |           | before | after |
|-----------|--------|-------|------------|--------|-------|-----------|--------|-------|
| <i>ai</i> | ஐ      | அய்   | <i>nai</i> | நை     | னை    | <i>ro</i> | ரெ     | றா    |
| <i>au</i> | ஔ      | அவ்   | <i>lai</i> | லை     | லை    | <i>no</i> | னெ     | னா    |
| <i>nā</i> | நா     | ணா    | <i>lai</i> | லை     | ளை    | <i>nō</i> | நே     | னோ    |
| <i>rā</i> | ரூ     | றா    | <i>nai</i> | நை     | னை    | <i>rō</i> | ரே     | றோ    |
| <i>nā</i> | நா     | ணா    | <i>no</i>  | னெ     | னா    | <i>nō</i> | நே     | னோ    |

It is apparent that the government decided to ignore the conclusions of both the expert committee and the government of the 1950s and went for a populist acceptance of a Periyar's reform.<sup>33</sup> The government received due criticism, also caused by the fact that it justified the reform by the request for Periyar's anniversary, not mentioning anything about the long history of the reform and discussions with the public, professionals and scholars. The dissenting voices were mostly regarding abolishing the *ai* and *ay* diphthongs and replacing them with *ay* and *av* without affecting pronunciation. Eventually the government ceded and issued another order on 15th of January 1979 in which it allowed the old spelling using diphthongs (பாலசுந்தரம் [Pālacuntaram], 1982, p. 23).

The government was in no rush to implement or promote the proposed changes either. In a survey of almost 2,000 adults at the end of January 1979, almost 55% respondents said they had not heard anything about the government-proposed changes (see Figure 10). Governmental magazines, calls and signs in public spaces remained in the original orthography even a year after the changes were announced.

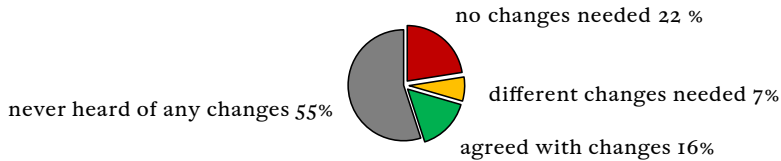


FIG. 10. Public poll of opinions on the Tamil script reform in 1979 (data after Siromoney and Bala, 1979)

33. One of the readers noted that we should be thankful for at least one Periyar's reform being accepted (இளந்திரையன் [Iḷantiraiyan], 1979, pp. 76–77).

In October 1979 the Association of Tamil teachers in Singapore (*ciṅkappūrt tamilāciriyaṛ caṅkam*) expressed their support in the *Voice of Tamil Teachers* magazine (*tamilāciriyaṛ kural*) for the Tamil Nadu government accepting the Periyar's suggestions. The Singaporean government announced in a circular from 26th September 1983 that starting with January 1984, the changes should be implemented for all educational purposes. The changes were to be implemented gradually up to 1987 when the new orthography would be expected of students during exams (Kandiah, 1986, pp. 25–26).

In Malaysia, a committee for consideration of the proposed changes was established in the 1980s, but it was not possible to come to a consensus (*ibid.*, p. 22). The government officially adopted the new orthography (as amended, i.e., keeping the *ai* and *au* in 1994 (Nedumaran, personal correspondence)).

Even though the situation improved in Tamil Nadu during 1980s (the government, universities and various associations started using the new orthography), the private sector, despite being the one who initiated the changes, lagged behind (Shanmugam, 1983, p. 99; Kandiah, 1986, p. 24). Many concrete proposals for changes in orthography were published during this 50-year history (see the supplementary material). Paradoxically, a considerable number of them only after the reform was accepted. As Periyar himself stated, this was just the beginning. At the start of the 1980s, the government established a new committee that would propose further changes to the script (Shanmugam, 1983, p. 99).

#### 4. Conclusion

We have seen two different reforms of the Tamil script. One devised by a single person whose main interest was to make Tamil easier to learn, where there was no authority to regulate the script usage, no way for the public to express their opinions, and all that was needed was the one printer to adopt the changes. Yet still, no changes deemed unnecessary were made. On the other hand, we have decades of discussions, ideological arguments and politics playing a role. Expert committees were established that prepared carefully balanced recommendations, only for everything to be thrown away, and replaced by a 40-year-old suggestion for political points, to honor a person whose all other reforms were too radical to implement.

During the course of history summarized in this paper, we can see four arguments being put forward for a script reform:

1. *educational*, trying to make it easier to learn to read and write;
2. *technological*, trying to make it simpler, faster or cheaper to typeset and print;

3. *social*, where the script does not meet the society needs, either for business or cultural reasons;
4. *functional*, where the script does not meet the language needs.

These types of arguments closely correspond to the criteria for optimal writing systems discussed in Meletis (2018): the psychological/cognitive fit, the technological fit, the sociocultural/ideological fit, and the linguistic fit.

As for contributions of C. Beschi and E.V. Ramasamy, both had the means to realize their ideas in print and get their publications to readers. The one change we can attribute to Beschi is the distinction between long and short *e* and *o* vowels, which he must have devised between 1728 and 1738. We learned that rather than inventing a new glyph, he used the traditional Tamil means of prolongation, i.e., ending the existing short glyph with a loop, and this difference was still visible in early prints.

The situation with Periyar is slightly more complicated. He was an activist, he fought for the changes and promoted them. However, he did not invent any of the particular changes, and he was no longer alive when the government issued the order. Furthermore, the first governmental order contained changes that even Periyar later in his life argued should not be done.

It should be pointed out that some of the other countries were willing to progress without waiting for India. This is even more prominent after digitalization, where Tamil Nadu was very reluctant to move to Unicode, while countries like Sri Lanka and Singapore had practically no other choice if they wanted to support all their scripts simultaneously, and adopted Unicode first.

With the onset of digital technologies and modern printing methods, the technological needs for changes in script and orthographical reforms diminish.<sup>34</sup>

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34. Rather, it gives rise to ideological voices calling for changes in how script is internally represented in such technologies, without any visible effect for readers.

## Overview of proposed changes to the Tamil script

Authors:

|    |                                                  |     |                       |
|----|--------------------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------|
| 1. | raṅkācārya also proposed ர ங க ஃ ர ன             | 9.  | cirampāṇ paramānantam |
| 2. | periyār, porkō, irā kiruṣṇamūrtti, vē. kalaimaṇi | 10. | kuḷantaicāmi          |
| 3. | koṭumuṭi caṇmukam,<br>koṭumuṭi caṇmukappirakatam | 11. | nallatampi            |
| 4. | namaccivāya mutaliyār                            | 12. | mu. varatarācaṇ       |
| 5. | te. po. mī.                                      | 13. | pulavar kuḷantai      |
| 6. | tirumalai muttu cuvāmi                           | 14. | vē. tillaināyakam     |
| 7. | porkō                                            | 15. | i. jē. cuntar         |
| 8. | pēṇā ṭṭi                                         | 16. | irācakōpālaṇ          |

Initial vowels:

|      | a | ā | i  | ī | u | ū | e | ē | ai  | o | ō | au  |
|------|---|---|----|---|---|---|---|---|-----|---|---|-----|
| 1.   | அ | ஆ | இ  | ஈ | உ | ஊ | எ | ஏ | ஐ   | ஓ | ஔ | ஒள  |
| 2.   | அ | அ | இ  | இ | உ | உ | எ | எ | அய் | ஓ | ஔ | அவ் |
| 3.   | அ | அ | இ  | இ | உ | உ | எ | எ | ஐ   | ஓ | ஔ | ஒள  |
| 4.   |   |   | இ  | ஈ |   |   |   |   |     |   |   |     |
| 5.   |   |   | இ, | ஈ |   |   |   |   |     |   |   | ஓள  |
| 6.   | அ | ஆ | இ  | ஈ | உ | ஊ | எ | ஏ | ஐ   | ஓ | ஔ | அவ் |
| 7.   | அ | ஆ | இ  | ஈ | உ | ஊ | எ | ஏ | அய் | ஓ | ஔ | அவ் |
| 8.   | அ | அ | இ  | ஈ | உ | உ | எ | எ | அய் | ஓ | ஔ | அவ் |
| 9.   | அ | அ | ஆ  | ஆ | உ | ஊ | எ | ஏ |     | ஓ | ஔ |     |
| 10.. | அ | அ | அ  | அ | அ | அ | அ | அ | அய் | அ | அ | அவ் |
| 11.  | அ | அ | அ  | அ | அ | அ | அ | அ | அய் | அ | அ | அவ் |
| 12.  | அ | அ | அ  | அ | அ | அ | அ | அ | அய் | அ | அ | அவ் |
| 13.  | அ | அ | அ  | அ | அ | அ | அ | அ | அய் | அ | அ | அவ் |
| 14.  | அ | அ | அ  | அ | அ | அ | அ | அ | அய் | அ | அ | அவ் |
| 15.  | அ | அ | அ  | அ | அ | அ | அ | அ | அய் | அ | அ | அவ் |
| 16.  | அ | அ | அ  | அ | அ | அ | அ | அ | அய் | அ | அ | அவ் |

Authors:

|                           |                          |                           |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. periyār                | 7. porkō                 | 13. cu. makātēvaṇ         |
| 2. mu. va.                | 8. kuḷantaicāmi          | 14. ātittar               |
| 3. nallatampi             | 9. cirampāṇ paramānantam | 15. te. po. mī.           |
| 4. pōṇā ṭṭṭi              | 10. vē. tillaināyakam    | 16. ṇṇāṇatēmā             |
| 5. tirumalai muttu cuvāmi | 11. i. jē. cuntar        | 17. koṭumuṭi caṇmukam     |
| 6. pulvar kuḷantai        | 12. irācakōpālaṇ         | 18. vi. kē. tillaināyakam |

Vowel marks:

|     | ka | kā | ki | kī | ku | kū | ke | kē | kai  | ko | kō | kau |
|-----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|------|----|----|-----|
| 1.  | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
|     | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 2.  | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 3.  | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 4.  | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 6.  | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 7.  | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 8.  | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
|     | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 9.  | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 10. | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 11. | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 12. | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 13. | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 14. | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 15. | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 16. | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 17. | க  | கா | கி | கீ | கு | கூ | கெ | கே | காய் | கொ | கோ | கவ் |
| 18. |    |    |    |    | க  | கூ |    |    |      |    |    |     |

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