

Lost Word is Lost World - A Study of Malayalam

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Abstract

This study attempts to present some of the salient features of influence of other languages on Malayalam. Kerala people's contact with other people groups from India and elsewhere led to many changes in vocabulary and this enriched the language. In particular, impact of Pali and Prakrit impact needs to be further explored.

Key words: Influence on Malayalam, impact of contact on culture.

Influence of Other Languages on Malayalam

Language originated from sound, script originated from pictures, expression from natural body movements and utensils from the figures seen. What is explored here is to watch history of Malayalam while on transition by finding certain words and how it functioned through in the great passage of time. This is an attempt to find history from words, script, expression and utensils left by a succession of people. There is always living fossil left unmarked by the living time and one can discover missing links there. It will be done by acknowledging the influence of languages in its periphery.

Writers common in Malayalam acknowledge the heavy influence of Tamil and Sanskrit but ignore the influence of Pali and Prakrit, what was the breath of life from 3 BC to 13 century AD Kerala. Sinhala language influenced it much. Tulu had influenced it. So did Konkani. These will be discussed separately. Just as the highlands people and islands people, people beyond the sea also contacted throughout its history. These include traders from Middle East - chiefly Egyptians, Greeks, Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, etc. The language some of these communities speak -Hebrew, Cyriac, and Arabic became the language of Judaism, Christianity and Islam respectively. These left an indelible impression on the Spartan life of Kerala. The eastern trader - China too left a great imprint on its sea faring activities, house hold articles, utensils, architecture, music, agriculture, etc. Then came the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:6 June 2016

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Europeans in 15th Century in waves. The influence of Portuguese, Dutch, French and English is yet to be studied. It's after effects on the Postcolonial Cultural History is not yet over.

People Contact

The people of Kerala and its language Malayalam had always been influenced by the people they had come into contact. They were High land people, island people and sea borne people. The hard ware and the software these people used for communicating had a profound influence on the historical realities and fictional truths the Kerala people developed around them.

Pali and Prakrit

Interestingly Pali and Prakrit had an influence on Malayalam language in its infant days. But the advent of Sanskrit and its call for purification changed many Pali and Prakrit words to Sanskrit. It didn't need much time or effort. The words were similar. They needed only some inflection changes. With focus on children and with schools under new political dispensation it was easy to change the entire new generation to a different reality and be part of collective amnesia.

Pali language came to Kerala initially with Mahayana Buddhists, then Theravada Buddhists and finally the Vajrayana (Tantric) Sects. Kerala was the land of Buddhists. Buddhism prevailed in Kerala from the 3rd century BC to 12th century AD. It was Buddhist educationists who had laid down the foundation work for the 100% literacy now claimed by modern Kerala. Health and welfare what the modern Kerala coasts of had an aggressive past initially pushed through by the Buddhist physicians and their mendicants. The medicinal plants and their use was cardinal to Buddhism. Amarakosha was a part of education. Vrikshavarga was the primer. The study made sure that these trees, herbs and plants are part and parcel of their life. They planted and raised these in their lands. Incidentally, Amarasimha lived and studied in Takazhi in Kerala for 20 years and left for Ceylon. There he got the name Simha and left for North India. The availability of the medicinal treatise-Ashtangahridayam everywhere in Kerala is a testament to the awareness of medicinal research here. It is only natural that a 17 century Medicinal Publication Hortus Malabaricus illustrating around 700 indigenous plants in the Malabar region of Kerala in 12 vol. was published in Holland.

Before the development of Tamil and Malayalam, Pali was extensively used in Kerala. Before Sanskrit exerted its influence on Malayalam, Pali was its foster mother. The development of Tamil was earlier and was faster than Malayalam. Tamil became a common language for intellectual expression for at least 3 centuries commencing with samgham age. Despite the activism was growing and as kanaksabai observed- 'modern Malayalam preserves that form of language which was spoken by the early Tamils'.

Pali Roots

The most common words like Achan (father), Amma (mother), Ambalam (temple), Palli (mosques & churches), Pallikoodam (school), Kallu (toddy), Purikam (eye brow), Thadakam (lake), Vattam (circle), Pattika (list), Chanthi (butt), Ayyo, Chakkara (jaggery) and Onam (the festival) have their roots in Pali language. Ayyan is a word used for Buddha or sastha. 'Ayyo' is generally used in Kerala in distress to call God. 'Allo' and 'Karthave' are similarly used by Muslims and Christians respectively. 'Karthavu' meaning the originator is a word addressed frequently in Theyyam too. Inflexion changes are interesting. Look at the word 'Ammo'. The meaning of Ammo, Ayyo and Allo is similar. These words show a certain time beyond the present when these words had an existence with similar other words which are now considered deleted or rendered pervert or corrupt as the case may be.

The term 'Margam Kali' is Magga of Pali. The play shows how the Christians found the way- Magga - to Christianity. 'Bela' is a Sinhala word for neck.

There are many words like that in Kerala. Thiyyas and Ezhavas are two dominant communities who sailed to Kerala from Islands like Ceylon, Laccadives, Minicoy and Maldives or lived in both these lands. How many words they got transferred is anybody's guess. They were Buddhists and their connection with Pail was there. It is really worth studying the slangs they used in their Malayalam, typical words they use and the inflexions they differ from the rest. One must look at the history here. Ceylonese chronicle note that Mahavamsa Rakshitadara came to Kerala and converted 60000 families to Hinayana Buddhism. He ordained 37000 as parivarajaks to propagate Buddhism in the state. He raised 500 viharas. Second batch led by Dharmasena were received at Kodungaloor in 65 AD by the ruler, Imayavaramban Nedumchaeralatan Adan. 'Adan' is 'Arhat' in Pali - a title name conferred on the king.

Muslims and Malayalam

Muslims keep certain reservation in the use of Malayalam. The words and the slangs they use are very different from the rest in many parts of Kerala. They retain many characteristics of old Malayalam like the Christians and Juda communities. In the earlier period of Malayalam language, the word 'nattam' has the meaning- good smell. Juda community, for instance, still retains the old meaning- good smell for 'nattam' in their songs. The old meaning is still maintained in old Tamil verses.

Njan, Njammal and Njee, for instance, are used in certain areas of Kadathanad and Iruvainad by certain communities like Muslims. It is used to express I, We and You like Naam Nammal and Nee. Invariably, Nja of Malayalam represents na or ya of the other Dravidian languages.

Indus Valley and Malayalam Words

Asko Parpola, while deciphering the Indus valley script cited a few a Dravidian loan words in the Rig Veda, such as phalam (fruit), mukham (face), khala (threshing floor) and nangol (plough) as example. Kuntam (pit), kaana (imperceptible, one-eyed) are similar other words borrowed by Sanskrit from Dravidian language. Southern Travancore still speaks these words. Kundu is still a word used in Malabar and houses had a pond for bathing purposes in front of the house quite like a down sized Mohanjo Daro. M.D. Raghavan had suggested that 'Kalari' was derived from the Sanskrit khalurika, Burrow is of the opinion that khalurika- 'parade ground, arena' and its Sanskrit root, khala- 'threshing floor' are Dravidian loan words.

Dropping of Sounds

Dropping of sounds or words in spoken or written discourse is very common in Malayalam. For e.g. the words 'entha' and 'ippol' becomes 'ntha' and 'ippo' respectively. Gundert had this comment that 'ma' is often pronounced where 'va' is original. Vannam in the word atinmannam becomes nmannam; vina becomes mina. The words masuri, mizunnuka become vasuri, and vizunnuka respectively. In other dialects, initial 'ma' is represented by na in the words like mayir, mayil, mozhi etc. Peacock is mayil in Tamil and Malayalam. It is njamali in Canarese, and namali in Telugu. Mayir for hair in Tamil and Malayalam is navir in Canarese. A promise is mozi in Malayalam. In Canarese, it is nudi.

Sinhala and Malayalam

There is great similarity in the history, growth and development of Sinhala and Malayalam languages. Close resemblance of Ceylonese script and Malayalam is well acknowledged, the difference is mainly in the way and style of the two alphabets is written. In phonetics, the pronounced tendency to end words in half vowel is a characteristic found in both these languages. Before Sinhalese was influenced by Pali, it was elu (ezhu). Malayalam word elut which means script or writing is closely related to Elu or Ezhu. Together with Malayalam it influenced Divehi the language of Maldives. More than a millennium the two languages were heavily influenced by Pali. From 16 century onwards, mainly due to the willful sanskritisation drive by literatures, most Pali words were driven out from Malayalam.

Malayali Muslim Attire

The dress of Ernad Muslim women is something interesting to watch. Katchi and thattam they use is something what you see more in Burma and Siam. They dress their mundu over their long blouse. A belt is seen worn over the Kachi mundu around the waist.

In the latest scenario, the dress culture is really different. Though the Kerala Muslim young men use latest fashion, Muslim women now wear purdah covering every part of their body.

Impact of Political Dispensation

The play of the present political dispensation to exert their domination is very much there on every part of the Kerala society. This has to be read well with how Pali and similar other languages were lost in the present political setup.

Every caste, every tribe and every community retain a linguistic past in their hideouts. Many retain something past in their living fossils. Their tongue and their collective memory is a treasure trove to see how Malayalam evolved through in its transition. If students well with a spread field study is not engaged seriously to document the variation, inflexion, etc., all would be lost soon and the rich history of a language would be treated as mere myth.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:6 June 2016

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Institute
Indebted to Cartoonist Pathanjali, Govinda Raj, Novelist Ashokan, P. Premnath and Dr.
P.M.Girish (Madrass University)

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