

Abstract

Keywords: Letterforms, Letterpress, Manuscripts, Palm leaf, Printing, Script, Tamil, Transformation and Typography

Tamil language belongs to the Dravidian languages of Southern India. It is one among the classical languages of the world with a literary history of more than two millenniums. The earliest Tamil literature dates to the Caṅkam period (300 BC – 200 AD). Traditionally, Tamil was written on palm leaves – one of the oldest medium of writing in ancient India. The precise origin and history of palm leaves writing are unknown but the practice is believed to have existed since the Caṅkam period. The use of palm leaf medium continued for several centuries until late twentieth century. A medium with such historicity has a negligible literature on its writing system and its influence on script evolution. The existing literature on evolution of script only focuses on stone and metal inscriptions. Other traditional mediums such as palm leaf manuscripts have not been explored and researched.

In the late sixteenth century the traditional palm leaf manuscript writing gradually got displaced by the introduction of print medium. In 1556, a printing press sent to Abyssinia for missionary works landed in India by an accident. Soon the Christian evangelists adapted the printing press for the conversion of natives. Initiatives of the missionaries led to the spread and establishment of printing. Progressively, the press became one of the major medium of communication and began to dominate the hand written manuscripts in the later centuries. The script on the other transformed itself with respect to the medium. The shift from handwritten palm leaves to printing led to the transformation of letterforms. And also there has been an influence of the letterpress medium and western typography on the native script which needs to be researched. This early transformation is critical for typographers and type designers to understand the script and its evolution from handwritten forms to standardized letters seen today. The understanding will also bridge the knowledge gap between the evolutionary findings of archeologist, epigraphists and historians.

Aim of the research was to determine the influence of palm leaf medium and its writing system on evolution of script. Concurrently, it aims to understand the transformation of Tamil letterforms from handwritten palm leaf manuscript to early letterpress typefaces. The

research also seeks to determine the impact of letterpress medium and western typography on Tamil script. At present, there were very few literature and research material available on typography and type design in vernacular languages especially in Tamil. Therefore, the body of research would aim at creating a primary resource and knowledge base for the history of Tamil type design.

Organization of chapters

The thesis is organized into eight chapters including the introduction and conclusion. The introductory chapter outlines the dominance of oral tradition over the written communication, Brāhmī script the mother of all Indian scripts, research problem and methodology adapted. It was observed that the existing studies on script evolution largely rely on stone and metal inscriptions and neglects the other traditional mediums. Therefore, a literature study consisting of various mediums used for writing in ancient India were examined. The study concludes by identifying the gap in knowledge and proposes the aims and objectives of the research. Chapters two, three and four consists of extensive literature survey.

Chapter two concisely describes the history of Tamil language and its script. It explores the existing literature on evolution of Tamil script, with key phases discussed in length. It cites the uniqueness of Tamil script as compared to other Indian languages. The evolution of Roman script was taken as a case study to compare and understand the letter transformation. Through the study, it was understood that the tradition of manuscripts writing (*minuscules*) had transformed the Roman capitals to lowercase letterforms. And the same miniscule was reflected in the typeface designs during movable type printing. Studies of writing tradition and influence of tools on letterforms were well established in Roman script. Tamil script lacked such studies on writing tradition which needs to be addressed to understand its influence on letterforms.

Chapter three gives an overview of palm leaf manuscripts such as types of palm leaves used for writing, preparation and preservation techniques, writing system, reading and characteristics of manuscript letterforms. The characteristics were based on the general study and visual observance of several manuscript images. A more detailed study with a methodology was followed in the later part of the thesis. Chapter four examines the history of Tamil letterpress printing, based on the literature survey and scholarly overview three printing

phases were synthesized. The proposed phases intend for a better understanding of the history of Tamil printing. Some of the key script reformations in Tamil were also highlighted. Finally, the above chapters emphasize the need for research on palm leaf manuscripts, letterpress medium and early typefaces.

In chapter five, two methodologies followed in the field of epigraphy and western typography was analyzed. Appropriate elements from both the methodologies were taken and adapted for the current research. One such element was the visual documentation used as a means of research method. The chapter explains the various data collection process involved in preparation of visual documentation and understanding the mediums. It includes conversation with experts, firsthand experience with palm leaf manuscripts, video documentation and photo documentation of palm leaf manuscripts and old printed books during the field visits to Tamil Nadu, data logging and preparation of visual chart. Along with the chart a visual vocabulary comprising of typographic terminologies, joineries, construction and visual grouping was created to facilitate data analysis.

Chapter six constitutes major part of the research where the visually documented data was analyzed and interpreted. The chapter was divided into two parts – Part I: A critical analysis of palm leaf manuscript letterforms and Part II: Study of transformation and mechanization of handwritten letterforms. In part I, palm leaf manuscripts letterforms were studied based on the visual documentation (visual chart) and evolutionary chart prepared by the Department of Archeology, Tamil Nadu. Individual letterforms across manuscripts and evolutionary chart were visually compared and analyzed. Similarly in part II, the characteristics of individual letters from manuscripts and early typefaces were visually compared to study their transformation.

Chapter seven discourses the history of early letterpress typefaces through the visual documentation of early printed books and scholars view points. It also determines the impact of letterpress medium and western typography from the analysis of visual chart and documentation. Chapter eight presents an overview of the study and summarizes the conclusion from analysis. It also outlines the contribution of the present research and scope for further research.