

Pāli

Posted on

‘Pāli’ is an ancient language that existed contemporaneously with India’s Sanskrit and Prakrit (Prakruta). It became a dead language for so many reasons, like disuse, wars, and social upheavals. Still, it has been reviving for reasons like Buddhist chanting, Dhamma preaching, practicing Buddhism (meditation), and learning Pāli to study Buddhism.



Pāli language has been used to study Buddhism from ancient times, and continues even today.

Pali (/ˈpaː li/) is a Middle Indo-Aryan liturgical language native to the Indian subcontinent. It is widely studied because it is the language of the Pāli canon or Tripitaka and the sacred language of Theravāda Buddhism. In earlier times, it was written in Brahmi script.” Pāli language had been used mainly in India and some other Buddhist countries as a language of communication, preaching, and studying Buddhism. On the other hand, another language named ‘Pali’ could be mistaken by someone as Pāli. Therefore, it is essential to understand the difference between the two words clearly, the Pali and the Pāli. (It may not be the word ‘Pāli’ by pronunciation, but ‘Pali’). Pali is an African language.

Pali language (Chadic)

Pali is a West Chadic language of Nigeria. It was reported by Rudolf Leger. Chadic languages, the superfamily of languages in the Afro-Asiatic phylum. Some 140 or more Chadic languages are spoken, predominantly in Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad. The four sub-divisions of the Chadic family – West Chadic, Central Chadic (BiuMandara), Masa, and East Chadic – show considerable differences.

It could be understood that this Pali is not the Indian Pāli, which we are going to reveal. As in every language, there is an alphabet in the Pali language as well. In Pāli, there are 41 letters, with eight vowels and 33 consonants. The specialty in the Pāli language is that it could be written in the characters of any language. For example, in Sri Lanka, it is written in Sinhala characters, while in other countries,

they write it in their languages such as Thai, Myanmarian, Hindi, Laos, Nepalese, and Tibetan. But, in western countries, they use predominantly Roman characters. Though they write it in any characters, the meaning of the word would not be changed. We can see the Sinhala Paṭṭali alphabet in Roman/Italic letters with diacritics. The Paṭṭali alphabet in Sinhala and English characters. (Tipitaka canon Vowels).



First, before we go further, one can realize that the Paṭṭali language could be written with letters of any language. In some countries like Myanmar, sometimes they use the Paṭṭali language to express their ideas. The most important thing we should remember here is that the Paṭṭali is used only in Dhamma sermons (in Dhamma talks and in preaching suṭtras) and studying Buddhism.

We can see that they had used the Paṭṭali language to teach and study Buddhism from ancient times until today. We could see a golden age of Paṭṭali language in the recent history of Buddhism. Many scholars in western countries and in the east had studied the Pali as a language to study Buddhism. At this juncture, I am impressed by Dr. Pole Dahlke, a scholar from Germany [1865-1928] who learned Paṭṭali from the scholarly monk, Pandith, Venerable. Diyapattugama Wāchissara Thero at Siriwardhanaramaya, Kollupitiya. After learning Paṭṭali and Buddhism, he wrote many books and articles on Buddhism. T.W. Rhys Davids (F.B.A. D.Sc. Ph.D. L.L.D. D.Litt.) is also a very popular, unforgettable character among the Buddhist philosophy scholars in the east and the west. That is because of an excellent product for Paṭṭali education, a Dictionary: 'THE PALI TEXT SOCIETY'S PALI-ENGLISH DICTIONRY' (published by The Pali Text Society, London.) It has been the best work among his Buddhist books. Besides, we can see that the Sinhala Language is also well off with some Paṭṭali language words. As a Paṭṭali teacher, I come across many similar words in both Sinhala and Paṭṭali languages. I was fortunate enough to find an ancient Sinhala grammar book in English, named 'Sinhalese Grammar' – Orthography, (1891, The Author, A.M.G.) to research about Pāli and Sinhala similar words with diacritics, as well as Sanskrit. In this book, we can find out some: Sanskrit, Pāli, and Elu or Sinhala similar words meanings in English, as mentioned below.

In addition to that, some countries, like Thailand, use Paṇḍit as a communicative language in their educational institutions. We can use some Paṇḍit expressions in day-to-day life, like in self-introductions and greetings.

Suppabhaṇḍitaṃ = Good morning. Susayanham = Good evening.

Svaṇḍitaṃ = Welcome.

Sotthi Bhavatu = Good-bye

Thuti or Thuti Atthu = Thank you.



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When we learn any second language, we can see some strangeness as well as familiarity. So, it is fascinating to learn an additional language to keep calmness of our mind, especially during this pandemic period; while in lockdown, one can endeavor to learn Pali. It will pay dividends.

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