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 (/’pa: li/) is a Middle Indo-Aryan liturgical language native to the Indian subcontinent. It is widely studied because it is the language of the P¯ali canon or Tripitaka and the sacred language of Therava¯ da Buddhism. In earlier times, it was written in Bramhi script.’’ Pa¯li 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 Pa¯ li. Therefore, it is essential to understand the difference between

the two words clearly, the Pali and the Pa¯ li. (It may not be the word ‘Pa¯li’ 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 Pa¯ li, which we are going to reveal. As in every language, there is an alphabet in the Pali language as well. In Pa¯ li, there are 41 letters, with eight vowels and 33 consonants. The specialty in the Pa¯ li 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 Pa¯ li alphabet in Roman/Italic letters with diacritics. The Pa¯li alphabet in Sinhala and English characters. (Tipitaka canon Vowels).

අ-a ආ-ā ඉ-i ඊ-ī උ-u ඌ-ū ඒ-ē ඕ-ō
source: Mahāvaggapāli-i
අ-ʌ ආ-a: ඉ-i, ඊ-i: උ-ʊ ඌ-u: ඒ-ɛ: ඕ-ɔ:
source: International Phonetic Alphabet

Consonants
අ-ka, ඛ-kha, ග-ga, ඝ-gha, ඞ-ṅa
ච-ca, ඡ-cha, ජ-ja, ඣ-jha, ඤ-ña
ට-ţa, ඨ-ţha, ඩ-ḍa, ඪ-ḍha, ණ-ṇa
ත-ta, ථ-tha, ද-da, ධ-dha, න-na
ප-pa, ඵ-pha, බ-ba, භ-bha, ම-ma
ය-ya, ර-ra, ල-la, ව-va, ස-sa, හ-ha
ළ-la, ං-aṃ
source: Mahāvaggapāli-i

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

We can see that they had used the Pa¯ li language to teach and study Buddhism from ancient times until today. We could see a golden age of Pa¯ li 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 Pa¯ li from the scholarly monk, Pandith, Venerable. Diyapattugama W¯achissara Thero at Siriwardhanaramaya, Kollupitiya. After learning Pa¯ li 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 Pa¯ li 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 Pa¯ li language words. As a Pa¯ li teacher, I come across many similar words in both Sinhala and Pa¯ li 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 P¯ali and Sinhala similar words with diacritics, as well as Sanskrit. In this book, we can find out some: Sanskrit, P¯ali, and Elu or Sinhala similar words meanings in English, as mentioned below.

In addition to that, some countries, like Thailand, use Pa¯ li as a communicative language in their educational institutions. We can use some Pa¯ li expressions in day-to-day life, like in self-introductions and greetings.
Suppabha¯tam = Good morning. Susayanham = Good evening.
Sva¯gatam = Welcome.
Sotthi Bhavatu = Good-bye
Thuti or Thuti Atthu = Thank you.



Paramadhamma chetiya Pirivena, an ancient Pāli educational center, Sri Lanka.

Sanskrit.	Pāli	Elu or Sinhala.	Signification.
Āhāra-ආහාර	Āhāra-ආහාර	Ahara-අහර	Food.
Rōga-රෝග	Rōga-රෝග	Rōga-රෝග	Sickness.
Lōka-ලෝක	Lōka-ලෝක	Lō-ලෝ	World.
Māsa-මාස	Māsa-මාස	Masa-මාස	Month.
Lajjā-ලජ්ජා	Lajjā-ලජ්ජා	Lajjā-ලැජ්ජා	Shame.
Āyu-ආයු	Āyu-ආයු	Āyu-ආයු	Age.

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.

Ven Diyapattugama Revatha Thero (B.A., M.A., M.Phil.)
Expert Psychological Counselor and Meditation Instructor Siriwardhanarama Buddha Dhamma College
Mano¯daya Meditation Center Mano¯daya Asapuwa (Face Book)
Siriwardhanaramaya, Temple Lane, Kollupitiya
sirirevathad@gmail.com dhammavedi.com



Ven Diyapattugama Revatha Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Siriwardhanaramaya Temple, Kollupitiya.