Teaching Language and Literature: Tamil Manuscript Compendia on Grammar

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Sources
Part of the rich heritage of Tamil manuscripts consists in compendia that contain extracts of various treatises from the wider field of grammar. This comprises not only phonetics/phonology, morphology and syntax, but also poetics, rhetoric, and metrics – in Tamil a single domain named ilakkaṇam. Also personal adaptations of treatises or their commentaries are found, often simplified, as well as unidentified smaller texts which may be summaries of or notes on established texts. What they all have in common is that they appear to come from a context of learning and teaching. The sub-project envisaged here proposes to collect, classify and analyse manuscripts of this type.

Goals
The double goal of the sub-project is that of better understanding the contexts and the different levels at which grammar – a fundamental discipline in a diglossic tradition – was taught, as well as to assess the personal contributions made by individual teachers, and perhaps also students, to the wider domain. This understanding will shed fresh light on the historical processes that took place from the 17th to the early 19th centuries when, after a phase of reconsolidation and systematisation of traditional knowledge under the Nayak rulers, there followed a compartmentalisation of knowledge and loss of information. This will enable us to understand how grammar, with its tool box necessary for re-accessing the earlier literary heritage, came to play a nodal role in the subsequent period of resurrection, called Tamil renaissance, when during late colonial times Tamil texts were re-canonicalised and printed for the first time. The better part conservation is not ensured. Various institutions have been involved with projects of microfilming or photographing part of the heritage, at least as far as the palm-leaf manuscripts are concerned (such as the IGNCA). A small part of the manuscripts for the literary tradition of the first millennium has by now at least been digitised (EFEO Pondicherry; now also Cemmoḻi, the Centre of Excellence for Classical Tamil in Chennai). More manuscripts can be found in various European libraries as part of their colonial heritage. In particular, this sub-project will make use of manuscripts preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris and the Orientalní Ústav of Prague.