

Beginners' Tamil: a taster course



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Introduction

This free course, *Beginners' Tamil: a taster course*, introduces Tamil society and culture, Tamil scripts, and common phrases that will allow you to start having simple conversations in the language. You will also have plenty of opportunities to practise Tamil throughout the course with activities and quizzes.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- demonstrate an awareness of the Tamil alphabet and sound, and a basic understanding of the Tamil language
- count up to 10 in Tamil
- name some of the traditional musical instruments used by Tamils
- name some of the fruits grown in Tamil Nadu
- greet a person in Tamil, and say simple phrases related to numbers, musical instruments and fruits with confidence.

1 The Tamil language

Tamil is one of the oldest languages in the world, and can be dated back to around 400 BC (Violatti, 2016). It is spoken by more than 85 million people (Ethnologue, 2021), most of them in Tamil Nadu (meaning 'The Tamil Nation'), a state in southern India. Tamil is a language rich in literature, philosophy and music, and thus of interest to many people. It is one of the 22 official languages of India.

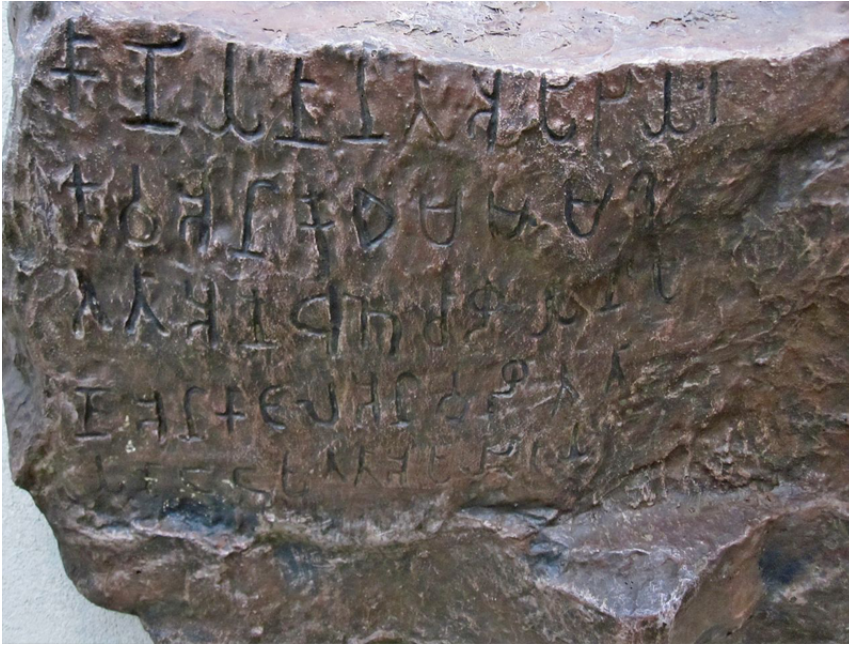


Figure 1 Tamil Brahmi inscription in Mangulam, Madurai district, Tamil Nadu, dated to c. 400 BC to c. 200 AD (Violatti, 2016)

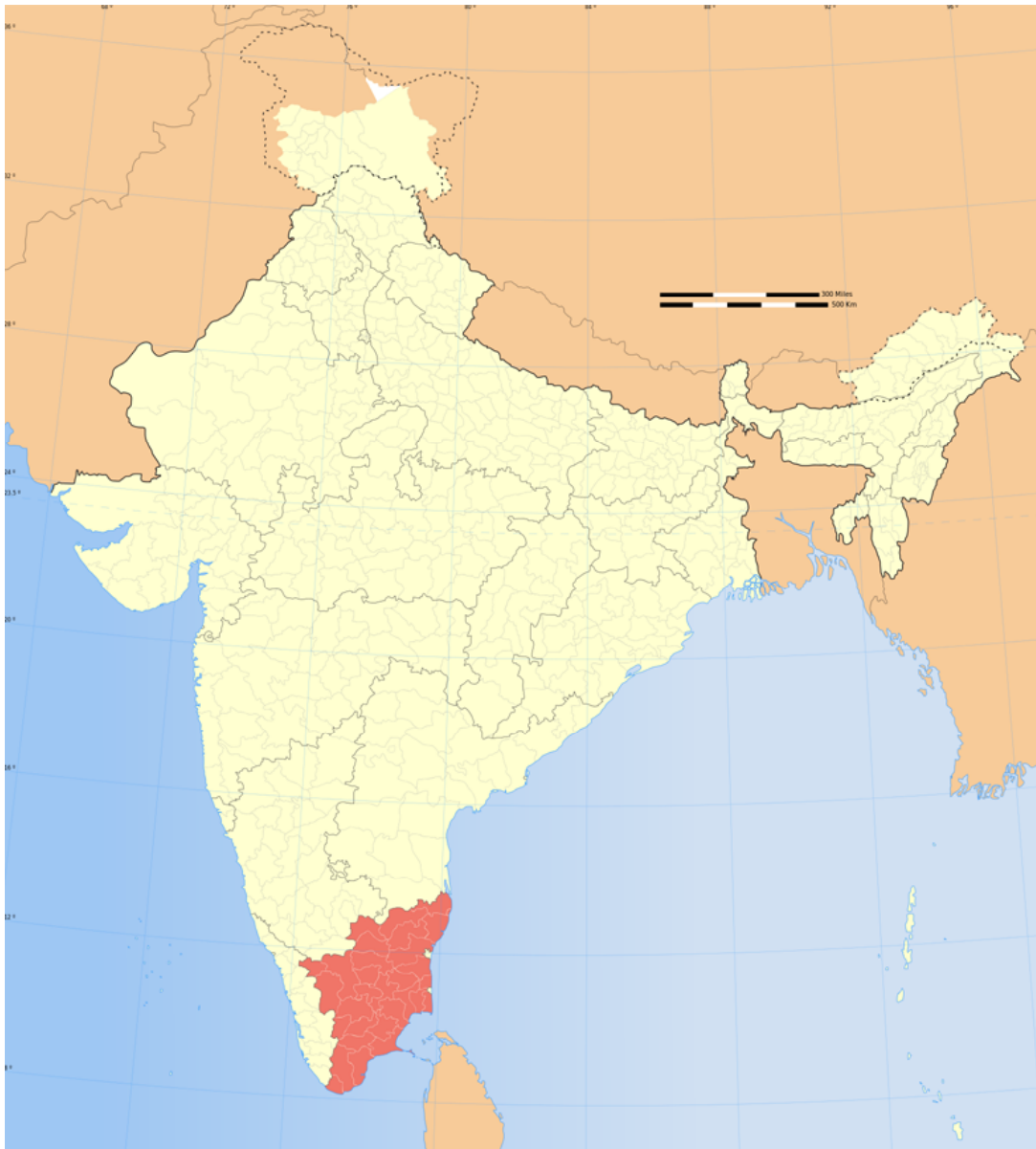


Figure 2 A map of India, with Tamil Nadu in red

Tamil is the official language of Tamil Nadu and the Indian territory of Puducherry, and is one of the official languages in Sri Lanka and Singapore.

As well as in Singapore and Sri Lanka where Tamil is particularly prominent in Jaffna in the north of the island, and in the Vanni in the east, there are also large numbers of Tamil speakers in the diaspora in Malaysia, Mauritius, Fiji, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Australia and the USA. Significant Tamil minorities in the Indian states of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana, and in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, also speak the language.

Tamil is also used as a language of education in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore.

In England and Wales in 2011, the Tamil speaking-population was said to be 100 689 (Gopal and Matras, 2013) while Dissanayake some years earlier (2008) quoted a community estimate of 150 000.

The majority of Tamils are Hindus, with a smaller proportion being Christians and Muslims. Tamils tend to live in extended families, with the elderly often living with their adult children.



Figure 3 Three generations of a Tamil family – the women are wearing *saris* (*saylay*, in Tamil), while the patriarch is wearing a *vertti*, and the young girl in the front is wearing a *pavaadai*.

Activity 1

True or false. Tamil is an official language only in India.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Discussion

False. As well as in India, Tamil is also an official language in Sri Lanka and Singapore.

True or false. Tamil is an ancient language.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Discussion

True. Tamil is an ancient language, dating back to around 400 BC.

True or false. The majority of Tamils are Buddhists.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Discussion

False. The majority of Tamils are Hindu.

2 Tamil script

The current Tamil script consists of 12 vowels (Table 1), 18 consonants (Table 2) and one special character, the *āyṭam*. The vowels and consonants combine to form 216 compound characters (see Section 2.1 for examples), giving a total of 247 characters. There are also Grantha letters originating from the 4th century, which are used with Sanskrit words, usually in religious contexts.

All consonants have an inherent vowel *a*, as with other Indic scripts. This inherent vowel is removed by adding a tittle called a *pulli*, to the consonantal sign. For example, னை is *ṇa* (with the inherent *a*) and ன் is *ṇ* (without a vowel).

The direction of writing is from left to right, in horizontal lines. The alphabet was originally written on palm fronds. As a result, the letters are made up mainly of curved strokes which would not have ripped the fronds.

Table 1 The 12 Tamil vowels

அ	a	ஏ	e
ஆ	aa	ஈ	ee
இ	i	ஐ	ai
ஊ	ii	ஓ	o
உ	u	ஔ	oo
ஊ	uu	ஔ	au

Table 2 The 18 Tamil consonants, with the Grantha letters

க	ங	ச	ஞ	ட	ண
k	ṅ	c	ñ	ṭ	ṇ
[k], [g], [x], [ɣ], [ŋ]	[ŋ]	[t͡ɕ], [d͡ʒ], [s], [ʃ]	[ɲ]	[t̪], [d̪], [ɾ]	[ɳ]
த	ந	ப	ம	ய	ர
t	n	p	m	y	r
[t̪], [d̪], [ɖ]	[n]	[p], [b], [β]	[m]	[j]	[r]
ல	வ	ழ	ள்	ற்	ன்
l	v	ḷ	ḷ	ṛ	ṇ
[l]	[v]	[ɻ]	[ḷ]	[r], [t̪], [d̪]	[n]
Grantha letters					
ஜ	ஷ	ஸ	ஹ	க்ஷ	
ja	sha	sa	ha	kṣha	

2.1 The sound of Tamil

As mentioned in Section 2, the 12 vowels and 18 consonants in Tamil combine to form 216 compound characters. Listen to the two audios below for some examples and to hear how the sounds are pronounced.

Audio content is not available in this format.



க,கா,கி,கீ,கா,கௌ,கடு,கடே,கடை,கடு·ா,கடே·ா,கடு·ள

Audio content is not available in this format.



ச,சா,சி,சீ,சா,சௌ,சடு,சடே,சடை,சடு·ா,சடே·ா,சடு·ள

Now listen to the pronunciation of some of the new words you have been introduced to so far in this course.

New vocabulary

Audio content is not available in this format.



Tamil | தமிழ்

Audio content is not available in this format.



Tamil Nadu | தமிழ் நாடு

Audio content is not available in this format.



Saylay | சலே

Audio content is not available in this format.



Vertti | வுட்டி

Audio content is not available in this format.



Pavaadai | பாவாடை

Activity 2

Interactive content is not available in this format.



3 Tamil greetings

Unlike many other languages where there are multiple ways of greeting, in Tamil there is just one way of greeting others. To greet someone in person or whilst on the telephone or internet, you would say 'Vanakkam' and, if meeting in person, you would say this with palms pressed against each other facing the person.

The word 'Vanakkam' implies respecting the person who comes in front of another person. This is just like the word 'Namaste' which is used in Northern India, Nepal, and in other regions where Hindi is spoken.



Figure 4 A couple saying 'Vanakkam' - (வணக்கம்).

When saying goodbye to someone or leaving a gathering, Tamils will say, 'Naan poyitu vaarein' meaning 'I'll go and come back'. This is an indication of being in constant connection with people.

Table 3 lists some useful phrases to use when greeting others and when saying goodbye. Read through the table and then listen to how each phrase is pronounced in the study note that follows. You will then have a chance to practise saying some of the expressions in Activity 3.

Table 3 Greetings and essential expressions

Phrase in English	Phrase in Tamil	Pronunciation
Hello	வணக்கம்.	Vanakkam
Are you well?	நீங்கள் நலமாக இருக்கிறீர்களா?	Neenkal Nalamaka Erukkirirkala?
Yes, I'm fine	ஆம், நான் நலமாக இருக்கிறேன்.	Aam, naan nalamaka erukkiren
Thank you	நன்றி.	Nandhri
You are welcome	நீங்கள் வரவதேகப்படுகிறீர்கள்.	Neenkal varavetkappadukireerkal
I'm sorry	நான் வருந்துகிறேன்	
Forgive me (this is a more common way of apologising in day-to-day communications)	என்னை மன்னித்துக்கொள்ளுங்கள்.	Ennai manniththukollunkal
It doesn't matter	அது ஒரு விடயம் இல்லை. (அது பறவாயில்லை)	Athu oru vidayam ellai (Athu paruvaayillai)

Goodbye

நான் பஃயிற்று வாறனே.

Naan poyitu vaarein

I have to leave now, as I have to fetch my son from school

நான் எனது மகனை பள்ளியில்
 இருந்து ஂடுக்கவனே஁
 இருப்பதால், நான்
 இப்பஃழுது பஃகவனே஁
 இருக்கிறது.

Naan enathu makanai palliyil
 erunthu edukka vendi
 eruppathaal naan eppoluthu
 pokavendi erukkirathu

New vocabulary/phrases

Click on 'Show transcript' to reveal the transliteration (Tamil words using the English alphabet) of the vocabulary/phrases.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Hello | வணக்கம்.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Are you well? | நீங்கள் நலமாக இருக்கிறீர்களா?

Audio content is not available in this format.



Yes, I'm fine | ஆம், நான் நலமாக இருக்கிறனே.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Thank you | நன்றி.

Audio content is not available in this format.



You are welcome | நீங்கள் வரவறேகப்படுகிறீர்கள்.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Forgive me | என்னை மன்னித்துக்கொள்ளுங்கள்

Audio content is not available in this format.



It doesn't matter | அது ஒரு விடயம் இல்லலை. (அது பறவாயில்லை)

Audio content is not available in this format.



Goodbye (literally, 'I will go and come back') | நான் போயிற்று வாறனே.

Audio content is not available in this format.



I have to leave now, as I have to fetch my son from school | நான் எனது மகனை பள்ளியில் இருந்து எடுக்கவணேன்டி இருப்பதால், நான் இப்பொழுது போகவணேன்டி இருக்கிறது.

Now have a go at speaking Tamil yourself.

Activity 3

Record yourself saying the following statements and questions. Once you have recorded yourself, compare your recording with the model answer given.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Interactive content is not available in this format.



Interactive content is not available in this format.



4 Tamil names and introductions

Tamils usually only have one name, but it can be quite long, for example, 'Sivaloganathan' (a male name, usually shortened, amongst family and friends, to 'Siva', or 'Loga', or 'Nathan'). The first letter of the father's name is then put as an initial. So, if the father of Sivaloganathan was named 'Sriskantharajah', Sivaloganathan would be known as 'S. Sivaloganathan'.

Female names tend to be shorter than male names, for example, Saraswathi or Lakshmi, the name of two Hindu Goddesses. If you imagine Saras (the shortened form of Saraswathi, but which would never be used in a religious setting) to be Siva's brother, she would go as 'S. Saraswathi' when filling in any paperwork.

In Tamil, as in many Asian languages, older people are addressed in respectful ways and suffixes for different categories of relatives are used. For example, your mother's eldest brother would be your 'Peria Maama' ('Peria' means 'most senior'; and 'Maama' means 'paternal uncle').



Figure 5 The Goddess Saraswathi, the provider of knowledge (left) and the Goddess Lakshmi, the provider of wealth (right)

Now study Table 4 alongside the audios that follow in the study note. These are some useful phrases to use when introducing yourself, such as saying where you live, where you were born and a bit about your family. Once you have listened to the phrases, have a go at Activity 4.

Table 4 Introducing yourself

Phrase in English	Phrase in Tamil	Pronunciation
My name is Siva	எனது பெயர் சிவா.	<i>Enathu peyar Siva</i>

I live in Milton Keynes	நான் மில்டன் கீன்ஸ் இல் வாழ்கிறேன்.	<i>Naan Milton Keensil Vaalkiren</i>
I was born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka	நான் இலங்கையின் யாழ்ப்பாணத்தில் பிறந்தேன்.	<i>Naan Elankaiyin Yalpanathil piranthen</i> [Here, Sri Lanka (Elankai) comes before Jaffna (Yalpanam)]
I am married	நான் திருமணம் ஆனவர்.	<i>Naan thirumanam aanavar</i>
I am single	நான் திருமணம் ஆகாதவர்.	<i>Naan thirumanam akathavar</i>
I have two children, a boy, and a girl	எனக்கு இரண்டு குழந்தைகள், ஒரு ஆணும், ஒரு பெண்ணும்.	<i>Enakku erandu kulanthaikal, oru aanum, oru pennnum</i>
My son's name is ...	எனது மகனின் பெயர் ...	<i>Enathu makanin peyar ...</i>
My daughter's name is ...	எனது மகளின் பெயர் ...	<i>Enathu makalin peyar ...</i>

New vocabulary/phrases

Audio content is not available in this format.



My name is Siva | எனது பெயர் சிவா.

Audio content is not available in this format.



I live in Milton Keynes | நான் மில்டன் கீன்ஸ் இல் வாழ்கிறேன்.

Audio content is not available in this format.



I was born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka | நான் இலங்கையின் யாழ்ப்பாணத்தில் பிறந்தேன்.

Audio content is not available in this format.



I am married | நான் திருமணம் ஆனவர்.

Audio content is not available in this format.



I am single | நான் திருமணம் ஆகாதவர்.

Audio content is not available in this format.



I have two children, a boy, and a girl | எனக்கு இரண்டு குழந்தைகள், ஒரு ஆணும், ஒரு பெண்ணும்.

Audio content is not available in this format.



My son's name is ... | எனது மகனின் பெயர் ...

Audio content is not available in this format.



My daughter's name is ... | எனது மகளின் பெயர் ...

Activity 4

Select one. In what situation(s) would 'Vanakkam' be used?

- ☐ When speaking on the telephone
- ☐ When meeting someone face-to-face
- ☐ When communicating by electronic media
- ☐ All of the above.

Unlike in many other societies, Tamils often just have one name.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Interactive content is not available in this format.



5 Numbers

In this section you will learn how to count from zero to ten. Study Table 5 alongside the audio that follows to help you become familiar with numbers in Tamil.

Table 5 Numbers in Tamil

Number	Tamil script	Pronunciation
0	பூச்சியம்	Poochchiam
1	ஒன்று	Ondru
2	இரண்டு	Erandu
3	மூன்று	Moondru
4	நான்கு	Naanku
5	ஐந்து	Ainthu
6	ஆறு	Aaru
7	ஏழு	Erlu
8	எட்டு	Ettu
9	ஒன்பது	Onpathu
10	பத்து	Paththu

Audio content is not available in this format.



Numbers 0–10

5.1 Using numbers

Giving your telephone number or saying your age are just two examples of when you might need to use numbers. How about giving your work identification number or your house number? Listen to the audios that follow to hear how you would say these two examples.

Audio content is not available in this format.



My work identification number is 1148 | எனது வலை அடையாள இலக்கம் ஒன்று ஒன்று நான்கு எட்டு.

Audio content is not available in this format.



My house number is 7 | எனது வீட்டு இலக்கம் ஏழு.

Now have a go at using numbers yourself in Activity 5.

Activity 5

Interactive content is not available in this format.



If someone tells you their locker code is 'ettu, poochiam, ondru, onpathu', what is their locker number?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

8019

Interactive content is not available in this format.



6 Food and drink

In Tamil culture, it is common to offer visitors a drink and some snacks soon after they arrive. The snacks are usually savoury for adults, and sweet for children.

Listen to the audios to hear how to offer someone a drink and also accept an offer for a tea.

Audio content is not available in this format.



What would you like to drink? Tea, coffee, a soft drink? | உங்களுக்கு என்ன குடிக்க விரும்பம்? ததேர்,காப்பி,குளிர்பானம்.?

Audio content is not available in this format.



Tea would be nice, thank you | ததேர் நன்றாக இருக்கும், நன்றி.

(NB: Tea in Tamil culture comes automatically with milk and sugar!)

Audio content is not available in this format.



I have some nice murukku. I'll bring it | நான் நல்ல முறுக்கு வதைத்திருக்கிறேன். அதை நான் கொண்டுவருவேன்.

Murukku (Figure 6), which was mentioned in the last audio, is a savoury, crunchy Indian snack, typically made from rice and urid (also called 'urad') daal flour, along with water, salt, chilli powder, asafoetida and either sesame seeds or cumin seeds. Once mixed together the ingredients are kneaded into a spiral or coil-shaped dough, either by hand or with a mould, before being deep-fried in vegetable oil.



Figure 6 (முறுக்கு)

Activity 6






Interactive content is not available in this format.



6.1 Fruits

Tamil Nadu is blessed with a tropical climate (though there are hilly areas, like Kodaikanal where it can get as cool as 2.7 °C). The warm climate in Tamil Nadu favours the growth of several fruits, some of the most popular of which are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Fruits grown in Tamil Nadu

Fruit	Illustration	Name in Tamil	Pronunciation
Papaya		பப்பாளி	<i>Pappaali</i>
Jackfruit		பலாப்பழம்	<i>Palaappalam</i>
Wood apple		விளாம்பழம்	<i>Vilaampalam</i>
Jambu		ஜம்பா	<i>Jambu</i>
Nungu		நுங்கு	<i>Nungu</i>

Now listen to how to pronounce the names of the fruits given in Table 6 before testing your knowledge in Activity 7.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1 Fruits



Vocabulary

Audio content is not available in this format.



Papaya | பப்பாளி

Audio content is not available in this format.



Jackfruit | பலாப்பழம்

Audio content is not available in this format.



Wood apple | விளம்பழம்

Audio content is not available in this format.



Jambu | ஜம்பா

Audio content is not available in this format.



Nungu | நுங்கு

Activity 7

Match the images of the fruit with the correct script.

விளம்பழம்

நுங்கு

ஜம்பு

பப்பாளி

பலாப்பழம்

Match each of the items above to an item below.





7 Music

Classical Tamil music belongs to the Carnatic school of music. Carnatic music is traditional to South India, whilst Hindustani music is associated with North India. Modern Tamil songs, particularly from films, are very popular in Tamil-speaking societies.

Figure 7 illustrates some of the instruments used in both traditional and modern Tamil music. Take a look at the different instruments and then move on to Section 7.1 where you will hear some of the instruments being played.



Figure 7 Instruments used in Carnatic music

7.1 Examples of Tamil music

In this section you will have the opportunity to listen to some of the instruments used in Tamil music. In Video 2 a musical trio can be seen playing the *mirdangam*, electric violin, and *morsing*. The video is a recording from the national sadhana for the 95th Advent of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. You should watch the video from 45:07 to 47:17 to hear the music.

View at: [youtube:kGuq3dG_8E8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGuq3dG_8E8)



Video 2 Tamil music

Did you notice the bond between the musicians? For example at 47:08, when the violin player is pleasantly surprised by a note that the *morsing* player generates!

The vocabulary box below lets you hear how to pronounce these three instruments being played. Listen and practise the pronunciation yourself and then continue on to hear the harmonium and morsing being played.

Vocabulary

Audio content is not available in this format.



Mirdangam | மிருதங்கம்

Audio content is not available in this format.



Electric violin | மின்சார வயலின்

Audio content is not available in this format.



Morsing | முகச்சங்கு

The *morsing* is a type of 'jaw harp', seen in many cultures, and known by various names, such as the Jew's harp, mouth harp, gewgaw, guimbard, khomus, trump, Ozark harp, Galician harp, or murchunga.

Now watch Video 3, which gives a detailed explanation of the morsing, as well as a demonstration of how it is used.

View at: [youtube:H25eHABxf5c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H25eHABxf5c)



Video 3 What is a morsing?

Finally, before having a go at the last activity in the course, watch Video 4.

View at: [youtube:Y2VbCDPkbqg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2VbCDPkbqg)



Video 4 Harmonium recital

Activity 8

Match the images of the musical instruments with the correct word.

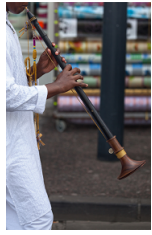
Nadaswaram

Ghatam

Harmonium

Thavil

Match each of the items above to an item below.



Name three stringed instruments used in Tamil music.

Provide your answer...

.....

Discussion

From Figure 7, you could have said the veena, thambura, and violin.

Conclusion

We hope you found this short course interesting and enjoyable! You should now have some knowledge of the history of the Tamil language, together with an understanding of the Tamil script and numbers. You will have acquired some familiarity with commonly used Tamil phrases, including the concept of 'Vanakkam', and you've also been introduced to some fruits from Tamil Nadu and instruments used in Tamil music.

If you enjoyed this taster in Tamil and would be interested in a longer, paid-for version of the course, you can express your interest by e-mailing oclc@open.ac.uk. Please provide your name and contact email address. Your contact details will be kept for the sole purpose of contacting you should a longer version of the course be produced in the future and will not be used for any other purpose.

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