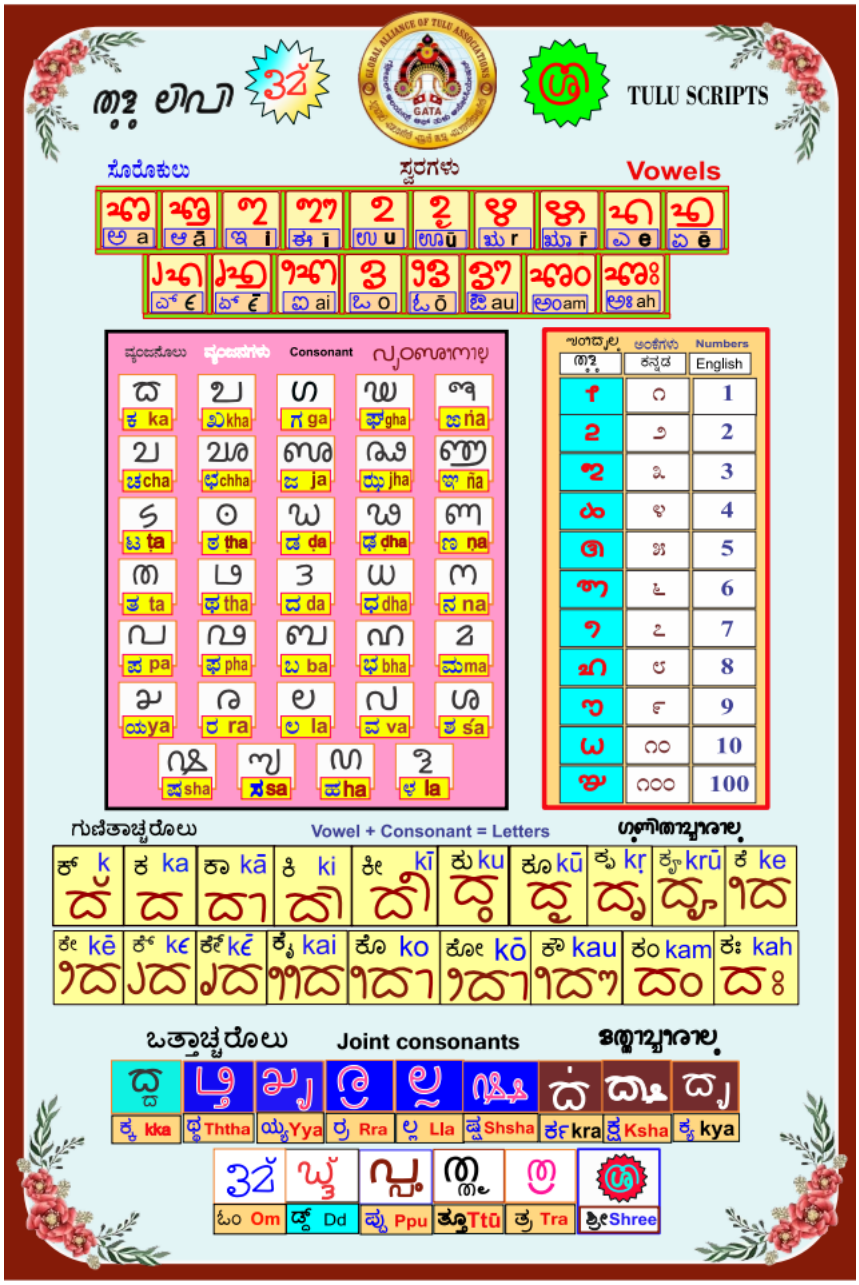
TULU LIPI – TULU SCRIPT

By: Shreevalli Rai Martell, Florida, USA



Tulu is not merely another language, civilization, or culture — it is a jewel in the crown of our motherland. Among the Dravidian family of languages spoken primarily in South India, Tulu stands as one of the oldest. It is spoken mainly in the regions of **Udupi**, **Dakshina Kannada**, and the **northern parts of Kasaragod district** in Kerala. The native speakers of Tulu are known as **Tuluvas**, and their homeland is affectionately called **Tulu Nadu (the land of Tulu)**.

Tulu is one of the five major Dravidian languages — **Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and Tulu** — collectively referred to as the *Pancha Dravida Bhashegalu*. Reverend Caldwell, in his monumental work *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages*, recognized Tulu as one of the most highly developed among the Dravidian family. His study gave Tulu the linguistic recognition it long deserved.

Origin and Evolution of the Tulu Script (Tulu Lipi / Tigalari Script)

Tulu Nadu has its own script known as the **Tulu Script** or **Tigalari Script**, a Southern Brahmic script primarily used for writing Vedic texts in Sanskrit. The script evolved from the **Grantha Script** and bears close resemblance to the **Malayalam Script**, which also originated from Grantha.

In Kannada-speaking Malnad regions, it is called *Tigalari Lipi*, while Tulu speakers refer to it as *Tulu Lipi*. According to **Prof. Gunda Jois**, who has studied the script for over four decades, historical evidence from stone inscriptions and palm-leaf manuscripts shows that the original name for this script was "Tigalari."

Historically, Tulu Brahmins used this script extensively for writing mantras, temple accounts, and sacred texts. When Tulu Brahmins served as priests (*Shantis*) in Kerala temples, they brought this writing system with them. At that time, Malayalam had not yet developed its own script, and thus the Tulu script influenced what later became the **Malayalam script**.

Vidwan P.V. Puninchathaya and **Dr. Punduru Venkatraj Puninchathaya** both affirm that Malayalam script originated from the Tulu script, calling it the *Tulu-Malayalam script*.

Historical Evidence and Literature

The world-famous **Shri Krishna Temple in Udupi (Ashta Mutts)** still uses the Tulu script for official signatures. The oldest known inscription in Tulu Lipi dates back to **1159 A.D.**, found in the **Sri Veeranarayana Temple at Kulasekhara**. Several inscriptions from the 14th–15th centuries, especially in **Barkur** (the capital of Tulu Nadu during the Vijayanagar period) and **Ullur Subrahmanya Temple**, are in Tulu script.

The earliest surviving Tulu literature includes a Tulu translation of the *Mahabharata* by **Arunabja (1657 AD)** of Kodavur near Udupi. Other significant works include:

- *Shri Devi Mahatme* (1200 AD) – Tulu translation
- *Sri Bhagavata* (1626 AD) by Vishnu Tunga
- *Kaveri* (1391 AD)

- *Bhagavatantargata Ramayana*, *Karna Parva*, *Vinayaka Havana Vidhi*

These works demonstrate the literary richness of the language and its script.

Cultural and Archaeological Evidence

Evidence of Tulu Lipi can be found engraved on clay pots, brass vessels, wooden carvings, jewelry, and ancient palm-leaf manuscripts (Ola Gari).

The Dharmasthala Cultural and Research Museum and Udupi Mutt hold over 2,000 Tulu script manuscripts, with another 15,000 documents located worldwide.

Squadron Leader Pattathmogar Shivaprasad Rai notes that Tulu has a history spanning over 3,000 years, with one Greek play having several lines written in Tulu script — proof of its ancient scholarly use.

Modern Rediscovery and Efforts to Revive Tulu Script

Although the Tulu script has a long history, it eventually faded from use for various reasons:

- The shift in political power to Kannada-speaking rulers.
- Limited exposure beyond Brahmin communities.
- Lack of formal education in Tulu.
- Introduction of printing by German missionaries using Kannada script.

Over time, Kannada script became the medium for Tulu writing. Yet, the oral tradition, especially through *Pardana* (epic folk songs) like **Siri** and **Koti-Chennaya,** kept the language alive.

In recent decades, **Tulu Sahitya Academy** has worked to reintroduce Tulu in schools across coastal Karnataka. First launched in sixteen schools, the programme now reaches over 1,500 students at more than thirty-three institutions. Similarly, the **Kerala Tulu Academy**, set up in 2007 in **Manjeshwar (Kasaragod)**, promotes Tulu through seminars, publications, and cultural programs.

Tulu is available for study at the postgraduate level at Mangalore University, Dravidian University in Kuppam, and Government College, Kasaragod. **Nitte Deemed University** celebrates **Tulu Dina (Tulu Day)** on **October 2nd**, honoring Dr. Amritha Someshwar and the *Tulu Lexicon* project by **Govinda Pai Research Centre**.

Lexicographical and Research Achievements

German missionaries **Revs. Krammer and Manner** were pioneers in researching Tulu. Rev. Manner compiled the first Tulu dictionary in **1886** with support from the Madras Government. Later, the **Govinda Pai Research Centre (Udupi)** launched the monumental *Tulu Lexicon Project* in 1979, which took 18 years to complete and won the **Gundert Award** in 1996 for the best dictionary in India.

In 2011, **Mangalore University** approved certificate, diploma, and postgraduate diploma courses in Tulu, both in regular and correspondence modes, further institutionalizing the language's study.

Tulu Script Revival in the Global Community

Today, efforts to revive and teach **Tulu Lipi** are spreading globally. In the **United States**, four Tulu script classes and two spoken Tulu classes are actively conducted under the **All America Tulu Association(AATA), one Tulu Lipi** class is being conducted by the **Global Alliance of Tulu Associations (GATA),** and **Jai Tulu Nadu**, an organization from India, is conducting Tulu Lipi classes. Through these initiatives, learners across continents are reconnecting with their roots.

By learning the Tulu language and script, we **preserve, protect, and promote** our unique cultural identity for future generations.

References:

- Wikipedia: Tulu Language – History