

**PHONEMIC SYSTEMS OF INDIAN TAMIL AND
ESTATE TAMIL
A CONTRASTIVE STUDY**

W.M. WIJERATNE

1. Introduction

Tamil is a Dravidian language, spoken mainly in (South) India. It has several social and geographical dialects. Socially, there are two varieties, namely high or formal variety and low or informal variety. These exhibit one's educational and occupational status. The high variety or literary Tamil is rigid and formal, and is exercised in literary works, broadcasting, and public discussions. The low variety or colloquial language is used in informal discussions, in communication with family members and friends. Geographical varieties are found mainly in colloquial form of the language, spoken in South India, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, the West Indies, etc. It must be noted that geographical differences occur even within each of these countries. For example, though one refers to Indian Tamil as a single entity, its dialects differ extremely from place to place. Equally, (so called) Sri Lankan Tamil has several geographical dialects spoken in Jaffna peninsula, Trincomalee, and Batticaloa districts.

It is interesting to note that one of the Tamil dialects spoken in Sri Lanka is also called Indian Tamil. This is the dialect spoken by Indian Tamil migrants who are about 40% of the Tamil speaking population in the country. Most of these people are the descendents from those who were brought to Sri Lanka by European planters to work on the tea and /or rubber plantations in the latter part of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century. They have been living in the hill sides of the country in tea/rubber plantations/estates and are called 'Estate Tamils' (Nagita, 1988:7). In the past, they were daily paid labourers in the tea and /or rubber estates. Therefore, they were also identified as 'Cooly Tamils' (Wells, 1927). These Estate Tamils or their ancestors lived in different parts of South India and belonged to communities with different socio-linguistic backgrounds prior to their arrival in Sri Lanka. When they reached the island they were accommodated in plantation sites disregarding their socio-linguistic differences. This led various dialects of Indian Tamil to merge with one another during the last century. Since this merging and