

DATING DEVEHI (MALDIVIAN)

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1 INTRODUCTION

Divehi (Maldivian), spoken by approximately 250,000 people in the Republic of Maldives is Sinhala's closest linguistic relative. Even a cursory comparison of the common lexical items in the respective languages reveal startling similarity (e.g. *Si. balanəwa, D. balanī look-ing*, *Si. karanəwa, D. kurani doing*). The similarities between the two languages are so great that Geiger concluded that Divehi was a Sinhala dialect which had branched off from its "mother tongue" as late as the 10th c.A.D., (1919: 99-100; 1939: 168). In this article, I will present evidence that suggests Geiger was off by at least a millenium, and that Divehi began developing as a separate language from Early Sinhala Prakrit by the first century B.C., if not earlier. The nature of the evidence consists of comparative data between Divehi and Sinhala that indicate the extent to which Divehi conforms to the sound changes that occurred early in Sinhala's development as determined by Karunatilake (1969). Unlike Sinhala which has written records going back at least twenty - three hundred years, epigraphic records in Divehi are scarce. The oldest Divehi texts found to date consist of copper plate land grants from the latter part of the 12th c. A.D. (Loamaafaanu 1982, Maniku and Wijayawardhana 1986). For the Divehi data, then, I rely largely on modern cognate forms.¹ First, I show how Divehi conforms without exception to sound changes that were known to have taken place in Early Sinhala Prakrit (or "Old Sinhala") by the 3rd c. B.C., and that the predecessor of Sinhala and Maldivian, Proto-Divehi-Sinhala (PDS), forms a distinct off-shoot from other Middle Indic languages. Then, I present data that strongly suggests that Proto-Divehi began diverging from Sinhala Prakrit (SP) relatively shortly afterward. The divergence was not total, however, for Divehi also had undergone the same type of sound changes found in subsequent periods of Sinhala's development. I summarize how closely Divehi conforms to the changes attested in Sinhala Prakrit (2nd c.B.C. - 4th c.A.D.). What emerges in Divehi is a complex pattern of early divergence from Sinhala on the one hand, but conformity suggesting subsequent convergence on the other. This pattern continues throughout the historical development of the respective languages, but only those similarities and differences found in the earliest stages of Divehi and Sinhala are reported here.

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