South India and Sri Lanka Before Modern Ethnic Categories

Archaeology, language and mobility across the Palk Strait without retrospective nationalism

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Direct answer. South India and Sri Lanka were connected by repeated movement of people, goods, technologies, religious ideas and political forces long before modern nations and ethnic censuses existed. Proximity across the Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar made contact persistent, while sea level, monsoons, ports and states changed its form. Archaeology documents comparable Iron Age burial practices, black-and-red ware, iron technology, beads and later imported ceramics; ports such as Mantai joined island and continental routes. Early Brahmi inscriptions in Sri Lanka are predominantly Prakrit, while Tamil-Brahmi and references to Dameda or Tamil persons show Tamil-speaking and identified Tamil participants in particular contexts. These findings neither prove timeless separation nor a single undifferentiated population. Responsible history reconstructs dated communities and networks without projecting today's Sinhala, Tamil, Indian or Sri Lankan political categories unchanged into the distant past.

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1 Geography and research scale

The Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar enabled repeated crossings, but sea level, monsoon, watercraft, ports and political security changed connectivity. Analyses must align sites and phases rather than assume timeless interaction.

2 Prehistory and Iron Age comparison

Coastal occupation, black-and-red ware, iron technology, beads and burial forms establish broad comparative fields. Shared artefact classes can result from exchange, migration, imitation or parallel development and are not ethnic labels.

3 Anuradhapura and urbanization

Stratified sequences document urban growth, craft, writing and imported materials. Continental parallels matter within a locally specific institutional trajectory; diffusion from a single source is inadequate.

4 Scripts and languages

Brahmi signs served multiple languages. Early Sri Lankan inscriptions are mainly Prakrit, while Tamil-Brahmi and references to Dameda persons document Tamil presence in bounded contexts. Script, language, identity and demography require separate inference.

5 Ports and commodities

Mantai and other ports connected island production to South India and wider ocean networks. Ceramics, beads, pearls, shell and food remains trace circulation with distinct biases; compositional analysis is needed to distinguish imports and imitation.

6 Religion and institutions

Buddhist mobility involved monks, donors, texts and artisans across several routes. Religious commonality did not erase linguistic or political difference, and local patronage transformed transmitted practices.

7 Political and textual evidence

Invasion, raid, alliance, tribute and administration should not be conflated. Chronicles, literature and royal inscriptions carry genre and political agendas; they are strongest when synchronized with independent contexts.

8 Identity and population history

Language shift, intermarriage, occupational mobility and religious affiliation create layered identities. Genetic ancestry and material culture cannot be translated directly into modern ethnicity or sovereignty.

9 Research protocol

Use dated site sequences, provenance science, reproducible epigraphy, bioarchaeology and explicit claim scales. Evaluate object movement and human mobility as competing but compatible processes and publish uncertainty.

10 Evidence assessment

Strong	South India and Sri Lanka participated in recurring maritime and cultural interaction across many periods.
Strong	Comparable Iron Age materials occur on both sides of the Palk Strait, alongside important local variation.
Strong	Early inscriptions document Prakrit writing and specific Tamil-speaking or Tamil-identified participants in Sri Lanka.
Probable	Migration as well as exchange contributed to some archaeological similarities, though scale varied by phase.
Probable	Ports and religious networks connected multilingual communities without eliminating local political development.
Contested	The chronology, demographic scale and social meaning of particular migrations and inscriptional identities.
Unsupported	The claim that one artefact, script, language or conquest proves timeless ethnic ownership of a territory.

11 Conclusion

Ancient South India and Sri Lanka were neither isolated worlds nor one timeless community. Archaeology and inscriptions reveal repeated connection among locally changing societies. The most credible reconstruction separates objects from people, scripts from languages, ancestry from identity and military episodes from enduring rule. This method recognizes Tamil and Prakrit evidence fully while refusing to make ancient fragments carry modern territorial claims.

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This paper is an evidence review for public scholarship.

Corrections: info@indusvalley.org.