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PM Modi highlighted Tamil's presence in Malaysia: the centuries-old story of how the language crossed the seas

The connection, visible in the country's everyday life, did not begin with governments but with maritime trade even before the British established its colonies in the region

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim during their joint press statement in Kuala Lumpur on February 8. Photo: X/@PMOIndia

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi landed in Malaysia for his first foreign visit of 2026, the language he chose to emphasise was not Hindi or English, but Tamil.

"India and Malaysia are also united by a **shared love for the Tamil language**. The strong and vibrant presence of Tamil in Malaysia is visible in education, media, and cultural life," he said in his address on Sunday (February 8), delivered after talks with his Malaysian counterpart, Anwar Ibrahim.

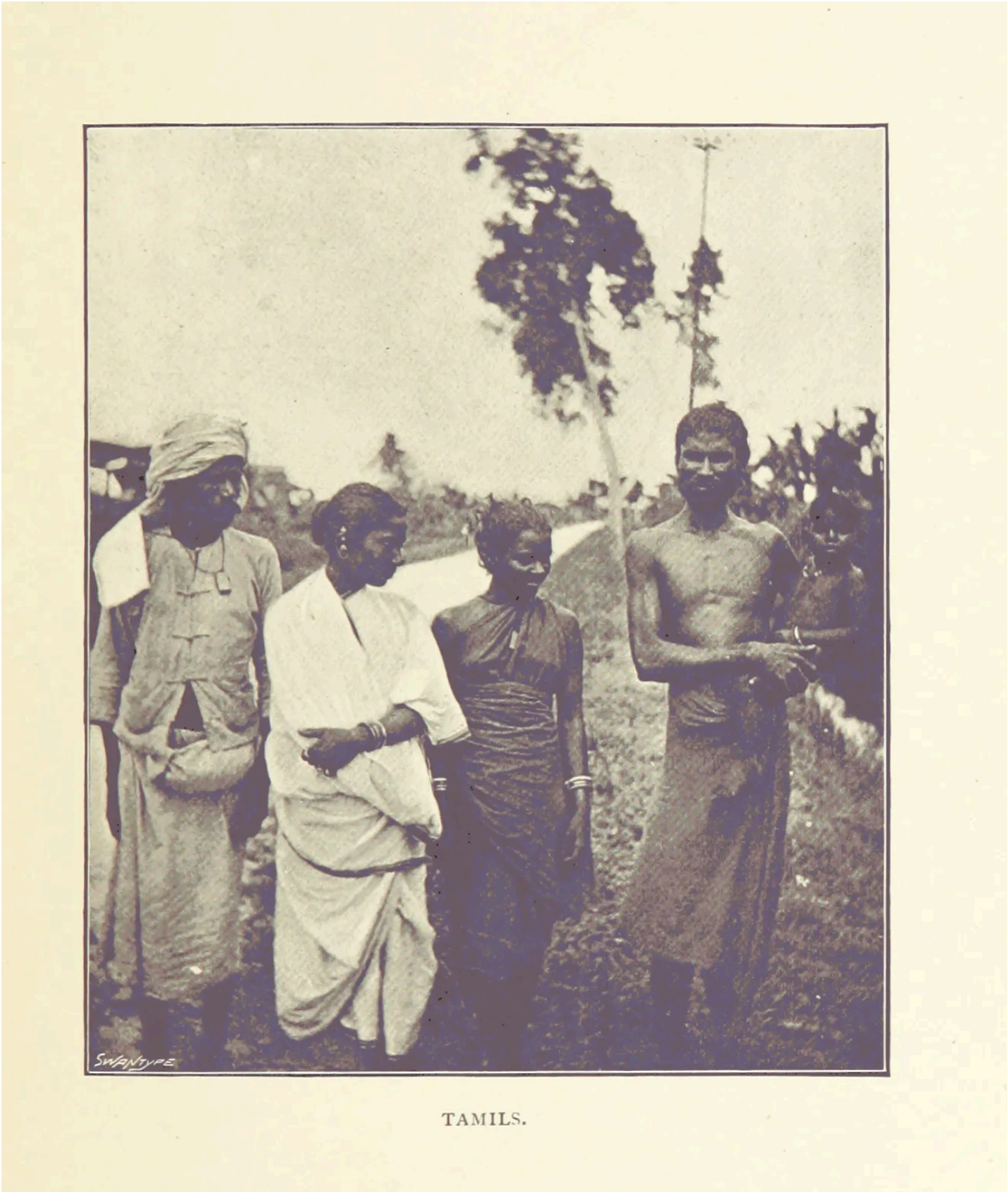
For most diplomatic speeches, such a line might pass as a gesture to the diaspora. In Malaysia's case, it was something else: a simple statement of fact. Tamil is not merely a migrant language here. It is a public language: heard in schools, temples, television, newspapers, and cinema halls. It is older than the Malaysian nation-state itself, older even than colonial rule. It arrived not by policy but by tide. And that long history – trade, labour, settlement, survival – helps explain why nearly three million people of Indian origin, overwhelmingly Tamil, form one of Southeast Asia's most visible and rooted diasporas.

Before plantations, there were ships

The story does not begin with the British. As the scholar Carl Vadivella Belle noted in his book, *Thaipusam in Malaysia: A Hindu Festival in the Tamil Diaspora*, these connections were "established and sustained over an extended period reaching back well beyond the first century BCE". Maritime routes linked the Coromandel coast to ports along the Malay Peninsula, especially the state of Kedah and the Strait of Malacca. Spices, textiles, and forest goods moved both ways. So did people.

Merchant guilds from South India established semi-permanent settlements. Temples appeared. Tamil inscriptions followed. Cultural exchange travelled alongside commerce,

carrying Hindu and Buddhist practices into local societies.



A group of Tamil people in British Malaya, 1898. (Wikimedia Commons)

These were not transient visits but durable ties. Tamil Muslim trading communities – Rowthers and Marakkayars among them – settled, married locally, and stayed. Place names and rituals carried traces of those early arrivals. By the time European powers entered the

region, Tamil presence was already part of the social fabric. The British would later reorganise that movement on a scale never seen before.

A century of labour

If trade brought the first Tamils, the empire brought the many. Under colonial rule, plantation capitalism transformed Malaya's economy. Rubber estates, railways, tin mines, and ports required vast pools of labour. Recruiters turned to the Madras Presidency – districts like Thanjavur, Tirunelveli, and Ramanathapuram – and devised the "*kangani*" system, where foremen brought entire groups of workers, often bound by debt or contract.

"The large-scale migration of Indians to Malaya throughout the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth century led to the creation of a distinctively Malaysian Indian society," Belle wrote in his book.

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Belle wrote that "the history of Indians under British colonialism in Malaya was one of oppression and, in the case of the labouring classes, brutalisation".

By the early 20th century, hundreds of thousands of Tamil labourers had arrived. They cleared forests, tapped rubber, laid tracks, and built roads. Most lived in estate lines — cramped rows of workers' quarters. Conditions were harsh, mobility limited, wages low. Recruitment officially tapered off by 1910 amid growing criticism of exploitation, but by then a community had taken root.

Yet, what endured was not just hardship. Even inside plantations, Tamil life organised itself with stubborn continuity. Workers built temples from scrap timber and brick. They started Tamil schools for their children. Local presses printed newspapers. Annual festivals like Thaipusam survive. Cinema travelled with them.

Language became the spine of the community. Over generations, the estates produced teachers, clerks, small traders and, eventually, professionals who moved into towns and cities.

After independence in 1957, mobility increased. Families left plantations for Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and other urban centres in search of education and stable employment.

The shift did not dissolve identity. Tamil schools, media, and cultural associations expanded. Today, Tamil newspapers circulate widely. Television and radio broadcasts continue. Tamil

cinema from Tamil Nadu commands large audiences. The result is unusual among diasporas: a migrant language that did not fade into domestic memory but remained publicly visible. So when Modi noted that Tamil's presence could be seen "in education, media, and cultural life", he was describing something structural, not sentimental.

The political moment

Modi's speech framed these ties within diplomacy. "The three million-strong diaspora is a living bridge between our nations and a great source of strength," he said, **announcing measures** that included social security agreements, easier visas, and the introduction of India's digital payment interface in Malaysia.

But the deeper story of that "bridge" was not built by policy meetings. It was built over centuries of small decisions: a trader staying back, a labourer planting roots, a schoolteacher refusing to let a language disappear.

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Belle wrote: "At the time of Merdeka (independence) in 1957, Indians numbered 858,616 people, of which 62.1 per cent were of local birth… Indian migration to Malaya had been 'of an ephemeral character with approximately 4 million entering and 2.8 million leaving the country between 1860 and 1957'. The report further observed that 'much of the 1.2 million net immigration appears to have been wiped out by disease, snakebites, exhaustion and malnutrition'."

The visit itself carried symbolism. Choosing Malaysia as the first foreign stop of the year signalled the importance of Southeast Asia to India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Yet, the most resonant line of the speech was cultural, not strategic.

A diaspora that feels local

When one walks through Kuala Lumpur's neighbourhoods where Tamil is spoken, the distinction between "Indian" and "Malaysian" blurs. Families have lived here for five or six generations. Their memories are tied to estate lines, not villages in Tamil Nadu. Their festivals, their politics are local. Yet their language still carries the cadence of the old coast across the sea.

That continuity makes Malaysia's Tamil community distinct from newer migrations elsewhere. It is not simply an expatriate population but a historical community: shaped first

by maritime trade, then by empire, and finally by nationhood. It is why Tamil of Malaysia feels less like an imported tongue and more like an inherited one.

In diplomatic prose, history is often compressed into a sentence. Modi's did it neatly: "shared affection", "vibrant presence", "living bridge". Behind those phrases lies a timeline that stretches from early seafarers to rubber estates to modern city streets.

Ships before steamers. Temples before treaties. Schools before summits.

The connection between Tamil and Malaysia did not begin with governments. It began with the sea. And long after speeches fade, that older current continues to shape the relationship: steady, lived, and visible in the everyday life and language that has travelled far and stayed.

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