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Chennai: It's a recent—almost chauvinistic—fad with mobile phone retailers in Tamil Nadu. They no longer just write cellphones in Tamil for their advertising. They use *selpesi*, *kaipesi* or *alaipesi*, roughly translating into walkie-talkie, handset and wireless phone—the coinages earning their existence from new Tamil technical dictionaries.

It's been a quest for the International Academy for Internet Tamil, earlier known as the Tamil Virtual University, to come up with Tamil words for all scientific and technical terms. The academy has published 10 of 14 planned Tamil technical dictionaries in the past two years and hopes to complete the remaining over the next three months, all at a total cost of Rs32 lakh. "The publications will have to be updated on a continuous basis, based on technological developments and evolution in usage," says academy director P.R. Nakkeeran.

A case in point is the word computer. For some time now, it's been called *kanipori* in Tamil. "But somewhere along the way, we Net enthusiasts felt it didn't quite capture the essence of an efficient, thinking, versatile machine, and so started calling it *kanini*," says T.N.C. Venkata Rangan, a founding member of the International Forum for Information Technology in Tamil (Infitt).

The dictionaries were originally associated with a lobby that called for making Tamil the medium of instruction in all engineering colleges in the state. The Net enthusiasts now see a larger calling for these word guides.

Rangan says there's a potential user base of 60 million people—the population of Tamil Nadu. Besides, Tamil's an official language in Malaysia and Singapore, the countries having a sizeable population of immigrants from the south Indian state.

At the public exhibition of the Tamil Internet Conference (TIC) in Coimbatore in June, held alongside the World Classical Tamil Conference, the technical dictionaries were a huge draw. Some 25,000 were sold over five days to scores of Tamils comfortable with computers but not English.

TIC, a regular feature now, aims to make computing easier for this demographic and, for the first time, had the state's backing. "Tamil computing refers to developing software applications in Tamil for the local user," says Badri Seshadri, a member of the TIC organizing committee and Infitt.

Not an easy task. The Tamil alphabet has 247 letters, compared with English's 26. "Every verb or noun can take up to 3,000 forms, compared to just six forms for English verbs," says Deiva Sundaram, a Tamil computing expert. "But among Indian languages, Tamil is easier as it doesn't have nasal and aspirated characters."

Badri adds: "A Tamil font can, at the most, enable entry-level word processing and Web pages with Tamil content. But for a local business to use billing software or for a Tamil medium school student to use Web pages that are user-friendly in English, those applications need to be developed in Tamil."

The Tamil Nadu government is putting its might behind this mission. At the Tamil conference, the state government was clearly promoting the language and information technology (IT) as its key strengths. In Coimbatore, wall paintings—sort of official graffiti—depicting scenes from the Tamil epic Silapathikaram were interspersed with hoardings advertising IT special economic zones (SEZs) the state government has developed. Advertisements for Web services had lines from Tamil classic Thirukkural as a footer.

"The TN government has allotted Rs800 crore for developing its websites alone, Rs450 crore for computerizing the public distribution system (PDS), and Rs1,000 crore for e-governance, all of which will be bilingual—Tamil and English—henceforth," says state IT minister Poongothai Aladi Aruna.

The state government's recent order standardizing the 16-bit Unicode as the official coding for its websites is touted as one of the successful outcomes of the Tamil conference, as this would ensure that software developers don't build applications using the Tamil-incompatible 8-bit coding.

Symbolisms apart, Infitt is confident in its venture and says Tamil and computing have gone rather well together so far. "Optical character recognition, text-to-speech and speech-to-text conversions, and handwriting recognition are already there in Tamil," says Badri. "This was, in part, fuelled by the usage of Tamil as one of the official languages in Malaysia and Singapore. When those governments started adopting IT, Tamil computing emerged."

The first TIC, in fact, was held in Singapore in 1997, with just two ministers from Tamil Nadu attending.

Badri realizes a private IT company in India might prefer computing solutions in Hindi because of the potential size of the language. "But there is the advantage of existing, consistent initiatives in Tamil computing, a proactive state IT department, and a tech-savvy user base here."

Aruna says Tamil Nadu contributes around 35% of the employees in IT companies in India. The state's already giving tough competition to Bangalore, considered the country's software capital, in attracting IT product and services companies.

"It is only a matter of time," says the minister, "before this indigenous talent pool and the private sector realize the potential usage for Tamil computing here."

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