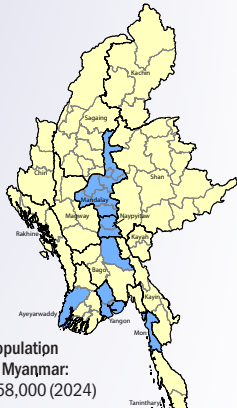


Asbjorn Olsen



Population in Myanmar:
158,000 (2024)

Location:
Yangon Region, Bago Region, Mandalay Region, Ayeyarwady Region, Mon State

Language Family: Dravidian

Main Religion: Hinduism (93.0%)

Christians: 5,920 (4.0%)

Location: Approximately 158,000 Tamil-speaking people live in Myanmar. They are found in most urban centers of the country, including the four regions of Yangon, Mandalay, Bago, and Ayeyarwady. Some live in Mawlamyine, the capital of Mon State and the fourth largest city in Myanmar. As many as 87 million Tamil-speaking people live throughout the world, with 77 million in India, 5.5 million in Sri Lanka, and two million in Malaysia. Others are scattered in at least 30 countries around the globe.¹ The number of Tamils in Myanmar has changed little in a century, with 149,888 Tamils reported in the 1931 census, rising to 200,000 in 1966.²

Identity: Tamil is not the name of a specific ethnic group but is a regional language spoken as the first language by over 200 different people groups in India alone, and as a second language by another 370 groups.³ Despite being the descendants of farm laborers brought to Burma by the British two centuries ago, the Tamils and other South Asian groups have never been accepted as one of the country's indigenous "ethnic races." An Indian government report says: "The younger generation of Tamils eats Burmese food, speaks the Burmese language in their homes, and in many cases prefers to wear traditional Burmese costumes. Unlike the previous generation, they have very little emotional

connection with the land of their ancestors. This trend is giving way to fears of total assimilation."⁴

Language: Tamil is one of the great languages of India and lends its name to the state of Tamil Nadu. It is part of the Dravidian language family and bears no resemblance, in either its spoken or written forms to north Indian languages like Hindi and Bengali. Most Tamil people in Myanmar can speak fluent Burmese since the government imposed the Burmese language as the medium of instruction and closed Tamil schools in the 1960s.⁵

History: Tamils first arrived in Myanmar in 1824 after being recruited to labor in rice fields and rubber plantations. Their numbers gradually increased, but anti-India sentiments and riots in the 1930s caused many Tamils to move back to India, where they often struggled to gain acceptance among their own people.⁶ Their fortunes "took a huge downturn during the Second World War and subsequent political upheavals. After the Japanese invasion of Burma, many thousands of Tamils who worked in urban areas for the British colonial administration returned to India."⁷ The Tamil population in Myanmar has fluctuated since, with many families fleeing across the border into Manipur only to find their hopes of returning to Myanmar dashed after not being allowed to re-enter the country.⁸

Customs: Since the upheavals

of the 1960s, "many Tamils have maintained their deep roots in the country. They kept a low profile and slowly improved their fortunes by mending their relationship with the majority community and staying away from politics."⁹ In 1911, missionary William Purser described the Tamil as "employed as domestic servants, coachmen, money-lenders, coolies, laborers, etc., and as they are thrifty, most of them save up enough money to enable them to return to their own country and spend their old age in comparative opulence."¹⁰

Religion: Over 90 percent of Tamil people in Myanmar are Hindus, and they have constructed their own temples in all the large cities. Small numbers of Christians and Muslims are also found among them. The percentage of Tamil Christians has fallen sharply since the 1931 census, when 21,787 (14.5%) identified as Christians.

Christianity: Mentions of any missionary work among the Tamils of Myanmar are exceedingly rare. One worker wrote in 1911: "The work of the Church in Burma has been to tend to those Tamils who are already Christian, and very little attempt has been made to evangelize those who are Hindus."¹¹ The Tamil Bible was first translated nearly 300 years ago in 1727, but copies are not available in Myanmar, and tensions with India means it is nearly impossible to import printed material into the country.

OVERVIEW

Population:
158,000 in Myanmar (2024 Asia Harvest)
151,000 (2017 J. Leclerc)
149,888 (1931 census)

Other Countries:
76,900,000 in India
5,540,000 in Sri Lanka
2,027,000 in Malaysia
600,000 in South Africa
433,000 in Saudi Arabia¹

Other Names: Damulian, Tamal, Tamalsan, Tambul, Tamili

Location:
Ayeyarwady Region: Pathein, Hinthada, Myaungmya, Maubin, and Pyapon districts;
Yangon Region: Insein Township;
Mandalay Region: Myungyan and Meiktila districts;
Bago Region: Taungoo, Pyay, Bago, and Tharrawaddy districts;
Mon State: Mawlamyine, Thaton, and Thanbyuzayat districts;
Sagaing Region: Shwebo District

Language: Tamil [tam]

Dialects: 4

Scripture:
Bible 1727
New Testament 1725
Portions 1714

Jesus film: Tamil

Global Recordings: Tamil #174

People ID: 8211

