

Ever since I was a child, I've never felt particularly connected to my Tamil Indian heritage. And believe me, I've tried. Some of my earliest memories are writing Tamil letters in a little workbook, my mother watching over my shoulder. I'd familiarize myself with the curves of the *uyir eruzhthugal*, always getting stuck on this one letter that looked like a jalebi—an Indian sweet.

Those memories feel so out of reach now.

I suppose there were precipitating factors as to why I never learned Tamil fully. I never went to Tamil school. I attended a *slokam* class at our local temple for a bit, but our Hindu prayers and scripts are written in Sanskrit (which I obviously cannot read), and were taught to us in English. I tried to attend a Karnatic singing class, but ultimately found that soccer—which clashed with the singing class days—was my true calling. I don't play soccer anymore.

I think I started losing my language, first, when going to kindergarten. I had no incentive to speak Tamil at kindergarten. Everyone spoke English—my parents spoke English at home too.

By the time I was in Year 3, I had lost most of my language skills. I could barely speak Tamil at all. My sentences were, and still are, fragmented and rudimentary. I am lucky that my grandmother can speak English well, and praises my rudimentary, childish spoken Tamil. But my grandfather, and my grandparents on my father's side: they barely understand me.

I never fully learned to write, too, despite my mother's early efforts. I don't really know why. One day, I simply... stopped. To this day, I can only still write those *uyir eruzhthugal*, and only in alphabetical order, the way it was taught to me.

Did you know *uyir* in Tamil means life? My mother used to tell me that these letters in the Tamil alphabet breathed life into others. The way our alphabet works is that we have vowel letters, we have consonant letters, and we have over 200 combination letters made from adding each vowel sound to each consonant. Maybe that was part of why I stopped learning to write: our alphabet is ridiculously long.

And then, reading. I'm sure you've guessed the pattern now: somewhere along the way, I just gave up. Until about a year ago, it was those trusty vowels... and nothing else. That was all I could read, and somehow it never occurred to me that I should continue to learn my *own* language.

That was until last December, when I visited India again for the first time in six years.

There was this odd sort of longing I experienced when I returned to my home state, Tamilnadu. I've actually lived in Melbourne since the age of two and a half, and that's all I remember. Yet, the green rollicking hills, the stray dogs on the street, the thick yet glimmering humidity; I felt a deep sense of nostalgia when returning to India. Maybe it was nostalgia for something I never had, but deep down had always wanted.

And it was there that something strange happened. We were in Tamilnadu for only two or three weeks in total; we went sightseeing in North India for the other half of the trip. But in those two weeks, I felt a newfound sense of determination.

I wanted to read Tamil.

It started when sitting in a bank in Madurai. There were signs everywhere, conveniently in both Tamil and English. Though I could only read the vowels of the signs, because I had the English translation *and* the preexisting knowledge of approximately what the Tamil word would be, I slowly began to guess what each letter was. I kept pestering my mother next to me, checking if my guesses were correct—and no, most of the time they weren't, because the bank signs were written in more proper, grammatically correct Tamil, which I wasn't familiar with. The extent of my Tamil knowledge was an eclectic mashup of spoken Tamil, specifically in the language and dialect used by my parents, with a sprinkle of slang from Kollywood movies and reality TV and songs. It's safe to say that the formality of bank signs were totally beyond me.

But it was a start. Slowly, more and more letters became familiar to me. Just from using the signs on the road, the subtitles on TV, and newspapers, I went from reading letters, then to words. Then, very very slowly and haltingly, sentences.

By the end of the two weeks, I could approximately read every single letter in the Tamil alphabet.

Two weeks. That's all it took. I'd spent 16 whole years of my life evading a learning process that took me two weeks.

But, strangely enough, I'm grateful I waited this long. I do regret all the years of my life I could have spent immersing myself in Tamil books and poetry and literature had I simply taught myself to read. I still can only read very slowly now, and any formal written Tamil is unintelligible to me—even if I can read it—because I've never studied Tamil grammar.

Despite it all, I think it was worth it. I can now say, proudly, that I taught myself to read Tamil out of my own determination and drive; that I did it in a way that was authentic, and true to myself.

And I can understand, now, that it's never too late to connect to your culture, to immerse yourself in your language. You can never really lose what is inside of you, after all.

I think back to those *uyir eruzhuthugal*, the ones that started this journey in the first place. These letters don't only breathe life into the rest of the Tamil alphabet, but they breathed life back into *me*.