The Status of Tamil in Ceylon

A historical and comparative study of the bilingual problem

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I

It was a fateful night, the 14th of June 1956, and the day was breaking when the Ceylon House of Representatives passed by sixty-six votes to twenty-nine the Sinhala Only Act which read : "The Sinhala language shall be the one official language of Ceylon". The sponsors of the bill were the new Government led by the Hon. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and composed entirely of Sinhalese-speaking ministers. The vote of every Tamil-speaking member but one, fourteen in all, was cast against the unjust decree. The redeeming feature of the voting was that as many Sinhalese votes were cast against it and one Burgher vote as well.

The future historian who reads the relevant documents would be surprised at the inconsequential nature of State language policy. When the legislators first got interested in the problem it was at a time when the British Government had declared its willingness to concede full responsible Government in internal affairs provided the constitutional scheme had the approval of three quarters of the members of the State Council[1]. This condition probably explains the facility with which the Official Languages Resolution, favouring Sinhalese and Tamil as official languages on equal terms, was passed in May, 1944. A Select Committee worked out a programme to give effect to the

[1] Declaration of H.M. Government, 26 May 1943 (S.P. XVII—1943).

motion[2]. The key recommendation was that by 1957 all public servants should be able to transact business in both national languages : courses in both languages were to be provided in secondary schools to help to achieve this bilingualism in administration. A general election followed, but nothing was done till the eve of the next general election when an Official Languages Commission was appointed to consider ways and means of implementing the recommendations of the previous Committee. A year after the general election the Commission issued its Final Report containing " plans for the quickest possible adoption of such of the proposals of 1946 as are capable of facilitating the transition from English to Sinhalese and Tamil as the official languages of Ceylon without sacrificing the efficiency of the administration "[3]. Within a month of the submission of this report, in October 1953, another Commission, that on Higher Education in the National Languages was appointed, ultimately with the same Chairman who presided over the previous one. The report of this Commission consisted of a majority report, signed by the Chairman and the other three Sinhalese members, and a minority report signed by the three members who belonged to the minority communities.[4] In spite of a directive by the Governor-General to confine themselves to their terms of reference, the minority report questioned the wisdom of government's policy in underrating the place of English while the majority report questioned the wisdom of recognizing two official languages. The majority even went further and in the name of equality of opportunity asked for higher education provision " for at least six Sinhalese-speaking students to every Tamil-speaking student "[5]. They recommended that the Univer-

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[2] *Sinhalese and Tamil as Official Languages* (S.P. XXII—1946).

[3] *Final Report of the Official Languages Commission* (S. P. XXII—1953).

[4] *Final Report of the Commission on Higher Education in the National Languages* (S.P. X—1956).

[5] Incidentally, 6 : 1 is not the proportion of Sinhalese speakers to Tamil speakers in Ceylon. It is 7 : 3 according to S.P. XXII—1946.

sity of Ceylon now functioning in Peradeniya and Colombo should be converted into Sinhalese medium universities along with a new such university in Galle. They suggested that a separate Tamil medium university should be established in Batticaloa or Jaffna.

II

That these moves represent an attempt to use language to secure a temporary political advantage for one group rather than as an instrument of national creativity is evidenced by certain political moves during the same period. The Board of Ministers had put forward a constitutional scheme in September 1944 [6], which became the basis of the Soulbury Constitution [7]. The main safeguards for the minorities consisted of a system of weightage in representation in the legislature and a restriction on legislative power. The advocates of the ministerial scheme represented to the Soulbury Commission that of the 95 elected seats, 58 would go to Sinhalese candidates and 37 to the minority candidates (Ceylon Tamils 15, Indian Tamils 14, Muslim 8), making, with six nominated seats, a minority representation of 43 in a House of 101. But when the Constitution was in working, by a series of acts of omission and commission it was possible to reverse the weightage. At the general election of 1956 so many as 74 seats went to the Sinhalese and only 19 to the minority candidates (Ceylon Tamils 12, Muslims 7, Indian Tamils Nil.) The other safeguard, section 29, which forbids discriminatory legislation and requires a two-thirds majority for amending the section, obviously depended on the above proportion being maintained with regard to the number of seats. But, the then government was able to find the necessary majority to waive section 29 and pass the discriminatory Indian and Pakistani (Parliamentary Representation) Act, 1954.

[6] *Reform of the Constitution* (S.P. XIV—1944).
[7] *Ceylon : Report of the Commission on Constitutional Reform* (H.M.S.O., 1945).

All that can be said in mitigation is that thinking in terms of one's community rather than in terms of the nation is by no means confined to the majority community. The Tamil revolt against these racial policies has in recent years taken the form of a demand for a federal state in Ceylon. So far all that the Federal leader, Mr. S. J. V. Chelvanayagam, has been able to secure from Prime Minister Bandaranaike is the assurance that regional councils of the Northern and Eastern Provinces would use Tamil as their main official language and that Tamil would be recognized as the language of a national minority [8]. The inadequacy of this solution does not lie merely in the fact that nearly two-thirds of those who speak Tamil live outside these two provinces ; it questions the very basis of a democratic nation — a common citizenship.

The fact of the matter is that in the past, as in India so in Ceylon, the fatherland has tended to be the community of the caste, creed or linguistic group mistaken for a race. But the firm hold of an ancient culture has, as pointed out by Radhakrishnan, prevented many political fatherlands breaking up the solidarity of India. A wonderful tolerance combined with the power of synthesis of different traditions has been the essence of that culture. Indeed through the ages India derived her unity and her individuality from her cultural outlook. To this cultural unity political strength was added by the intense struggle against British rule. The fortunate emergence of great leadership imbued with a lofty moral ideology helped her in the developing period to build an All-India mind and a secular democracy. It was fortunate for her that neither the Hindu revivalists nor the modern materialists have counted in the building of new India, else she might have retreated into medievalism or slipped into totalitarianism. In the event she is shaping into a great modern power without losing the moral grandeur of her native genius.

[8] This pact was recently declared "null and void" by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, Prime Minister of Ceylon—*Editor.*

While it is true that Ceylon has also been touched by the Asian awakening, the political struggle here has been relatively lukewarm, the leadership sectional rather than national and the cultural movement more a revival of old forms rather than a renewal of spirit. From one point of view, the present is a conflict between those who think that it would have been an advantage if time had stopped before the advent of the West and those who would reject the past altogether. From another view, the language and racial controversies are at one and the same time a complete repudiation of our age-long ideals of toleration and co-existence as well as the realties of democratic nationhood.

III

The saving factor, however, is contained in Bismark's remark that statesmen cannot alter the currents of history ; they can only steer their little barks. It is true that in early times, when people were not firmly attached to the soil and were still migrating, transplanting, enslaving and shifting frontiers, they freely changed their speech. Language is therefore no clue to race anywhere. In this country there is evidence to support that some groups speaking Sinhalese may have been originally Tamil speakers and some Tamil-speaking groups of today may once have spoken Sinhalese. But with permanency of settlement, the establishment of law and order, the acquiring of literacy and the development of literature and printed books, people came to be wedded to what they regarded as their mother tongue and the thoughts, tradition and history enshrined in that tongue. It is no longer possible to make even small linguistic groups to change their language, not possible to stifle their speech in any way. Witness the persistence with which the few thousand Romansch speaking group in Switzerland have kept to their language and won official status for it.

Our statesmen would do well to hearken to the message of our own history. The bilingual state is the legacy of our history. Ours appears to have always been a bilingual society. The early inscriptions, place names and family names, the documents of the courts of Kotte and Kandy, the curriculum of the medieval pirivenas, the extensive list of common words in the vocabularies of Sinhalese and Tamil all point to the intermingling of the peoples and languages down the ages. During the century and half of the Portuguese sojourn in these coasts, through their schools and the mixing up of large numbers of Portuguese soldiers and civilians with the indigenous population, the Portuguese language became for a time the *lingua franca* of the coastal towns and even reached the independent court of Kandy, but all that is left of the language is a few hundred Portuguese words in the vocabularies of Sinhalese and Tamil. The Dutch language which the Hollanders brought into Ceylon for another century and a half held even less sway. On the other hand the introduction of the printing press by the Dutch in 1737, the casting of types in Sinhalese and Tamil and the writing of books in the local language by Catholic writers steeped in the learning of medieval Europe and by Protestant writers full of the culture of the Renaissance gave fresh impetus to the national languages.

It is, however, the English language, which came into Ceylon with British rule early in the nineteenth century that has had the most abiding influence, for it brought with it a well-developed civilization to confront our own. It came first as an 'usurper' (to use Gandhiji's phrase), with text-books, school curricula and examination schemes all 'made in England'. Not only did it seek to supplant the native languages, but the colonial elite which adopted it tended to separate themselves from the mass of their fellow-countrymen. The first effective criticism of the prevailing system came from Arunachalam who pointed out that by

overlooking their mother-tongue ' the few who have assimilated Western culture and whose mission it should be to interpret the West to the East are disqualified for the great office of writing a good Sinhalese and Tamil literature instinct with the best spirit of modern Europe '. With the political awakening of our time the respective roles of English and the national languages is getting reversed : English is gradually shedding its place as the first language of the few and becoming the second language of many.

No less far-reaching has been the political unification that has followed British rule. Helped by a common administration and a common citizenship and facilities, for travel and employment on an Island-wide basis, there has been social and territorial mobility on a gigantic scale. To add to this, the opening of the plantations and the bringing of labour from South India has resulted in the settlement in the hill country of a Tamil-speaking population who now constitute nearly one-eighth of the Island's population. We have now become irrevocably a multi-lingual, multi-religious society. Sinhalese is mother tongue to 69% of the Island's nine million population ; Tamil is spoken by 29%, including the 12% who are of Indian origin. Though English has bestowed for over a century every political, economic and social advantage to those who knew it, it is understood only by 6% of the total population, English literacy being most pronounced in the City of Colombo. On the other hand, without any adventitious aid, the social and geographical interspersion of Sinhalese and Tamil account for 9% of the nation being bilingual in Sinhalese and Tamil, or in the urban areas 18%. Ceylon's modern towns too owe their existence to the impact of the West and the growth of a multi-lingual society is most reflected in the composition of the population of these towns. In several of them from a third to a half of the population is bilingual ; Colombo is the supreme example.

The bigger English schools helped to make some sense out of this cosmopolitan society. They became compre-

hensive in their composition and drew their pupils from all sections and from all parts of the country. Even with the change over to the Swabasha medium some of these schools are taking pains to preserve their cosmopolitan character. The University of Ceylon likewise reflects the entire nation, its 2500 enrolment representing 60% Sinhalese-speaking, 36% Tamil-speaking, 4% English and other language-speaking homes. These institutions and their alumni represent the first group of people in this country who come closest to being described as Ceylonese rather than as Sinhalese or Tamils or Muslims or Burghers. That some of the noblest institutions of the past like the Totagamuwa Pirivena of Ceylon or the Nalanda University of India were cosmopolitan in their composition and catholic in their outlook puts our modern schools in line with our inheritance.

IV

Just as under conditions of British rule we became a multi-lingual society, under the new legal system we became equally irrevocably a free and equal society. Under the principle of the rule of law, the same law for all and all equal before the law, all persons, men and women, found themselves released from a casteistic social order and from the conception that the nation is a bundle of communities. It has not taken long for equality before the law to be followed by equality at the polls and some measure of economic and educational equality. In time all citizens will demand the right to equal participation in Government and an equal share in the benefits of administration. No citizen will agree to be treated differently from any other. That is democracy's ultimate safeguard.

That is not to say that the battle for democracy will be easily won. Accustomed methods of thinking die hard. Witness the thought of leading men, including a former Chief Justice, who said that the community of higher

learning should be a racial community and that the access to such learning should be rationed among members of different communities according to numbers. Similar proposals have been made in India. It is, however, refreshing to note that the Radhakrishnan Commission rejected the rationing of seats.[9] " The fundamental right is the right of the individual, not of the community. Every young man must have an equal chance with others, to make the most of his abilities ". They opposed the assumption in " quotas " that the nation is composed of separate and self-sufficient groups as " a negation of the national ideal and democratic principle ".

Equally untenable is the position when a political party composed of one racial group, seeks a mandate from that group, and seeks to establish a government by that group for the benefit primarily of that group. If rights do not belong to racial communities, there can be no more rights to racial majorities than to racial minorities. Referring to a similar situation in India, Asoka Mehta writes : " When a religious community, a language group, an occupation, a class, or a political party makes sovereign claims and reduces all other associations to the status of satellities democracy is destroyed ".[10]

Politicians may not always be far-sighted, but the professional administrator is a stabilizing element in a democratic government. Himself selected on merit, his job is to ensure, as impartially as he can, equal rights to all citizens. Unlike the politician, the public servant belongs to ' all ' not to ' some '. To be able to serve all alike, whether in the public offices, the courts of law, the transport services or the hospitals, he should be able to understand both Sinhalese and Tamil. You cannot run a modern administration on any other basis. That is why, even when English was the unquestioned official language,

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9 *Report of the University Education Commission*, 1949 (Govt. of India Press).

10 Article in *Times of India*.

the British administration found it necessary to require a working knowledge of both Sinhalese and Tamil of all higher officials.

V

It may be worth while examining the different linguistic situations in the modern world. They may be classified as follows :—

(A) Unilingual countries

(B) Multilingual countries, which may have either :
One official language, or
More than one official language, either :
A federal language and other regional languages, or
Bilingual states, which may be :
Unitary states, or
Federal states.

Often it is a language that has articulated a state of its own. There are quite a number of unilingual states in the world, Britain and France being good examples. Strength also accrues to these states because people come to believe that those who speak the same language are of the same racial stock and are different from other linguistic groups elsewhere. If the essence of nationhood is mental homogeneity then the possession of a common language-culture makes for the stability of unilingual states.

The second main category consists of the many multilingual nations of the world. These have not always successfully solved problems arising from language differences, but where they have solved them it has been a real achievement. The solutions have generally taken either of two forms, one official language, or more than one. Examples of the former range from Thailand where the Thai language is exclusively used in administration and in

schools to Malaya where though English, and now Malay, have special status some measure of cultural recognition is given to Chinese and Tamil. The U.S.A. also belongs to the group of countries which have but one official language. The fact that English is home language to nearly 90% of the population and that the remaining 10% originated from some twenty-five different nationalities gives a natural supremacy to the English language. Minorities are, however, not debarred from conducting their own schools without state aid.

But several multi-lingual countries have had to give official status to more than one language. Here again the solution has varied. Large countries with a number of languages, like India and the U.S.S.R., have adopted the most widely spoken language as the official inter-state language (Hindi in the case of India,* Russian in the case of the U.S.S.R.) and given official recognition as regional and national languages to the other major languages. The claims of these languages have also compelled India to adopt a linguistic re-distribution of the states. The position which English has acquired by historic circumstance in India and its value as an international language gives it a special place in higher education and as an additional federal language alongside of Hindi for many years to come.

Perhaps the happiest solution has been in countries which already possessing some degree of bilingualism decided to adopt bilingualism as national policy. Some of these are unitary states like Finland, Belgium and South Africa. Finland has followed a bold language policy. Finnish is spoken by 91% of its four million population ; the remaining 9% speak Swedish. Both languages are official

* The position is somewhat different. Under the Constitution, English will continue as the Official Language of the Indian Union till 1965, when alone Hindi can become a full fledged Official Language. Meantime there is already determined opposition to this constitutional provision on the ground that it discriminates in favour of Hindi and against the other Indian languages. This opposition can be met only by retaining English as the Official Language indefinitely i.e. by maintaining the *status quo*. —*Editor.*

languages. This is scrupulously extended to every sphere, including street names and the telephone directory. Both languages are taught at school from the earliest classes. But Finnish and Swedish are minor languages and so two major languages, English and German, are compulsory in the secondary school, making four languages obligatory for the matriculation examination. Federal states which have given equal status to two or more languages and built a single nation out of different elements are Switzerland and Canada. In Switzerland German-Swiss is spoken by 72%, French by 21% and Italian by 6%, but all are equal federal languages ; conventions about the composition of the executive government which have never been broken add to the strength of the Republic. Canada's French-Canadian minority of 30% live largely in Quebec Province. Both English and French are federal languages and official languages in Quebec. A member may speak in English or French in both parliaments and the speech from the throne is delivered in both English and French. Government publications, postage stamps and currency notes all carry the message of unity. There are also conventions about the composition of the government and the supreme court. Throughout Canada the study of both national languages is promoted in the secondary schools and universities. A striking example is the University of British Columbia with a Chair of French Canadian Literature in a province where French Canadians number but 3½%. This is the sort of provision which makes French Canadians look to Canada rather than to France for the development of their distinctive culture.[11]

VI

Three conclusions may be drawn from this study :—

(1) The steps taken by the Government of Ceylon during the past few years to promote Sinhalese

[11] For the constitutional provisions of Finland and Switzerland, 'Language Rights in Ceylon' by Xavier S. Thani Nayagam in *Tamil Culture* Vol. V. No. 3.

and Tamil as media of instruction in schools have been in the right direction. But till Tamil is given the status of an official language throughout Ceylon, education will lack the incentive that comes from using in school the language of administration and civic life. But more than education will suffer. Since the status of a language is the symbol of a people's freedom, equal standing and honour, Tamil-speaking Ceylon will harbour the resentment of being treated as inferior. But state recognition is not all. Not till the people, whether Tamil-speaking or Sinhalese-speaking, get a burning conviction that their future in civilization is bound up with creations in their own tongue and 'what they have inherited from their fathers they must earn anew if they woulds't possess it', not till then, would they succeed in the strenuous task of turning their ancient languages to the uses of today. To use language as an instrument of domination or conflict is to postpone its use as an instrument of civilization. To want to curb the full flowering of either Sinhalese or Tamil is to deny to Sri Lanka the full expression of her variegated personality. Nor will Subramania Bharati's patriotic poems of India answer to the needs of the Tamils of Ceylon : Ilam's own poets must sing Ilam's praise whether in Tamil or Sinhalese.

(2) A positive nationalism will promote the study of each other's language and culture as an indispensable means of welding a multi-group society into a strong nation. Each language-culture must be the prized possession of both groups, the two traditions regarded as complementary to each other. National bilingualism must become a conviction, rather than a concession. To this end, as many institutions of learning should be consciously planned so as to provide opportunities of learning each other through each other's language and each other's language through each other.

(3) If it takes two languages to make a nation, it takes more than two to make a great nation. A little

while before his death Mahatma Gandhi wrote in the *Harijan* with characteristic insight :

> My plea is for banishing English as a cultural usurper as we successfully banished the political rule of the English usurper. The rich English language will ever retain its natural place as the international speech of commerce and diplomacy .... As it contains some of the richest treasures of thought and literature, I would certainly encourage its careful study among those who have linguistic talents and expect them to translate those treasures for the nation in its vernaculars.

It is neither likely nor desirable that an English-speaking elite should be reared in the future, nor on the other hand is universal English possible even if it is desirable. Some 80% of the population, chiefly in the rural areas, are not likely to profit by a study of English and should be content to be indirectly influenced by books and men who have received the inspiration of English (and other foreign languages). For about 18%, who have completed secondary education, English will serve as 'an instrument of communication'. It is for the remaining 2% that English will be a 'creative medium.'—"Not that we shall produce poets and writers who will contribute to English letters, but we should not despair of having scholars, and writers who can attempt creative writing in English in their chosen fields and statesmen and leaders of thought who can make a significant contribution in world assemblies. But the most abiding contribution of the nation's thinkers will have to be in the people's own language. Those who cannot speak in Swabasha will not be heard ; those who do not know English will have little to say." [12]

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[12] "The Place of English" in Humayun Kabir : *Education in New India.*