

Tamil Language and Culture in Mauritius
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Vanakkam. First, I would like to congratulate the Organising Committee for choosing to place language and culture under the same title. It is out of wisdom that they understood that one cannot be divorced from the other. In fact, in any situation, particularly in a multilingual and pluricultural situation language and culture reciprocally support each other. This means that when one is weak, the other follow suit; equally true is that when one is strong, the other is found to progress. But we all know that culture has a greater survival capacity. But it cannot survive for ever. The situation in Reunion Island as regard to Tamil culture bears witness to this statement.

Two great scholars- Block and Trager, in a study on the inter-relationship between language and culture has the following to say: “ Language is not only an element of culture, but it is the basis for all cultural activities and therefore the most rewarding clue to the characteristic features of any contemporary group”. It is, therefore, appropriate that both language and culture are taken care of under the same title.

In the course of this brief expose, I would like to look at a few questions considered to be of great significance to understand the situation of Tamil language and culture in Mauritius:

- How a transplanted minority language behaves in a multilingual country?
- What have been the main causes for Tamil language shift and partial loss?
- The strategies employed in the past to check the decline of Tamil language and culture?
- What is the situation now? Could it be otherwise?
- What can be done to improve the situation?

I will take the 1st question and see whether Tamil language in Mauritius responds to pattern of language shift. What is that shift pattern: In immigrant societies, people are first monolinguals in their respective native language, slowly they shift to become bilinguals involving their mother tongue and the language/s of the host country, and finally they become monolinguals in the host country's language. A generationwise study of the Tamils in Mauritius reveals more or less this tendency. However, the complexity of the linguistic situation in Mauritius does not allow one to be entirely monolingual. There was also some difference in behaviour between Tamils residing in the rural areas and those of urban areas. Normally, urban dwellers, given the opportunity of education and intergroup interaction, are more inclined to language shift. But in the case of Tamils of Port Louis the situation was different. The elders continued to speak in Tamil until quite recently, depending on the addressee. The central market, dominated by the Tamil merchants, provided a sustained interest in speaking Tamil.

As regards to language shift among Tamils, several causes can be identified. We cannot, however, pinpoint one as being the most important. I would like to draw attention to the 1930's – a period which is of special significance in the socio-political development of the country. The linguistic and cultural situation of that time must be studied in relation to a series of events that took place then. The

centenary celebration of the arrival of indentured labourers in 1935 brought about a consciousness for emancipation of the Indian community. The emergence of political awareness led people to be concerned more with national issues and it is precisely at this period that a structural gap in Tamil language maintenance occurred. Creole became generally accepted. Also, mass education and school environment greatly influenced the choice of language use. Among peers, outside the classroom, the language used was predominantly Creole. The importance of English and French as languages of education gained currency among parents and Creole was considered as a stepping stone towards the languages of education. Children used increasingly Creole. However, a passive knowledge obtained in the very bosom of the family, supported by the cultural environments, continued to nurture a positive attitude towards Tamil. But once a gap occurred it cannot be filled in spite of huge efforts being made by governmental institutions and socio-cultural organizations. The efforts helped to check further decline of our Language and culture.

In the 1950's and 1960's, the situation as regards to maintenance of language and culture was almost alarming. Opinion leaders of our community triggered a series of processes for ethno-cultural identity assertion. All markers that overtly expressed our identity were strengthened. Tamil knowledgeable people were highly respected and they, in turn, along with important socio-cultural organizations and Tamil schools brought about what we can term as a revival movement. This movement exerted a positive impact on teaching and learning of Tamil language and also on maintenance of our culture.

As from the 1980's, the situation changed. Preservation and promotion of language and culture became more a slogan for our leaders. Lip service superseded genuine and sincere intentions and actions. The rat race at CPE level and competitions at all level turned out people to be more individualists and materialists. Consequently, there were little concern for language and culture and, by extension our values. Fortunately, there still exist some sincere teachers, society leaders who, in spite of various difficulties have continued to keep the torch burning. Also, the institutionalization of Asian languages is a guarantee for their survival. A look at the present situation as regards to Tamil language demonstrates a qualitative improvement in the number of SC, HSC and graduate students. But statistical data may, at times, mislead us to evaluate the real situation. Is Tamil being used more than it was used a few decades ago? Does the present generation understand its culture better than the former? The surface level response is 'NO'. Why the situation is so requires a full fledged debate involving the linguistic situation as whole in Mauritius. Suffice it, therefore, at this stage, to see what can be done to remedy the situation. Following are a few points that can be taken by all of us if we are sincere and committed.

- There are about 100 words transmitted to us by our parents and which are either under used or dormant. A starting point could be to make these words functional and integrated in our conversation.
- A few socio-cultural organizations to take, each one, a Tamil school under its fold and provide all necessary support – financial, structural, psychological, personnel and administrative – for the promotion of language and culture in the region.
- Parents to be more concerned with their children's language education and acquisition of our culture.

- Parents and local Tamil organizations to care about how their children are being taught and what support the schools are providing.
- To stop some people who have developed the habit of putting all the blames on Tamil teachers alone for the present situation.
- Tamil knowledgeable people must be respected so as to be motivated them to perform better. Lobbies which allow juniors to occupy senior positions will not only bring about frustration, but will also drive away the competent people from mainstream activities resulting in the situation getting worse. The community must condemn such lobbies.