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Author(s)	Vanithamani Saravanan
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**Vanithamani Saravanan, English language and Literature, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, 469, Bukit Timah Road. Singapore**

**Tel(4605092) e-mail: vsarav@nie.edu.sg**

**Theme: Multiculturalism and indigenous education**

**Title: The management of multilingual and multicultural communities in Singapore**

**Introduction**

The island state of Singapore comprises diverse, disparate multilingual communities, which vary in the amount of access that they have to power, status, and management of their socio-cultural, linguistic and political needs.

Political and economic stability and growth have contributed towards socializing many Singaporeans into a common national, social identity (Gopinathan, 1998). How do these multilingual communities forge their links to language, culture and identity? In 1965 formula adopted was that of portraying the Singapore nation as a unique ethnic mosaic and the key terms used were multiculturalism and unity in diversity symbolized by the four official languages. Educational policies had to be ethnically balanced in an attempt at constructing a framework for the underlying themes and models of a Singaporean socio-cultural model of multilingualism and multiculturalism allowing for the different communities to display their identity through ethnicity, language, religious and other distinctive cultural elements.

**Models of management**

The paper will elaborate upon these attempts at the construction of a model of multilingualism and multiculturalism by looking at current political discourse. It will rely largely on media reports, as this is one of the main devices used by government agencies to announce policy changes and engage with political discourse with Singaporeans. The paper will review and discuss the ideological discourse and hence the frameworks used in the management of these policies.

The expressed goal is to develop a common Singaporean identity but one that retains the separate distinctive linguistic and cultural identities. Institutional policy decisions affect all domains of Singapore society, from the domains of defence, commerce & industry, education to technology, demography, media, social and environmental issues. Many policies continue to be shaped largely by concerns with regards to political stability and the maintenance of economic growth. Policymaking in education is based on a pragmatic evaluation that addresses the manpower needs of the nation and the other is a very rationalistic approach and an economic basis for selecting and justifying policies. An oft-repeated public 'mantra' is the refrain that many educational, linguistic and social policies are justified and appropriate, as Singapore is a small, developed nation.

The conceptual framework that is used to identify multilingual, multicultural identity is not that simple and clear as public discourse is scattered with linguistic and socio-cultural stereotyping that is used to ascribe characteristics of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and social identity to Singaporeans with labels that range from 'Chinese-educated' to 'English-educated', 'Chinese elite', 'minorities', 'heartlanders' to 'cosmopolitans' (Saravanan, 1998).

Chua (1999) refers to the corporatist characterization of the Singaporean state to explain the management of socio-cultural policies. Some of the debate refer to the kind of governance structure that's put in place, (controversial boundaries drawn up as electoral divisions) the dismissal of the place and functions of civil society ranging from feminist to nature and environmental NGOs, dismissal of NGO Round table arguments for an independent elections

commission as textbook Western-style democracy and the kind of national ethos amidst a growing debate on the employment of foreign talent.

The 1980's concept of Asian values that specified the national ideology and national identity of Singaporeans moved in the nineties to 'shared values, ethnic and religious harmony and the acquisition of mother tongues promoting a 'cultural anchor' and providing cultural roots' for a divergent multicultural population,

One aspect of the cultural model debated has been the role of Confucianism. Is Confucianism relevant in the new economy? Confucianism earlier lauded as the Asian economic miracle fell off the pedestal after the 1997 Asian financial crisis when nepotism took its toll. (SM LKY Davos Jan 27, 2001). The debate over Confucianism extended to the social position, and the value of communitarianism over the rights of the individual, both of which was seen as helping preserve order in the old-economy but now seen as one that could stifle entrepreneurship and leave no room for creativity.

The role of English language in the modernization of Singapore has been pointed out by SM Lee Kuan Yew in the corporatisation of Singapore Inc (Oct 16<sup>th</sup> 'riding on Singapore's brand name') that it was fortuitous that the British left behind the legacy of the English language and that they decided to stay with English language when neighboring countries, Malaysia went back to their mother tongues. This decision has turned out to be an immense advantage for international and national purposes and the building up the professional disciplines – engineering, law, and accountancy. The next phase of the development of Singapore is to build its own brand name to market it to the burgeoning middle class in India and China, to become a global hub and to support industry and enterprise.

While the different communities do identify themselves as Singaporeans, they do not want to be forced together and lose their distinct characteristics. This is so for Malay/Muslims with their mosques and *madrasahs* (Islamic schools). -- --the Chinese-educated wanting to preserve Chinese language and culture, or different South Asian groups vigorously maintaining their separate identities and traditions". (Straits Times, Sept 19, 1999).

Singapore is seen to have an advantage in acting as the middleman in Asia due to the multilingual, multicultural background Chinese, Malay and Indian communities.

Singapore hopes to play a greater role with the transformation of China from a sleeping dragon to a roaring economy a process speeded up with China's entry as a full member of WTO. Its links to Indonesia, Malaysia, China and India are seen as important and necessary in playing the go-between with US, Japan and European trying to get into China.

But here again the discourse refers to ethnic Chinese who are culturally descendents of the Yellow Emperor but are not politically Chinese as China's political history is very different from that of Singapore.

Singaporean Chinese businessmen learned that knowledge of Mandarin was inadequate as the business environment in China turned out to be complex and subtle. Businessmen realized that their memories of post-cultural China and the realities of post-cultural revolution were different when Singapore had difficulties with the Suchow project. ("Between North and South, between East and West' Geroge Yeo) May 1<sup>st</sup>)

Yet it is said that this is not to be good enough as we need a 'global' image for Singapore where for example, Singapore Malays need to be seen to be different from pribumis in Malaysia & Indonesia. Singapore Malays are not part of the affirmative programme that pribumis have in place in Malaysia. Singapore Indians are to be seen to be different from for example Indian Brahmins who speak Tamil who are seen to have to adapt to an environment which it said the Brahmins consider not be as pure as in India. Ironically

While this is the public discourse the Singapore Indian community has pointed out that migrant Indians bring in an active revivalist streak from locating into little pockets of Brahmin enclaves being created by migrant Brahmins and engaging Brahmin priests to conduct the observation of many brammanical rituals from the revival of Brahminical marriage to funeral rites to the tying of the 'sacred thread' or pounul.

Migrant Indians are seen as vying and competing for the same of educational opportunities and scholarships. Are

migrant Indians resensitising caste divisions etc, which have been rejected in India?

The Malay community has complained of being marginalized and that there have been no appointments of Malay permanent secretaries in the ministries, no Malay judges, no Malay generals in the armed forces.

There has been an on-going debate on the function of *madrrasah* schools, where 4,000 Muslim students learn and practice Islamic principles of life and values, where greater emphasis is given to Arabic language and Quaranic texts and where some are being recruited for training in the clergy. Debate whether they should be required to move to a mainstream curriculum in languages, mathematics and sciences. The switch to mainstream curriculum is regarded by the community as socially and politically injurious as it would lead to fewer religious teachers being trained through the system. (Hussein Mutalib: '*madrrasah* issue: accommodationist track preferred' Straits Times, Nov, 9<sup>th</sup>, 1999.)

Political strategy is to engage the Asian region, celebrate diversity and the same time use it to access economic and cultural spaces all over the world.

Was it a sense of nationalism or political astuteness that lead to the conversion of the long forgotten Sun Yat-Sen villa into a memorial hall? This same hall was rejected for classification as a national monument. Now a rethink has taken place and Singapore's historical role in the Chinese revolution role in 1911 is now seen not just a political revolution but contributing to a cultural revolution. The institution of Chinese icons is a strategy to be seen as politically correct and to be more acceptable to China.

The knowledge economy is said to require more international 'brain workers' and therefore Singapore has to be made attractive through the 'right' cultural and intellectual environment.

Can a culture be designed –or does it develop out of historical accidents or does it evolve? Is there a prescription for success?

One of the strands in the make-up of Singaporean multiculturalism is to package multicultural communities as 'cultural capital' to play a 'seductive' role in attracting economic capital, and in developing a corporate culture to attract the corporate elite, tourists and expatriate professionals.

Is it simplistic to reduce the distinctive cultural components of multicultural Chinese, Malay and Indian communities to the exotic label of 'ethnic Singapore', a tourist driven metaphor, conveniently used to represent the various sociocultural activities of Singaporeans as 'ethnic clothes', 'ethnic food', 'ethnic festivals'.

### **Social power: the role of English**

The dominant role of English, the development of an English-educated elite through educational programmes for the high flyers in the system has led to the development of a linguistically empowered group that wields both political power and social power. The failure to master English in the school system and the prevalent use of *Singlish* among some groups has led to a 'neutered pidgin', variety. "Though *Singlish* is a charming patois, even mildly romantic, the political leaders are right to argue cold logic in that pidgin retards progress as it is a form of linguistic in-breeding".

### **Minority Malay and Indian Communities Amongst Majority Communities**

Malay, Indian and Tamil speaking communities have raised particular issues with status planning decisions, the political status, strengths and roles of the Malay and Indian communities, the place of Malay and Tamil in the multilingual framework.

What about the pressures from a dominant Chinese ethnic population? Will strengthening the place of Chinese language and culture amongst Chinese-speaking Singaporeans sinicise the population? And yet the current debate refers to concerns whether the Chinese will retain their culture and identity with this observation on the trend with Chinese children without Chinese names and whether they will be deprived of an important facet of their identity as there has been a trend to give names such as Dominique, Celestine, Ariel, Nathanelle as it is claimed by parents that English names are easier to use and pronounce (June 20,2001)

What of the 14% Malay and 6% of the Indian population who do not communicate in Chinese? Non-Chinese speaking Singaporeans argue that these status language-planning approaches exclude all non-Chinese from the scheme of things which ranges from the 'Speak Mandarin, it's an asset' campaigns

to promoting *guan-xi* or networking with Chinese commercial and business transactions.

Would this lead to a dominant role and over the years into a hegemonic role for Chinese language? Singaporeans and Singapore Indians and Malays have accepted the place and role of English as an elite language rewarding economic capital, social mobility and social elitism. Has the status and role now being replaced in some areas by an English-Mandarin equation and in some contexts by Mandarin?

While these language shifts to English-Mandarin are not apparent at this point in time there are sub-groups that will tend to function within these specific language codes leading to sub-groups of inclusive and exclusive zones of language codes. Here again the Nov 2001 elections provided an example where it showed that racial, dialect, religious affiliations have emotional pull.

The incumbent a Cantonese speaking Christian was challenged in a dialect speaking district by a Hokkien speaking candidate and a devotee of the Taoist temple which celebrates and observes the Hungry Ghost festivals and Seventh Moon festivals.

Power lies with an English-educated elite selected for special attention in 'gifted' educational programmes that groom and assure them of a permanent position in the elite core of the top echelon of the civil service.

What elements of Singaporean culture and tradition should then be selected that will be relevant to urban Indians living in Singapore within a potpourri of popular cultural products on offer in a typical urban consumer society?

The notion of a pan Indian culture is alien even in India. In India the artists of music, dance and literary activities from the South Indian Dravidian civilization and the artists from the North Indian civilization occupy their own cultural niches. As there is inadequate cross-cultural transmission and cross-linguistic translations in regional and community languages ironically it is English that is used as a language code in translating these cultural activities for a wider audience. We have yet to find common cultural platforms to bridge their distinctive cultural activities for the small number of Indian writers and artists contributing to the development of Indian culture.

Nevertheless a strong and vibrant cultural input is needed for Indian students growing up in Singapore.

## Conclusion

Is it then a model of homogeneity for the sake of social harmony and social cohesion, a common destiny, or each community with its own reference of socio-cultural distinctiveness?

An SPH survey on 30 questions on national identity reported a 'silent majority' where 7 % of 636 interviewed would express disagreement with policies openly. 'Many are still afraid to disagree due partly to the different signals the government sends and more channels are needed (Eddie Kuo, Dean of communication studies. Others declared 'No burning issues.

The current model of multilingualism and multiculturalism tends to be largely a simplistic framework, reducing the complexities of a multilingual and multicultural framework to a workable formula, largely to assist efficiency in policy implementation. The on-going political process is at attempts of homogenising the disparate communities into a singular identity or whether its best to develop an English-Mandarin, English-Malay and an English-Tamil identity has yet to be evaluated.

What is the status of political representation for Indians in Singapore? The introduction of group representation constituencies (GRC) in 1988 in racially integrated Chinese majority constituencies led to the appointments of four GRC Indian MPs in the Nov 3<sup>rd</sup> 2001 elections who speak fluent Mandarin and little or no Tamil at all. The Tamil

Murasu debated whether their appointments were representative of the Tamil speaking Indian community.

It is summed by a debate on comments on a 'gifted' programme for undergrads It will be a perennial tussle between Singapore's egalitarian heart and its meritocratic head with charges of elitism against scholar administrative service officers from the Ivy League universities or Oxbridge with an instant ticket to success and a lifetime validity.

Or is it an egalitarian instinct where impoverished immigrants, and the disadvantaged succeeded. (June 16<sup>th</sup> 2001 Warren Fernandez "Is the NUS 'gifted' programme elitist?")

Will it be a made in Singapore label? Will generation M, the mobile -phone generation forsake Singapore when the going gets tough? Will it become a nation of economic migrants, a diaspora lured by markets, a generation, which will move where they command the highest premiums?

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