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The Maintenance of Bilingual and Bicultural Identities: A Case Study of Minority Indian Communities in Singapore

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ABSTRACT: The paper examines the political and social role of English language in homogenising both majority and minority linguistic communities in Singapore. It examines to what extent the original, distinctive, separate identities expressed in the distinctive language-culture codes have undergone a process of diffusion when overwhelmed by a homogeneous national identity. While there has been a shift to an English-based cultural orientation, it is not a simplistic case of a total cultural assimilation for all groups in the communities. The paper discusses the Tamil speaking community's attempts at maintaining some of their distinctive bilingual and bicultural identities within a multicultural context.

1. INTRODUCTION

The island of Singapore comprises diverse, disparate communities, which vary in the amount of access that they have to power, status, and management of their language, and their links to identity and culture. Where do smaller ethnic, linguistic communities in the island state of Singapore fit in? Do smaller linguistic communities such as the Indian community belong to a conceptual framework of a Singaporean identity or to a separate, distinctive, ethnolinguistic, bicultural identity within a Singaporean identity?

Though historically the Indians were linked to the mainland identity of the subcontinent of India during pre-war days, during the Japanese occupation, and the first ten years of the post-war period, it is no more relevant to consider India as providing a mainland identity as a generation of Indians were born in post-war Singapore. The historical allegiance to the Indian sub-continent gave way to a period of developing nationhood. The political and economic stability and growth that accompanied Singapore's independence helped many to make Singapore their permanent home. These young Indian Singaporeans have become socialised within a common national, social identity.

It is therefore relevant to discuss a separate Indian island identity within a common Singaporean identity, during the period Singapore set about establishing itself as an independent nation. How this Singapore mainland identity came to be established is relevant for the discussion here, as the development of a common linguistic and cultural identity was not left to chance. There is therefore a need to begin with a brief review of the use of the vast machinery and resources used by the

government and its agencies to develop this mainland Singaporean national identity. These measures and activities have in turn affected the original island identities of majority communities as in the case of Chinese and minority Indian and Malay communities. With independence Singaporean Indians gave up their pre-war political allegiance to India, many gave up their British passports and took up Singaporean citizenship while establishing their own Indian Singaporean identity.

In order to provide a context for the discussion of the strength and distinctiveness of separate language - culture identities, it is necessary to look at the ingredients that make up the national identity of Singapore. It is useful to begin with the relationship between language and culture. Fishman in "The Truth about Language and Culture" (1994:84-87) describes the relationship between language and culture as both subtle and complex. Cultural beliefs have definite consequences for education, second language learning and intergroup relations, and for cultural borrowing and planning. Further on, he states that the symbolic role of language is fundamentally involved in the contributions of language to ethnocultural identity. They are related not just with "our kind of people" but also with the flag, with the national symbols of language, culture and identity, and with the cultural values and national traditions. Once the associations and links are made, the symbolic role of language achieves a political capacity and a potential thrust, as motivators of collective human behaviour.

2. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A SINGAPOREAN IDENTITY

Some of the earliest attempts to present a clearer model of a common Singaporean identity came from sociologists who started from what was perceived to be a disparate set of ethnic and racial mix. Several models have been used to explore the links and relationships between ethnicity, language, culture and identity amongst the multiethnic, multilingual communities in Singapore.

Amidst the disparate set of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Western cultural traditions is a set of explicit government policies that promotes the integration of a national culture, an integration of the four great cultures: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Western. The discourse of the government has repeatedly referred to political, social and educational policies that are designed to bring about national integration that in turn will promote a national culture. Thus while a national Singaporean identity is being developed, at the same time the diverse ethnic communities have access to the exogenous cultures of China, India, Indonesia and Malaysia. Both integration and distinctiveness are promoted as national policies. But in reviewing some of the planned cultural activities by organisations such as the Tourist

Promotion Board, some observers state that in reality there has been in fact little access to the exogenous culture of China. What was set up were a number of cultural theme parks displaying Chinese artefacts managed by the Tourist Promotion Board. Other examples are the annual Chinese parades celebrating the Lunar New Year, the Autumn Moon Cake and Dragon Boat festivals.

Benjamin (1976:115-133) using the sociological theory of multiracialism attempts to provide a framework to discuss the underlying themes and models of cognition that constitutes Singaporean culture. Benjamin examines the concept of multiracialism as the reflex of a functioning Singaporean culture. The concept of multiculturalism is used by the government to reinvent and reaffirm the notion of "traditional", unchanging cultures. Such a conceptual framework allows for the different Chinese, Malay and Indian communities to have their own identity, their distinctions and expressive forms to be displayed through ethnicity, language, religion and other cultural elements. In order to demonstrate the distinctiveness of each of the four cultures, their differences have to be heightened, their similarities underplayed, and their expressive forms have to be developed to display their separate-but-equal status.

But Chew (1976) critiquing the government efforts at bilingualism points out that though Chinese education is used to promote traditional values which (the government hopes) will help to counter the individualistic drives of the economic impetus of acquiring wealth, it is unfortunate that the administrators have been promoting Chinese as a language possessing a conservative function implying that universal human values, such as devotion to family and loyalty to country, are peculiar to Chinese, that is, Asian society and culture. Chew observes that in fact the attempt to pigeonhole various languages in terms of their functions makes the effort to promote bilingualism too simplistic.

This approach to get the diverse communities to establish links with their traditional linguistic and cultural sources, make links to their exoglossic linguistic and cultural traditions, has posed a dilemma for the government from time to time. For while the government wanted a full appreciation of Chinese, Indian and Malay-Indonesian traditions and cultures, yet it has discouraged communities from getting too involved with the national affairs, with the political conflicts of their home countries, for example, in China, India, Punjab and Sri Lanka. With the Indian community, for example, the government has discouraged involvement with the Sikh separatist movement, and with the South Indians it has discouraged involvement with the politics in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. Young educated Sikhs looking for links with Sikhism and modernisation and Tamils with Hinduism were encouraged to promote Indian cultural heritage and language, but avoid the narrow

chauvinistic trends (Mani 1993:798).

The conceptual framework that is used to identify cultural identity is not that simple or clear, as it seems. Linguistic and socio-cultural stereotyping is prevalent in Singapore. Numerous labels such as “Chinese-educated”, “English-educated”, middle class, HDB dwellers, HDB heartlanders (people who live in housing and development board flats built by the government), “private apartment dwellers” and more recently, labels such as “Chinese elite”, “Tamil elite”, “Malay elite”, “Chinese chauvinist”, etc. are used to ascribe characteristics of ethnicity, socio-economic status, linguistic and cultural behaviour to various ethnic groups in Singapore. This in a sense reflects the complexities in this sociolinguistic setting.

These labels can also take on a political dimension revealing the uncertainties and sensitiveness as was seen in a recent legal case against an opposition political candidate. During the 1997 General Elections press interviews, Tang, an opposition candidate, was said to have expressed anti-Christian remarks and Chinese chauvinistic remarks. The *Straits Times* (Jan 31, 1997) reported a court case against Tang’s remarks on Chinese language which were seen as offences “to cause, or which are likely to cause, fear or alarm to the public, whereby any person may be induced to commit an offence against public tranquillity”.

Clammer (1985) and Gopinathan (1994 & Gopinathan et al. 1998) review the processes of socialisation used by the government to achieve national and political identity through a set of educational linguistic policies. The socialisation process is described as one where Singapore’s school children receive an ethnically integrated and nationally standardised English medium education. Ethnic integration takes place with school based extra-curricular activities, social, cultural clubs, school based national military activities, military bands and later compulsory national service for male citizens. These activities carried out mainly through English are all part of the internalisation of the symbolic system embodying common national values and identity. Clammer (1985:25) however refers to a number of paradoxes in the Singaporean model based on ideology, society and culture. The Singapore model it is argued is based on integration rather than segregation or complete assimilation of separate linguistic, cultural identities.

The government decided that one way of speeding up the process of linguistic and ethnic integration and in some ways the assimilation of the various ethnic groups was to evolve a national identity, a Singaporean identity through national educational and language policies, which would help to integrate the disparate communities. The rationale given by the government for its policy decisions was that linguistic policies had to be based on a pragmatic evaluation of an educational system that addresses the needs of the nation. These policies it argued have been

designed to bring about communicative integration across a diverse set of multi-ethnic, linguistic and cultural communities. The national educational system became a major instrument of the government's social engineering policies when Singapore became independent, observes Wilson (1974). The historical legacy inherited from the colonial period was said to be one of English language schools and vernacular schools, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil divided along political, cultural and linguistic orientations. Chinese, Malay and Tamil medium schools were replaced by English medium schools.

The English language has been used by largely English-speaking politicians for more than its linguistic role, that is, as a common tongue for most groups of people. English has been used to socialise collective human behaviour. Its potential as a common linguistic code was recognised early in the period of development as an independent nation. At the same time it is argued that it allowed for the continuity of an elite English-educated middle class, with status and political power to become political administrators for the last thirty years (Tan 1998).

The political discourse of the government extensively reported, mainly in English, in the daily news media, refers to a Singapore culture that must fulfil several requirements. Political discourse takes the form of discourse that exhorts, directs, educates, encourages, and discourages the population by providing disincentives when government driven initiatives are ignored, rejected, questioned or challenged. Thus while there have been no legal pressures on any ethnic group to give up its language, political discourse has been used repeatedly to persuade that many such linguistic, educational, and social policies are justified and appropriate as Singapore is a small but developed nation. Chua (1995), a sociologist, in his review of the ideology and discourse of the ruling party in Singapore, the People's Action Party (PAP), argues that the ideology of pragmatism is used to persuade and encourage Singaporeans to accept particular policy decisions as they are pragmatic. It has been argued that the formulation of race, language, and culture policies for multiracial identity introduced by the government is part of its ideological framework to reduce language and dialect differences.

Gopinathan reviews bilingual policy decisions institutionalised in the eighties and nineties (see Gopinathan 1994 & Gopinathan et al. 1998). In 1987 English was established as the main medium of education after a review of educational policies and manpower training for technology and modernisation. But at the same time the government began a debate on the cultural influences of an English-driven western education that "promoted consumerism, permissiveness and liberalism". These trends the government argued were to be corrected through a bilingual educational policy, where children would acquire a bicultural identity through mother tongue

education.

Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong in speaking on “Cultural Values and Economic Performance”, and reviewing the role of the Chinese intelligentsia, the concerns of the Chinese-educated with regards to the erosion of Mandarin and Chinese culture in Singapore, the link between East Asian economies and “Confucian dynamism” made the following remarks in 1991:

...the dominance of English over Chinese in Singapore has already been settled by history, the market and force of circumstances. English will be the common language of Singaporeans and the principal language of commerce and official communication. This is a reality. Given this reality, how do we preserve values, the social relations, and the dynamism to our national well-being?

The Prime Minister went on to say that unless the English-educated Chinese are taught and instilled with core Chinese values, cultural individualism will force out Confucian dynamism as Singapore’s value system (*Speeches* Vol. 15).

Policy makers decided on the exclusive use of Mandarin for the Chinese in the place of other mother tongue Chinese languages, that is, Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, and other regional Chinese languages. At the same time policy makers used the argument that it was unrealistic to prescribe equality of use of the four official languages in all public domains and instead institutionalised the use of English in most formal public domains. The government rationalised that support for all the Chinese mother tongues would lead to an inefficient and irrational use of resources for a multiplicity of languages. It was argued that in fact the use of high status Mandarin would add to the cohesiveness and cultural identity of the Chinese, that is, they would remain Chinese in their cultural identity but function in English mainly.

Similarly a parallel decision was taken to select the Malay language for the Malay population, a prestigious language of the region, rather than Javanese, or Boyanese (mainly speakers of Indonesian descent) and Arabic (which has a limited function confined to the religious domain). Tamil was selected for the Indians rather than the other Dravidian languages of Malayalam, Telugu or the North Indian languages of Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Urdu or Gujarati. The implications arising out of these decisions were that the dominant English and Chinese languages would have a larger allocation of resources compared to minority languages. The numerical strength of speakers of a multiplicity of Indian and Malay linguistic minorities was deemed to be too low for official support and for the allocation of

resources. Malay and Tamil were selected for official support under the four official language policy.

Singaporeans show general acceptance of such linguistic and educational policies and are persuaded through repeated political discourse that there are few options in a small but developed country (Gopinathan et al. 1994). It has been argued that an English language education is relevant for a technocratic society, for the nation is being wired up for the extensive use of information technology (IT), the use of internet facilities towards the year 2000. In general it has been shown that English education has been extremely advantageous to the middle class groups in terms of career opportunities in the professions, for upward social mobility.

The bilingual policy was formalised to allocate specific roles for the official languages, English medium education to provide for modernisation and industrialisation and mother tongue education to ensure “cultural ballast”, that is, to promote traditional cultures and values. Many writers have questioned this policy of compartmentalising the two languages. This policy of accommodation and adjustment and hence the dilemma faced in arriving at the right “equation” is echoed in Clammer’s question of whether Singapore can pursue a mono-cultural model where English is acquired for science and technology, and mother-tongue education for “values” (Clammer 1985:28). As Clammer and other linguists have observed, in reality the use of English and community languages are not compartmentalised. The sociolinguistic reality is that the socio-cultural behaviour of many Singaporeans may be described as “cultural brokers”, they inhabit more than one system of linguistic domains and cultural values where there are Chinese who speak Mandarin and English and a mixture of Chinese community languages, Indians who speak English and Tamil or other Indian languages, Malays who speak Malay, English and other Indonesian languages and some non-Chinese who include Mandarin and other Chinese dialects in their linguistic repertoires. Many Singaporeans present a multifaceted, bicultural, multilingual identity.

Thirty years of educational policies have encouraged the use and spread of English from being the dominant language in formal and public contexts to private, informal domains including social, friendship, home and intimate domains, and has consequently enhanced the social status and the economic power of English-educated speakers. The dominant use of English amongst and across post-war generations has contributed towards developing a common, national identity, above and beyond the ethnic and sub-ethnic levels. The functional use of English has spread through the use of the many varieties of Singapore English, which ranges from Standard Singapore English, to a low variety of Singlish which is a low variety of English combined with a great deal of borrowing from Chinese and Malay.

These varieties are extensively used over the media, television and radio networks, in music and drama, in the newspapers, in creative writing, and in Singapore literature.

The question that arises is to what extent the original, distinctive, separate identities that express distinctive language codes and cultural identities have undergone a process of diffusion and assimilation when these separate island identities are overwhelmed by a homogeneous national identity, a Singaporean identity? The government over the last thirty years has made use of selected linguistic, cultural and social elements to begin the process of shaping and moulding a national identity, a Singaporean cultural identity that includes bicultural identities. The various elements of mother tongue education are used to define and shape the ethnically defined, socio-cultural elements inherent in the mother tongue of the speaker.

The promotion of the Mandarin Chinese language and Confucianist philosophy for the Chinese is used to instill traditional values and family values. It is said to encourage a Singaporean culture that must portray traditional, “local values”, “Asian values”, group spirit, cohesive family life, thrift, industry, etc. These institutional policy decisions taken on behalf of the Chinese communities to bring about a more cohesive Chinese society in Singapore in turn raised the awareness of minority Indian and Malay communities, that it was necessary to develop Tamil and Malay language curriculum materials and cultural activities in the respective mother tongues. Common core materials in all languages on “good citizenship” and culturally related materials incorporating values education were developed for all learners in schools.

How effective has it been for the creation of a bilingual, bicultural identity for the Indians? Did this contribute to a bicultural curriculum for the Indians or was it one that is Asian and one that is Confucian in its principles and in its approaches? In the process of creating a common identity, some of the distinctive cultural identities that each community had, which are embedded in the mother tongues and community languages spoken by various groups, have been replaced by a common core of values education. Some have observed that the distinctive Indian, Malay, and Chinese linguistic and cultural identities embedded in the various languages spoken have been supplanted by a common Asian identity. Some have argued that the bicultural curriculum that was developed tended to be more Chinese, more Confucian in its approaches thus eroding the distinctive cultural identities of the Indians and Malays.

What are the broader implications of such linguistic policies for the various linguistic communities in Singapore? As a result of this sociolinguistic engineering,

patterns of language use in the Chinese, Tamil and Malay linguistic communities as well as in the sub-groups of minority linguistic communities over the years have changed, many groups have experienced different levels of language maintenance and language shift. For the minority Indian linguistic communities, such as the Tamils (6% of the population) in effect these language planning policies have contributed to a changing sociolinguistic environment, where English has spread to both formal and informal domains.

3. INDIANS IN SINGAPORE: SINGAPOREAN IDENTITY OR A DISTINCTIVE INDIAN IDENTITY

Indians form less than 7% of the total population. The Indian community consists of 11 sub-groups, with the Tamils 63.9%, Malayalees 8.6% and Sikhs 6.7% of the Indian population. Tamil-speaking Indians are a linguistic minority in Singapore. Out of a total number of 81,098 speakers of Indian languages, 68,269 are Tamil speakers and 12,829 speakers of other Indian languages. But Tamil is not a minor language (*Census* 1990). Tamil serves as a standardised, national language for 45 million mother tongue speakers of Tamil in India. Similarly, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Gujurati, Malayalam and Telugu are languages which have strong historical, political, and literary prestige in India. But speakers of these languages who are part of small ethnic groups in Singapore are considered linguistic minorities in Singapore.

Ironically as Gopinathan (1994) observes the linguistic policies have accommodated the requests of the Indians. Recently the government allowed for community-run classes in Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali and Urdu and Gujurati. Again one can interpret this decision not only in terms of an expression of strengthening language and culture links but to cater for a growing Indian expatriate population. This is part of an economic equation, that is, encouraging expatriate Indian communities to expand their business and investment activities in Singapore, to take up permanent residence (PR) and to settle their families in Singapore. Currently 1,000 Indian pupils studying Malay or Mandarin have been encouraged to switch to community-run weekend Indian language classes.

Despite its official and institutional language status, Tamil is in decline across the generations in Singapore. English has assumed an increasing role as a medium of intra-ethnic communication (*Census* 1970, 1980, 1990, Mani and Gopinathan 1993, Saravanan 1994). Tamil does not have the political status and economic significance that English, Chinese and Malay have in Singapore (Mani and Gopinathan 1993), regionally and internationally.

Given thirty years of national integration policies there are many signs to show that the national integration and assimilation of the various subcommunities is almost complete. The small numbers of Tamil speakers are fragmented and spread all over the island. They do not have the numerical strength to remain as a separate entity. The geographical enclaves developed by the community, the several Indian enclaves in Chong Pang (N=3,399), Jalan Kayu (1,194), Nee Soon (947) gave way to demographic quotas for the various ethnic groups, or more integrated populations (Mani 1993:794, quotes Fung 1975:17). Public housing policy discourages the development of enclaves and instead assigns quotas for each ethnic group in public housing estates. This housing policy ensures that the Indians and the other ethnic groups are integrated.

3.1. The Current Socio-psychological Behaviour of the Community and Perceptions of Singapore Indians of Themselves

The socio-psychological behaviour of the Tamil speaking community is affected by the fact that Tamil does not have the status and significance that English, Chinese and Malay have in Singapore. The choice of language code whether Tamil or English is related to a large extent to educational background, whether one is Tamil-educated or English-educated, the distinctive socio-economic classification and the distinctive life styles that go with the background (see Saravanan 1994).

Will Indian Singaporeans experience further language shift with the spread of English to many of the domains where Tamil was used, that is, the domains of home, family, friendship and in some cases even the religious domain? The data from two surveys on attitudes to Tamil provides current evidence on the attitudes of Indian children and the Indian community toward their language and cultural heritage. An attitudinal survey (Saravanan 1994) on affective linguistic behaviour of 220 Tamil secondary students obtained the following results: responses showed that 94.7% had pride in speaking the Tamil language. It shows that the community and the teaching of mother tongue in the school culture especially have established positive attitudes to the Tamil language, culture and heritage. There is evidence that some groups in the Indian community will retain their distinctive island identity.

On the other hand the respondents were realistic in their responses to the status, prestige and usefulness of English compared to Tamil, rating English higher (76%) than Tamil; only 24% said that Tamil has prestige in Singapore, and 29% said that Tamil can be considered a modern language. There are therefore groups in the community who see the uses and functions of the Tamil language marginalised, and have accepted English as the language of status and prestige.

A second study was conducted on the attitudes of adult Tamil speakers (N=395) in Singapore by Govindasamy and Ramiah (1995) between the ages of 20 to 50 with 74% with secondary or tertiary education. The survey (a largely middle class sample) reported the following findings: the vast majority (95.4%) said that they were proud to be able to speak in Tamil and proud to retain their cultural heritage; 70.4% said that they could appreciate Tamil literature and culture by reading English translations. This positive attitude towards maintaining their island heritage and culture shows that Tamil language will remain a symbol of in-group loyalty and solidarity as long as the community is involved in sustaining and maintaining its identity through this solidarity.

On the other hand there was concern with the finding where 79.2% said that they preferred to speak in English even in situations where they could speak Tamil, as most Tamils were bilingual in Tamil and English. This shift to English was supported by the finding that 88.1% felt that it was less prestigious to speak Tamil, with 70.9% saying that there was more status in speaking English than Tamil (cf. Coulmas 1991). What the survey shows is an Indian middle class response as Indians generally have benefited from an English language education.

While it might be difficult to deny the link between Tamil monolinguals and low occupational status, it remains a known fact that employers prefer bilingual Chinese-English speakers to Tamil-English speakers as the majority of clients, 77%, are of Chinese origin. Is there evidence of Indian Singaporeans maintaining their identity despite experiencing language shift? The survey on attitudes of Indian school children (Saravanan 1994) was used to find out the Indian community's responses to their sense of identity. The students had to respond to three categories: whether they wanted to be classified by linguistic, ethnic or national identity. The responses showed that 48.6% wanted to be identified as Singaporeans first, only 22.9% wanted to be identified by ethnicity or as Indian Singaporeans and 25.7% by their linguistic community or as Tamil Singaporeans. Part of the pressure for maintaining a common Singaporean identity comes from the power and status assigned to the English language and social interaction through English. This would imply that a common Singaporean identity has established itself and for some groups a distinctive ethnic and linguistic identity has been replaced by a bilingual-bicultural identity.

What are some of the factors that provide an explanation for the shift to English language based identity? Some of the language shift experienced by the various sub-groups has come about as a result of pressures that are economic in nature. Other researchers have observed the link between language planning and language management of economic resources. Coulmas (1991) argues that it is because

languages are economically significant that they are susceptible to influences from economic development, that a language is an instrument with practical utility, and that language shifts are never in the direction away from greater utility. He concludes that language shift may come about as a result of pressures that are essentially economic and cultural in nature. Coulmas (1991) goes on to describe Singapore's educational system as an efficient system, where Mandarin, Malay and English have been adapted to modern communication requirements, where individual bilingualism is institutionalised and widespread, and where the city state's multilingualism is used for economic activity and social integration.

How have policy makers and community leaders responded to the status assigned to English? It was reported that while the Chinese elite promotes high culture, music, art and scholarship, the Chinese-educated feel that American pop culture supported by the English-educated overwhelms the interests and occupies mainstream culture in Singapore. The Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, in responding to remarks of "westernisation" of Asian culture, of the "Macdonaldisation" and "coca-colaisation" of Asia shared his views during a speech entitled "Cultural Tide is Rising for Asia":

As East Asia develops there will be a reaffirmation of Asian culture, Asian tradition and Asian values ... they (the western media) have saturated our TV, radio and print media; American cartoons, documentaries and CNN bring the world into our sitting rooms. ... As East Asia develops and its people master the media, Asian cartoons, documentaries and commentators will interpret the world from an Asian perspective, Singapore's lifestyles and its political vocabulary. In 20-years this will shift, as East produces its own mass products and coins its own political vocabulary. (*Speeches* Vol. 19.1)

What are the pressures from a dominant Chinese ethnic population? Will strengthening the place of Chinese language and culture amongst Chinese-speaking Singaporeans sinicise the population, that is, produce a Chinese nation at the expense of the separate ethnic identities? This ideological argument may be counter argued, states Chua (1995), who observes that reinventing the traditional, linguistic cultures would mean reinventing the various racial cultures. This would pose a dilemma for the government, for a move towards reidentifying separate ethnic and linguistic cultures may prove detrimental to the social integration of Singapore as a nation.

This dilemma was illustrated in an extensive debate on the Singapore General Elections held on January 2, 1997. Journalists from the daily newspapers

commented on several issues that emerged during the course of nine days of political rallies. Cherian George, a journalist writing in the *Straits Times* (Jan 10, 1997) wrote that ethnicity has been politicised in the elections. A bitter, adversarial debate ensued between the Chinese-educated and English-educated as some observed that Chinese intellectuals had in their language and culture, though a demographic majority, remained a political and cultural minority.

On the other hand the return-to-roots drive has made the English-educated, that is, Chinese, Indian, and the Malay English-educated raise questions whether this was making Singapore too Chinese in its orientation. The anxieties, paradoxes, dilemma faced by political leaders are best summarised by the responses of the senior minister, Lee Kuan Yew, in a debate on language and culture during the election campaign of January 1997.

We are not a Chinese country and must not allow Chinese chauvinists to turn us into one.... The deep fault lines in our society over race, language, culture and religion will not go away. Inevitable deep faultlines, racial, religious, cultural and language conflicts, deep faultlines, need to close these lines. We are in danger if we go along with the tide because year by year, every five years, every ten years, the Chinese tide rises. So the desire of the Chinese-educated to assert their position because they share a reflected strength. We go that way, we will be destroyed. I have no doubt in my mind. We've thought it over very carefully. Because, one, our internal divisions will destroy us. Two, there will be external forces out to destroy us because, whatever happens, no regional or world power is going to allow a Chinese state in Singapore. So, long before we get there, we'll be destroyed. We are fighting nationalism because it saps us – our vitality, our multicultural robustness, each group maintaining a certain cultural identity and a certain self-confidence. (*Straits Times* Jan. 1997)

During this period of debate the prime minister Goh Chock Tong was also reported making the following observations: "...if chauvinistic politicians tap this ground and once in parliament try to make Chinese the dominant language in Singapore they will threaten our racial harmony" (*Straits Times* Jan. 1997).

These remarks made by the ruling politicians during the general election rallies and interviews in January 1997, firmly point to the fact that many issues regarding ideology, ethnicity, language, culture and identity have yet to be resolved. There are no easy solutions to all of these. The different permutations in terms of the ethnic communities have to be periodically reviewed.

Whether the political process is one of homogenising disparate linguistic and ethnic communities into a nation, one of creating a supra-ethnic national identity, or of distinctive identities the political process has to accommodate and renegotiate with the various ethnic communities (Gopinathan 1994). The current debate shows that policy makers have to periodically re-examine and bring about policy shifts in the language, cultural and social spheres to accommodate the various communities.

4. CONCLUSION

What more does the Indian community need to do to maintain the bicultural identity, bilingual identity? Mani (1993) states that "Even though the Indians are able to articulate specific issues that are relevant in the wider society, for example, Tamil language issues, they are unable to advance the community's specific needs owing to a lack of internal cohesion within any of the subgroups in the community". The community has to be more proactive in creating and using the opportunities provided given the multilingual, multicultural setting. A sociolinguistic response to maintaining a bilingual Tamil-English and bicultural heritage is to relook at how bilingual and bicultural approaches can support such minority languages. Tamil-speaking Singaporeans need to develop and accept a medium, a Singapore Tamil variety, similar to Singapore English, which can be used to express their thoughts and creativity, rather than be constrained by exoglossic norms, and standards set in India.

While there has been a shift to English by some groups in the community, it is not a simplistic case of a total cultural assimilation to an English or western culture by all such groups. It is a complex set of language behaviour patterns given the multilingual, multicultural setting. The desire to belong to a mainstream, middle class population, that is, socially and economically mobile in English, has resulted in a shift in language use patterns. The Singaporean Indian identity is a bilingual, bicultural identity evolving through a multilingual, multicultural base, of a language repertoire that includes both Singapore English and Tamil (and for some Indians who have intermarried Malay, it includes the Malay language).

Singapore Indians accept a pragmatic approach to the linguistic formula; they accept the dominant place of English in Singapore and in the education system. Indian parents accept the dominant economic and social status of English in Singapore. The internationalism associated with the English language and the belief that an English education in the hard and applied sciences gives one an edge over others in career prospects makes an educational system based on the English language attractive.

At the same time there are groups of Indians who are strong in their expression of distinctive cultural identity. In their own ways cultural practices are transmitted to a younger generation through community participation in year round socio-cultural, religious activities, from participation in cultural festivals, ponggal, religious festivals such as taipusam, teemiti, deepavali, onam, visha, to groups of Christians worshipping in Tamil (especially in the Tamil Methodist churches), to observing the religious and cultural practices that go with birth, marriage, death. Many of these cultural practices are conducted in the mixed codes of English and Tamil.

What other forms of bilingual, bicultural, Tamil-English maintenance are there? A review of publishing in Tamil shows that the publication of the daily Tamil newspaper *tamiR murasu* was prevented from closing down and is now subsidised by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). A small readership has made this inevitable. The annual Tamil language and culture seminars, a small scale book publication of about thirty books annually supporting Tamil poets and writers, have helped to sustain interest in Tamil language and cultural activities. The many fragmented Tamil language, social and cultural organisations have come together to support a small scale biannual campaign on "Speak Tamil". The first campaign launched in 1995 took the form of activities over Tamil radio station, the Tamil newspaper *tamiR murasu* and cultural activities. It tended to involve more Tamil monolingual speaking groups, than bilingual Tamil-English or English-educated groups. The "Speak Tamil" campaign has had little impact over English-speaking Indians when compared to the "Speak Mandarin" campaign, which was started in 1977.

The shift to English amongst the various communities has resulted to some extent in a de-ethnification of the communities note (Gopinathan 1994 and Baetens-Beardsmore 1994). Thus it can be argued that integration was used to forge a common mainstream Singaporean identity above the separate ethnic identities. The Tamil-speaking community, as well as other smaller Indian linguistic groups, provides perhaps the best examples of communities who have undergone different levels of de-ethnification. These communities display widespread assimilation into a mainstream common Singaporean identity, brought about by the dominant use of English.

The smallness of the Indian community, fragmented in yet smaller groups by language, religion, and culture, will need strong community efforts to ensure that their distinctive identities are not eroded, in terms of their linguistic, social and cultural identity by a powerful, dominant and status driven language such as English.

While it is recognised by some of the policy makers that the Singapore model

has to include all the complexities of an English-educated and a Chinese-educated framework, as well as the elements of the various sociolinguistic and socio-cultural components of Chinese, Indian, Malay communities, Singapore English, ranging from Standard Singapore English to a low variety termed Singlish, will continue to play a dominant sociolinguistic role.

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