While there had been some Indian traders in Singapore at the time of Raffles’ arrival—since 753 were listed in the population enumeration in 1823—the total number of Indians in the population continued to be less than 10,000 until the second half of the nineteenth century. It was not until after 1880 that any large number of Indians came to Singapore. The massive increase in the Indian population of Singapore occurred early in the twentieth century, growing from 17,000 or 7.8 per cent of the total in 1901 to nearly twice that figure (32,342) in 1921, and rising to 128,250 in 1966. In 1980, there were 154,632 Indians in Singapore.

The initial and largest number among the ethnic subgroups to become clearly distinguishable within the Singaporean Indian community were the Tamils from the Coromandel coast. By 1921, the Tamils constituted nearly four fifths of all Indians in Singapore, and although their proportion declined somewhat in later years, they were still, in 1980, the largest of the Indian subgroups in Singapore. The primary language of this group is Tamil. While Tamil has been extensively used among Tamils, it is clear as well that other South Indians also used it for literacy and education. Generally, Tamil has been accepted as the language of intra-group communication for most Indians.1

In 1970 (see Table 1), Tamils (including Sri Lankan Tamils) formed about 69 per cent of the Indian population in Singapore. If all South Indians were included, Tamil was spoken or understood by about 82 per cent of the Indian Singaporeans. Ten years later, in 1980, with the significant reduction of Malayalees due to the British withdrawal, South Indians formed about 75 per cent of the Indians.

Some Theoretical Views
Tamil is one of the four official languages of Singapore. Historically, it has been recognized as perhaps the most significant of the South Indian languages used by people of South Asian origins in Singapore. Despite the historical recognition of the importance of Tamil in Singapore, two recent developments have generated a measure of concern as to the future roles and status of this language. One is the closure of the last Tamil-medium secondary school in 1982, the other is the recent research finding that Tamil is declining in usage compared to other official languages (Kuo 1976, 1979)—despite the fact that the number of people of Indian origin has continued to increase. Equally paradoxical is the fact that each population census has clearly indicated that literacy rates are higher among the Indians when compared to Chinese, Malays, and others in Singapore.

Table 1: Language Affiliation of People of South Asian Origins in Singapore
(Figures within parentheses indicate percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Group</th>
<th>1931</th>
<th>1947</th>
<th>1957</th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>1980*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recent research on linguistic trends in Singapore offers both a statement and the following explanation with reference to the position of Tamil in Singapore.

1. “The apparent decline in Tamil in Singapore is significant but not unexpected. The finding is consistent with the decline of the literacy rate in Tamil among the Indians in Singapore, from 4.8 per cent in 1957 to 3.8 per cent in 1970. As a language, albeit official, associated with a small Indian population which is itself diversified religiously, culturally, linguistically, the communication function in Tamil in Singapore seems rather limited. Its future status deserves close observation.” (Kuo, 1976: 140)

2. “Comparing 1978 with 1972 data, we find that all languages/dialects under discussion, with the exception of Tamil, have made some gain in communicativity over the six-year interval … for Tamil there was a drop from 86.7 per cent to 79.1 per cent … Tamil is the only language showing declining communicativity, even for intra-ethnic communication among the Indians. The trend is consistent with the decline of Tamil literacy rate among the Indians.” (Kuo, 1979: 331)

This paper is an attempt to explore in greater detail the phenomenon alluded to by Kuo and to see if Lambert’s conceptualization of “subtractive bilingualism” can explain the phenomenon.

Lambert’s concept is an attempt to explain the problem of how ethnolinguistic communities are affected by the selection of languages in which members of the community become bilingual. He sees the explanation as lying in the area of ethnolinguistic privileges—that is, some residents may be privileged simply by their membership in a prestigious ethnolinguistic group; members of this group have an enormous advantage in that they can simply add a second socially relevant language to their repertoire of skills with no need for...
concern that this would lead to lower standards of the higher prestige language. Thus *additive bilingualism* available to a group is likely to result in members of the group being able to capitalize on the advantages of bilingualism.

*Subtractive bilingualism* on the other hand implies that ethnolinguistic minority groups, because of national educational policies and social pressures of various sorts, are forced to “subtract out” of their basic language in order to develop minimal competence in a national or prestigious international language. For these people, the state of their bilingualism at any point in time is likely to reflect some degree of subtraction of the basic language and its cultural accompaniments, coupled with an attempt to substitute a new language as the vernacular. Lambert considers that such groups are “penalized because a second language can be substituted for the basic language and linguistic dominance can be switched to an essentially foreign tongue” (Lambert, 1980: 9).

**Shifts in the Status of Tamil**

Shifts in the status of Tamil are identified by the use of a variety of data on important aspects of language acquisition and use, shifts in literacy rates, levels of comprehension, and usage of spoken forms of the language; its usage in a familial context and literacy trends among youth are also examined.

**Trends in Literacy**

In order to explain the changing literacy rates in the Tamil language, population censuses for 1957, 1970, and 1980 are used.

In 1957, literacy in a language was defined as “the ability to read and write a simple letter”. In the 1970 and 1980 population censuses, literacy in a language was defined as “the ability to read with understanding a newspaper”. For purposes of comparison, the subtle differences between reading and writing a simple letter and reading and understanding a newspaper are ignored.

In 1957, 4.8 per cent of the population in Singapore was literate in Tamil. By 1970, Tamil literacy declined to 2.8 per cent. However, by 1980, literacy rates for Tamil increased to about 3.4 per cent. Thus, the declining literacy rate for Tamil appears to have been reversed.

Using percentage change in the total Singapore population may be misleading if the number of Indians has remained fairly constant while other ethnic groups have increased by large proportions. For this, it is useful to compare the status of the Tamil language among the Indian Singaporeans. The 1970 and 1980 population censuses provide some of the emerging patterns in Tamil language literacy among Indians aged 10 years and over (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Literacy Rate Change from 1970 to 1980 among Literate Indian Singaporeans Aged Ten and Over (in percentages)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>1970 (N = 92,205)</th>
<th>1980 (N = 118,456)</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The pattern of literacy among the Indians in 1970 as well as in 1980 shows a great degree of variation.

In 1970, of the total literate Indians, 27.1 per cent were literate only in Tamil, 19.1 per cent were literate in Tamil and English, and 28.6 per cent were literate only in English. In addition, there were 2,439 Indians or 2.6 per cent of the literate population who were literate only in Malay. The Indians also had the highest percentage of persons who were literate in more than one official language. Apart from those who were literate in Tamil and English, there were 9.4 per cent who were literate in English and Malay and 7.9 per cent who were literate in two or more official languages other than those specified. This category of persons numbered 7,253 and consisted largely of persons who were literate in Malay and Tamil and a smaller percentage who were literate in more than two official languages. The Indians also had the highest proportion—5.2 per cent—of literate in non-official languages.

Between 1970 and 1980, the percentage of Indians who were monolingual has decreased. The four official languages have gained more usage among Indians, while usage of non-official languages, such as Indian languages other than Tamil, has shown a sharp decline. Thus, Tamil appears to be the only Indian language that can sustain itself among Indian Singaporeans. It is highly probably that Tamil could be one of the languages used by the Indians who were listed under the category of “Other two or more official languages”.

On the other hand, the percentage of Indians literate in English and one other official language has increased. The steepest increase has been in the number of Indians becoming literate in English as well as in Tamil. This increase may appear superficial if we observe only literacy rates in Tamil among Indians. For this, the categories “Literate in Tamil only” and “Literate in English and Tamil” and “Other two or more official languages” are combined. In 1970, about 54 per cent (49,732) of Indians aged 10 and above were literate in Tamil. This was despite the fact that 69 per cent of the Indians claimed Tamil as their mother tongue and 82 per cent were South Indians. In 1980, there were a total of 118,456 Indians aged 10 and above in Singapore. Of these, 59 per cent were literate in Tamil. Thus during the seventies, literacy in Tamil increased by about 5 per cent among Indians aged 10 and above. At the same time, the literacy rate for Malay among Indians increased by 5.8 per cent. The literacy rate increase for Mandarin (Chinese) was 0.3 per cent.

It may be useful to predict the general trend that Tamil literacy might take in the near future by analyzing the different age groups with reference to their literacy in Tamil. This might indicate whether more and more people would be literate in Tamil. A comparison is therefore made between the literacy rates obtained in 1970 and 1980 for specific age groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>-7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>-9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English &amp; Chinese</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English &amp; Malay</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>-6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English &amp; Tamil</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>-10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other two or more official languages</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>-3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-official languages</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>-3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3: Age-Specific Literacy in Tamil or Tamil and English among Literate Indian Singaporeans in 1970 and 1980 (in percentages)
In 1970, two groups had high literacy rates: those between the ages of 40 and 49, and those below 20 years of age. By 1980, those below 30 years of age showed increased literacy rates in Tamil, even though they did not correspond to the proportion of Indians in the larger population. The trend for more persons to become literate in Tamil may be possible in the next decade; but here again, we cannot boldly assert that those who are in school at present, and who are required to take a second language are really becoming literate in Tamil.

An analysis of language literacy among Indian students, aged 10 and over, at school in 1980 (see Table 4), indicates that 3.2 per cent of the students were not literate in any one of the official languages. Of those who were literate, only 45 per cent were literate in Tamil. This only indicates that another 15 to 35 per cent who could have become literate in Tamil had not done so and the reason might be that they were not studying Tamil in school.

### Table 4: Literacy among Ethnic Indian Students Aged Ten Years and Over in 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literate</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Tamil Only&quot; or &quot;Tamil and English&quot; or &quot;Other Two or More Official Languages&quot;</td>
<td>11,577</td>
<td>5,844</td>
<td>5,733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;English Only&quot; or &quot;English and Malay&quot; or &quot;English and Chinese&quot;</td>
<td>12,106</td>
<td>6,449</td>
<td>5,657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Official Language</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Literate</td>
<td>718</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>22,811</td>
<td>11,918</td>
<td>10,893</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Another interesting point made clear by the data is that gender has little impact on attainment in Tamil for there is not much difference between males and females in literacy attainment in Tamil.

Of the 30,785 Indian students who were at school in 1981, 58 per cent were using Tamil as a spoken language at home, but only 17,312 or 52 per cent studied Tamil as second
language in schools (Ministry of Education, Singapore 1982). Thus, a potential 6 per cent of the Tamil students, excluding those who had already left the school system, appear to indicate mixed trends.2

Thus, literacy in Tamil within the Singaporean Indian community is in a state of flux, not only in the larger Indian population but also among students at school.

Speech and Comprehension

National surveys, based on representative samples, help in identifying Tamil usage patterns in Singapore. For this, data collected in the seventies are used to understand the position of Tamil with reference to speech and comprehension. Four surveys carried out in 1972, 1975, and 1978 asked questions relating to language spoken or understood in Singapore.

The 1972 ECAFE national survey (Chen, 1973) of 2,500 married persons revealed that 6.2 per cent of the respondents could speak Tamil fairly well.

The 1972, 1975, and 1978 surveys by Survey Research Singapore asked about the comprehension level of languages for the population aged 15 and above in Singapore. The question relevant to our paper was worded as follows: “Are there any other languages or dialects you understand besides [the language of interview]?” Results of surveys done in 1972 and 1975 showed similar levels of comprehension for Tamil similar to the ECAFE one. In both surveys, 6.7 per cent of respondents understood Tamil. But by 1978, Tamil (as noted earlier) was found to be the only official language that showed reduced communicativity for only 6.0 per cent of the respondents reported understanding Tamil.3

It may be argued that reduced communicativity for Tamil may be a result of the minority status of Indians and other associated factors in Singapore. But Tamil was also observed to be declining in importance as an intra-ethnic language among the Indians: in 1972, 86.7 per cent understood Tamil, whereas in 1978 this was reduced to 79.1 per cent.

Thus, by the late seventies, Tamil as a language was observed to be understood by fewer people, at the intra-ethnic level as well as the inter-ethnic level.

Tamil in the Family

It may be possible to argue that Tamil literacy and usage might be declining in the larger society owing to the social, economic, and political position of Tamil language users in Singapore. However, Tamil may yet be stable in a functional sense in terms of usage within the family. In order to establish this, it is useful to analyze data pertaining to language usage within the family.

Two small-scale studies lend themselves well to understanding Tamil usage within the family. The data of these studies were collected in 1969 (Chia, 1977) and in 1978 (Mani, 1979). Both studies examined language usage among families with school-going children.

The 1969 study investigated oral language usage among a sample of Secondary 4 pupils. Indians formed about 14.3 per cent (N = 449) of the sample, which was rather large compared to their proportion (6.8 per cent) in the total Singapore student population (N = 519,362) at the time of the study. The Secondary 4 Indian students were from the Tamil, Malay, and English streams. Some of the significant observations were as follows:

1. As a rule, communication between subjects in the Tamil stream and their parents was in their mother tongue and English was hardly used. In all probability, these parents did not speak English at all. In contrast, about 50 per cent of the subjects in the English stream used English.
2. English was used widely among siblings, friends in school, and with neighbours.
3. Malay was used as a neighbourhood language.

The 1978 study was conducted among 233 Primary 6 children taking Tamil as a second language in English-medium schools. It was found that 81 per cent of the children used Tamil in conversing with parents and grandparents. With siblings, Tamil usage was 73 per cent, and among friends 32 per cent.

An analysis of language usage by Indian students with grandparents, parents, and siblings shows that Tamil is the dominant language (used by 53 per cent of the students) when conversing with parents. But only 47 per cent of the students used Tamil when conversing with siblings. A similar downward trend across generations was observed for usage of Malay and other languages. English was the only language that was more frequently used amongst siblings (35 per cent) when compared to usage with parents (23 per cent). Thus, increasing exposure to the English language at school and in the larger society provides evidence for English assuming an increasing role as a major communicative medium among siblings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grandparents</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33,282</td>
<td>33,282</td>
<td>33,282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without grandparents/parents/siblings</td>
<td>29,282</td>
<td>689</td>
<td>1,882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With grandparents/parents/siblings</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>32,593</td>
<td>31,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin &amp; Chinese dialects</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>7,502</td>
<td>10,978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>2,566</td>
<td>2,294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>2,073</td>
<td>17,232</td>
<td>14,777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>5,217</td>
<td>3,275</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Based on a 20 per cent sample enumeration of the population in the census survey of 1980, the following generalizations were made with reference to the status of Tamil in the larger population:
1. The proportion of students using Tamil, whether speaking to parents or to siblings, did not vary significantly.
2. For those who spoke in Tamil to their parents, only 85 per cent spoke in the same language to their siblings.
3. Among the monolingual Indian households, 57 per cent used Tamil, 21 per cent used English, and the rest used Malay or other languages.

Thus, within the familial context, usage of Tamil appears to be on a declining continuum across generations. Siblings exposed to English language education used more English when speaking to one another.

**Tamil as a Case of Subtractive Bilingualism?**
Lambert’s concept of “subtractive bilingualism” is a useful concept in understanding the linguistic phenomenon within the Indian community in Singapore. For the Chinese and the Malays, the addition of English as a second language is an example of “additive bilingualism”. The Chinese, comprising some 75 per cent of the population and with official encouragement to speak a unifying dialect, Mandarin, have a “critical mass” that both justifies and ensures the retention of Chinese competence within significant sections of the community. There will always be a wide range of situations, professional, formal and non-formal, in Singapore in which competence in Mandarin will be useful, and, indeed, for Malays and Indians as well. The Dean of the Law Faculty, University of Singapore, warned in 1979 that law graduates in the Indian ethnic group faced difficult employment prospects because of their language limitations (The Straits Times, 4 October 1979).

The Malays in Singapore have always displayed a strong sense of language loyalty. For the Malay in Singapore, aware of the difference in his status compared with his counterparts in Malaysia, the Malay language is an enduring symbol of his identity as a Malay. He is not unaware of the fact that Singapore’s immediate neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia, are Malay-speaking, and have taken various steps to enhance the use of Malay in scientific and scholarly areas and that Malay can claim special status as a regional lingua franca. Moves to standardize the Malaysian and Indonesian versions of the language and the fact that Malay or a variant of Malay is spoken by more than a hundred million people in the region give it added significance. Finally, Malay is Singapore’s national language, a status of considerable symbolic value. Thus, the search for English competence by these two ethnolinguistic communities can be undertaken without a real need to sacrifice mother tongue competence; their mother tongues retain both instrumental and non-instrumental significance.

English, Chinese, and Malay are important in special ways. English is the language with most economic potential and thus, the language of social mobility. The population strength of the Chinese—not to mention economic and political power—implies that non-Chinese learning Chinese as a language avail themselves of a significant advantage. In a different fashion, Malay’s role as a lingua franca within Singapore and its potential in the regional context makes it significant.

What of Indians and Tamil? The latest estimates put the Indian population at 7 per cent of the population or 156,500 out of 2,278,200 persons. The 1980 census data show the community divided as follows: Tamils 98,772 (64 per cent), Malayalees 12,451 (8.1 per cent), and Punjabis 12,025 (7.8 per cent). Table 1 indicates that between 1957 and 1980, the percentages for the three Indian languages have not remained constant. Declines in language affiliation therefore need to be explained. The Indians as a community do not have the numerical strength of the Malays and Chinese, and Tamil does not possess the extra significance that Chinese, Malay and English have. This is, however, not to deny that within the community itself, Tamil could have significance as an intra-ethnic language of communication (though in order for this to be achieved, the smaller language groups within the Indian community will have to overcome their antipathy to Tamil) or that in the context of Singapore’s language and cultural policies, the loss of Tamil speakers is one that can be lightly dismissed.

Community support and concern for Tamil-medium education has a historical basis and must be acknowledged. The Indians’ enthusiastic acceptance of English-medium education, too, has a historical basis and the opportunity and preparedness to participate in a non-mother tongue education (in sharp contrast to the Malays who had essentially Malay-medium education provided both at their own insistence and because the colonial authority recognized them as the original inhabitants) has had beneficial effects for the group as a whole. Further, the experience of living within a multilingual polity in India and the existence of different attitudes towards Tamil within the Indian community implies a non-exclusive
language tradition that made it possible for some members of the Indian community to take to learning quite different languages without too much stress. This is demonstrated by the variation in the pattern of literacy noted earlier. Finally, there is the influence of language politicization among the Indian population. The antipathy among non-Tamil speakers within the Indian community for learning Tamil, coupled with the view that Malay is an “easier” second language, would explain some of the loss of Tamil speakers within the Tamil population. The above facts suggest to us that a measure of loss in the number of speakers is perhaps inevitable in the particular situation that Tamil (and the Indian community) finds itself in.

Lambert uses the term “penalized” to characterize the ethnolinguistic community that either needs or opts to subtract out of its linguistic heritage. In what sense would this be an appropriate characterization of the Singaporean Indian community? It is important to bear in mind that in Singapore, free choice of medium of instruction preferred is a fundamental principle of education policy and multilingualism is national policy. There are no legal pressures on any ethnic group to give up its language; such pressures as do operate are economic and cultural in nature. We propose that it is possible to characterize the linguistic behaviour of the Indians as rational choice-making in the particular socio-linguistic situation they find themselves. The loss of Tamil literacy may be explained by the fact that some have recognized that Tamil has a limited range of uses in multilingual Singapore. Even within the Indian community, Tamils are likely to speak to Sikhs, Bengalis, Malayalees, Ceylonese in Malay or in English rather than Tamil. Tamil has no role in inter-ethnic communication; the spread of English within the Indian community, particularly among the school-going population, is so extensive that English could emerge in the years ahead as a medium of intra-ethnic communication.

The linguistic behaviour of the Indians as regards English can on several levels be seen as extremely advantageous to the community. Indian participation in English-medium education has been responsible for the fact that, though only 7 per cent of the population, they constituted almost 6.5 per cent of the university population in 1980; the Malays, though 15 per cent of the population, represented only 2.5 per cent of the university population. However, it must be noted that the Indians in the university population is a highly selected group. The proportion of Indians in the civil service and the professions far exceeds their proportion to the total population. The 1967 Report on Civil Service Statistics showed that 11.5 per cent of all Division I jobs were held by Indians, while the Malays were under-represented in Division I (0.4 per cent) and over-represented in Division IV (64.9 per cent), which is the lowest. English-medium education has been advantageous to Indians in the past in entrenching them in middle-class positions; the continued importance of English in Singapore will work to their advantage and should help them to consolidate their position vis-a-vis other language groups. As English competence is highly associated with income and status mobility and English is on its way to becoming Singapore’s dominant language, the Indian community’s competence in English will therefore provide even further opportunities for group and individual advancement.

What of language behaviour in the context of educational competition? It is probable that it is Indian participation in English medium education that has resulted in the high participation of Indians in tertiary education which has largely been in English. Chang (1974) has noted that 1.3 per cent of the total population went to university, compared to 1.9 per cent of the Indian community; he also noted that the proportion of Indian girls in tertiary education far exceeds their ratio to the population.

Since it is the education system that the “loss” in the use of Tamil is taking place, an examination of the school situation would be fruitful. Those concerned with the status of Tamil (for example, the Tamils Representative Council) have noted that the “loss” results
from the lack of opportunity to learn Tamil as a second language in school. An alternative hypothesis could be advanced. The Singapore school system is language-biased and progress upwards in the system is dependent upon language attainment. Pupils need to attain C6 in their second language in order to gain admission to the university. Is it not probable that sensible language choice in this context implies taking on languages that are easily coped with? Here possibly is one reason for the popularity of Malay among Indians. It is felt that Malay is an easier language to master—the Romanized script, extensive borrowing of vocabulary from English, extensive contact situations that would allow use of Malay learnt—these among other reasons suggest that the notion may not be ill-founded. The home-support for Tamil argument advanced by Tamil advocates is easily disposed of. Is it likely to be significant above primary level Tamil? What percentage of Indian parents who went to Singapore schools in the fifties and sixties can, for instance, read the local Tamil daily? It would, of course, need to be empirically demonstrated that the Indian child would do better in Malay than in Tamil; even if he did no worse, would there not be advantage in offering Malay because of its greater utility?

In Singapore, the value of the mother tongue is seen existing in its ability to provide a living link to the ethnic culture, an understanding of which would provide the values and norms that would prevent “deculturation”. Mr Devan Nair, now President of Singapore and one who has taken an active interest in community affairs, has argued that “the future prevalence and use of the Tamil language in Singapore is very much dependent upon parental attitudes”. He has noted that “if parents of Tamil origin do no encourage their children to opt for Tamil as a second language, the use of Tamil must inevitably decline, to the cultural detriment not only of Singaporean of Indian origin but of Singapore as a whole” (Nair, 1977). Devan Nair’s argument was in essence that though the Indian languages were in fact different, Indians shared a common cultural heritage and he hoped that some non-Tamil speakers might see the wisdom of accepting the Tamil language if they regarded it not merely as a vehicle for Tamil culture but also as a vehicle for the maintenance and preservation of Indian cultural values in Singapore.

If we accept the above, rational decision-making as regards choice of language cannot be viewed from the economic perspective alone. In the case of Tamil in Singapore, it is the cultural, not the economic or demographic, reasons that will have to be pushed to ensure the survival of the language. The government has chosen to stress the language-culture-race equation, seen in the detailing of the mother tongue appropriate to each community, and has emphasized the need to preserve and strengthen each ethnic group’s identification with its culture. Community leaders argue that a loss of Tamil competence will inevitably lead to a loss of ethnicity. Thus, the loss of mother tongue competence is seen as likely to reflect poorly on the group and to suggest lack of caring about its unique ethnicity. This in turn could have an effect on inter-ethnic relationships.

For Tamil—it needs to be stressed—can only be a living, not a textbook, language when it has a vital cultural tradition to sustain it. The crucial question is how this cultural tradition can be kept alive and well. Exhortation itself will count for little unless a cultural enhancement policy is developed to go hand in hand with the language promotion policy. While in the foreseeable future, some cultural inspiration must continue to be sought from Tamil Nadu, many aspects of Tamil Nadu life are irrelevant to Singapore. The systematic development of Tamil language and literacy studies at the highest academic levels is stymied by the lack of a Tamil Studies Department at the National University of Singapore. The smallness of the market inevitably results only in the emergence of a small number of books and magazines in Tamil authored in Singapore. Improvements need to be made to the Tamil language press, the promotion of both folk and classical forms of music, drama, and dance needs to be stepped up; and the improvement of locally produced Tamil programmes over the
Singapore Broadcasting Corporation is an urgent necessity. Without such inputs, the efforts to teach Tamil will come to little and Lambert’s characterization that such speakers are “penalized” will come true. There is some evidence already that such a realization has taken root. Teachers of Tamil and producers of Tamil programmes are to be sent abroad for further training. Though the Tamil press needs upgrading, some local publishing of Tamil books is taking place. Cultural organizations like the Indian Fine Arts Society are being given a new lease of life in the wake of greater funds being made available to cultural activity.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that the Tamil language in Singapore is in a state of uncertainty. It appears to have been declining in usage up until 1975, when there was an apparent upswing, though still not reaching the 1957 levels. It is also true that Tamil is still not widely used among Tamils and others of South Indian origin.

Literacy rates for Tamil had increased up until 1980 (when data were compiled for this study) and if the current trend emphasizing the learning of Tamil as a second language in schools is to continue, Tamil may become the only dominant Indian language in Singapore. Despite these positive signs, Tamil may only move to a point where not more than 55 to 60 per cent of the Indian population will be literate in the language. Measures undertaken by social organizations may not be sustained over a longer period of time if structural support to entrench the language in Singapore continues to lag behind. These structural measures may be in the form of support for the language at the institutions of higher learning as well as strengthening the position of the language in the mass media.

The position of Tamil in Singapore may have to continue to be watched closely.

**Notes**

1. Though it is accepted that the various Indian languages represented in Singapore are all important in themselves, the fact is that most of them have very few speakers. As Tamil is far and away the dominant language, this paper looks at language issues within the Indian community from the perspective of Tamil. Nevertheless, it is useful to keep in mind that the various language groups have made serious attempts to maintain the use of their languages within their respective communities. The Malayalees, for instance, have their own daily newspaper while the Bengalis and Punjabis maintain language classes. The case of Punjabi is especially noteworthy of further examination for an explicit religious reason exists for language maintenance in that the Sikh scriptures are recorded in Punjabi.

2. Unpublished figures released by the Ministry of Education indicate that about 40 to 50 per cent of the pupils taking Tamil as a second language (TL2) dropped out between Primary 6 and Secondary 4 during 1976-80. About 85 per cent of the potential TL2 students dropped out between Secondary 4 and the GCE Advanced Level examination between the years 1976 and 1980 (Mani, 1982).

3. A survey of passengers’ use of various languages during 116 bus trips found for the Indians that with Indian conductors 56.9 per cent used Tamil, 31.4 per cent used Malay, and 11.8 per cent used English. It also showed that 5.2 per cent of the Indians used Hokkien, Singapore’s predominant Chinese dialect, with Chinese conductors.

4. A *Straits Times* report (4 October 1980) revealed the following breakdown of the total university population, according to selected subjects: law 21.2 per cent, medicine 11 per cent, professional engineers, 5.9 per cent, pharmacists 3.7 per cent, and accountants 2.3 per cent. Statistics of Indian students at the University of Singapore (1979-80) reveal the
following percentages: law 14 per cent, medicine 7.6 per cent, dentistry 5.4 per cent, chemical engineering 4.6 per cent, pharmacy 2.2 per cent, and accountants 1.5 per cent, showing that Indians were well represented in the professions.

5. Note that this does not exhaust the multilingualism of the Indians. Though languages such as Malayalam, Telegu, Kannada, and Tamil share common linguistic roots, they do have quite different scripts and extensive literatures and that considerable differences exist between Dravidian and non-Dravidian Indian languages. Thus, a Sikh child studying Tamil is in a quite different position from a Cantonese-speaking child studying Mandarin in school. Many Malayalees have considerable oral fluency in Tamil.

6. Devan Nair was a prominent trade union leader, once Member of Parliament, now President. He is a Malayalee married to a Tamil. His involvement of Mr Dhanabalan, Singapore’s Foreign Minister, Professor S. Jayakumar, Minister of State for Law, and Mr M.K.A. Jabbar, Member of Parliament, in the newly formed Tamil Language and Cultural Society is an indication of concern at the highest levels with the language position of the Indians. Others on the committee include prominent non-Tamil speakers.

7. This was the thrust taken by the Tamils Representative Council and the Singapore Tamil Teachers’ Union in their attempts to have Religious Knowledge in general, and Hindu Studies in particular, taught in Tamil to students taking Tamil as a second language. For a detailed argument of their position, see Peravai (Bulletin of the Tamils Representative Council) 8 (1982).

8. Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the Prime Minister, in a speech in 1978 linking language and culture said, “… a person who gets deculturalized … loses his self-confidence. He suffers a sense of deprivation. For optimum performance a man must know himself and the world. I may speak the English language better than the Chinese language because I learned English early in life. But I will never be an Englishman in a thousand generations and I have not got the Western value system inside; mine is an Eastern value system.”

References