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## TAMIL EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE - ITS ACHIEVEMENTS, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

### INTRODUCTION

The two decades since 1959, perhaps the most momentous in our Republic's history, witnessed the beginning of a fundamental transformation in the attitudes and values of our people. A politically more stable, economically affluent, and a more closely knit society in the emergence inevitably brought about changes, significantly voluntarily, in the educational scene.

The trend towards English medium schools in the last decade affected the Chinese Malay and Tamil media Schools and the numerically small Tamil medium primary schools ceased to attract Primary One admissions now for the last four years. To us this phenomenon is an intelligent and imaginative response to the changing milieu and the challenges of our time.

It is in this context, that we propose noting, however, that the Goh Report on Education is the catalyst that moved the Tamil Language Society of the University of Singapore to organise this seminar, to look at Tamil education - its achievements, problems and prospects - in a broader perspective. That the Tamil Language Society should undertake this task speaks well of its members and is a tribute to our national policy in engendering respect and love for mother tongue while accepting English as the dominant language in our republic.

We congratulate the organisers and thank them for their invitation to present this paper today.

### TAMIL EDUCATION

We have taken a broader definition of Tamil education to include the teaching of Tamil as a second language and Tamil Literature. Teaching of Tamil and one or more subjects through Tamil, many would readily accept, as education in Tamil although we recognise that some might well argue otherwise.

Putting aside the issue of definition we propose to deal firstly with achievements, secondly with some of the major problems and finally with the prospects of Tamil education in our republic.

## ACHIEVEMENTS IN TAMIL EDUCATION

While enrolment in Tamil medium schools has been falling in the last two decades, the number of pupils offering Tamil as a second language, the number of Tamil language teachers in the service, the language instruction time and language exposure time have considerably increased.

### Pupils Offering Tamil as a Second Language

In 1958 some 6000 pupils in primary schools and 400 pupils in secondary schools offered Tamil as a second language. Today there are 11000 pupils in primary schools and 4600 pupils in secondary schools, nearly a two-fold increase at primary level and a nine-fold increase at secondary level. And at Pre-University level some 300 students are offering Tamil as a subject at Principal or Subsidiary level.

### Tamil Teachers

In 1958 there were 60 Tamil teachers but today there are some 278 Tamil teachers including teachers-in-training, more than a four-fold increase.

The Institute of Education now provides training for Tamil language teachers at 'O' and 'A' levels. There are now 103 teachers-in-training. These students are not only trained to teach Tamil but also to teach other subjects in English. This makes it possible for them to be deployed more widely and become effective bilingual teachers.

### School Facilities

A large number of Government primary schools offer Tamil as a second language; six secondary schools offer Tamil within the school and there are twelve Tamil centres for other secondary school students to study Tamil. Tamil is also taught as a subject at four junior colleges and one centre.

As the second language was made compulsory at PSLE in 1963, at 'O' level in 1969, and will be made compulsory at pre-university level in 1980, nearly all students offering Tamil as a second language in schools or as a subject at 'A' level take it for their examinations. The number of pupils offering Tamil as a second language at PSLE rose from 840 in 1960 to 2111 in 1978. Likewise the figure at 'O' level rose from 150 in 1958 to 1493 in 1978.

As a second language the time allocated to Tamil has increased from 14% to 40% by 1975.

The policy of equal treatment to the four official languages has accorded Tamil language and Tamil teachers a comparable status and equality in terms of salaries, facilities and staff development.

All these developments are significant but more could be done, in our view, to enhance Tamil education in our republic. To an examination of some of these major problems we now turn.

### PROBLEMS IN TAMIL EDUCATION

It is national policy to encourage and promote education throughout the school system in English and the mother tongue. Yet it is paradoxical that a considerable number of ethnic Tamils have not responded positively to the challenges and opportunities of our nation.

#### Parental attitudes

That Singapore, as an Asian nation, while English speaking, will and should maintain an Asian identity is beyond question. Nor can we be anything else or less culturally. Then, if what we can and must be, is accepted, then our efforts must be directed to the attainment of that goal. Fortunately that goal is not alien to our contemporary position. All that is required of Tamils is simply the maintenance and continued use of the Tamil language at home and at school.

English, as has been pointed out, by the "Goh Report" will increasingly become the dominant language in our Republic. But the status and use of Mandarin, Malay and Tamil need not be relegated. Indeed the adoption of different levels of competence in the mother tongue based on the ability of pupils and increased exposure to it by lengthening schooling by one year, by making pre-primary bilingual education universal by 1983, the status and use of mother tongue in the education system is assured and therefore cannot but be enhanced.

The major problem in our view, in attaining this target is the indifference if not the complacency of a large number of Tamils themselves. Some of them are not offering Tamil as a second language for various reasons. If the numbers offering Tamil decline then the Tamil community and Singapore will be impoverished of a major South Asian cultural heritage.

Mr Devan Nair, at the first-seminar organised by this society commented on this problem and I quote:

"The future prevalence and use of the Tamil language in our Republic is very much dependent on parental attitudes. If parents of Indian origin do not encourage their children to opt for Tamil as a second language, the use of Tamil language must inevitably decline".

This, to our minds, would be the most crucial factor in determining the future of Tamil in our Republic. It is not within the realm of practical politics for any government in a democracy to legislate on the use of language unless, the people whom it affects, accept and use that language in their daily lives. Neither policy nor measures can of themselves develop the personal and intimate response of a people to their own mother tongue. It has to develop from within and policy and measures can only help in this process.

It therefore behoves, the ethnic Tamils in Singapore to a more serious pursuit of Tamil language as a second language in our schools.

### Facilities

While substantial progress has been made in providing facilities for the study of Tamil, as a second language in the school system we are equally mindful of the deficiencies and inadequacies in the provision of Tamil education in our Republic.

The "Goh Report" has ushered in a new era in education. It is now possible for the capable, to study the mother tongue at the same level as English or at the second language level or even at a lower level. Primarily the ability of the pupils will determine the level of proficiency in the mother tongue. Adequate facilities will no doubt be provided in our schools. In doing so the Ministry will have to look into the feasibility of providing TL<sub>2</sub> instruction in schools nearest to pupils' homes and in some of our premier schools including the aided schools. In fact this has been a problem where parents wanting to send their children to mission schools have had to forgo the study of their mother tongue. This is one area, where the Ministry could help by making provision for Tamil as a second language in more primary schools.

At 'A' level, four junior colleges and a school centre provide instruction in Tamil as a subject at subsidiary or principal level and this is commendable.

However at secondary level very few schools have made provision to teach Tamil, with the result that many secondary students have to attend Tamil centres in the opposite session. Needless to point out the difficulties and loss of time these students have to endure. It would be advantageous to provide TL<sub>2</sub> within the school the student attends.

As proficiency in a second language is mandatory for progress in the education system it is all the more important to provide for Tamil in more primary and secondary schools.

### Personnel

There are now some 278 Tamil language teachers most of whom have an 'O' or 'A' level qualification and are professionally trained or undergoing training. But there are few graduates teaching at secondary level. In order to raise the standard of instruction in Tamil, it is suggested, that graduates be deployed at upper secondary level.

A staff development scheme could be drawn up to provide for suitably qualified teachers to pursue a university course with Tamil as one of the subjects.

The scheme could also take into account the recommendations of the Goh Report and the views of our Prime Minister on moral education and the need to teach Indian history.

### Resources

Tamil textbooks written by our own authors are now available at primary level, but at secondary level we are still depending on imported books. There is therefore a need for professionals to develop teaching materials and for the ministry to initiate and support this enterprise.

### Department of Tamil Studies

It has been noted that some 300 students at pre-university level are pursuing Tamil as a principal or subsidiary subject in four junior colleges and one school centre.

It is our national policy to get Singaporeans to become effectively bilingual where practical, in two of the official languages, namely English and the mother tongue. For this purpose the study of a second language is compulsory throughout the school system and more importantly, upward mobility in the education system as already noted earlier, is now predicated on competence in English and the mother tongue.

The provision of Tamil education since 1959 has kept pace with educational development in our Republic and is now possible to study Tamil as a subject from primary to pre-university level. One more step needs to be taken to complete the development of Tamil education which began with the establishment of Umar Pulavar Tamil High School in 1960.

And that step when taken will usher in a glorious era of multilingualism and equality both in spirit and practice in our Republic. We therefore propose, for serious study, the establishment of a Department of Tamil Studies in the University of Singapore.

Such a department when established could act as a national instrument for the preservation and development of Tamil as one of our Republic's official languages; enhance the status of, and encourage the use of Tamil; provide for continuing education in Tamil for those who intend to pursue it up to university level; develop language expertise and resources and train potential graduate Tamil teachers for our schools. The department need only offer Tamil as one of the subjects of study in the under-graduate programme. It will take its place along side the Malay and Chinese studies departments of the University of Singapore.

The establishment of such a department, and more importantly, the survival of that department when established, will depend entirely on the Tamil community. Financial resources have to be found and student support must be forthcoming if this project is to become viable. We believe, that in either respect, there will be substantial and continuing support.

#### PROSPECTS

The foregoing analysis would show that education in Tamil has come a long way since 1959; there is little doubt that government policy by and large in providing equal official status to Tamil and encouraging its use has enhanced the status of Tamil. Of major importance, has been the policy of bilingualism especially, in the insistence on the reasons why the mother tongue should be retained and mastered. The call to retain and develop for cultural reasons, has struck a responsive chord in Tamils whose love for their language and pride in their unique cultural heritage are deeply rooted.

That said we must recognise that problems exist in the task of promoting Tamil amongst the Indian population. Rather uniquely, Tamil is the only language to have slowly lost speakers in the recent decades. Eddie Kuo states that comparing 1978 with 1972 data there has been a drop from 86.7% to 79.1% in claimed competence in Tamil. He says Tamil is the only language showing declining communicativity even for intra-ethnic communication amongst the Indians. Further, it has been estimated that currently only about 50% (11,000 out of 22,000) of Tamil pupils at the primary level and about 32.5% (4,600 out of 13,000) at the secondary level offer Tamil as a second language. If these trends are allowed to continue unchecked then we can expect for the future, greater losses in Tamil-speaking competence.

The reasons for such a situation may be variously attributed. A principal cause does appear to be the difficulties pupils face in offering Tamil as a second language in many of our schools; Tamil centres though cost-wise an efficient alternative is nonetheless, less than adequate and the fact that some parents do not choose to avail themselves of facilities is proof that this answer is not satisfactory. There is yet another reason, not discussed above that may explain some of the dynamics of language choice among the Indians. It must be remembered that unlike the Chinese (who though divided by dialects are united by a common script) the Indians are a linguistically heterogeneous group - Malayalam Sinhalese, Urdu, Punjabi are different languages. If we add to this mixture the carry-over of the volatility of Indian language politics to Singapore we would not be exaggerating, if we stated that there is bound to be some mutual antipathy among speakers of Indian languages - this can and does lead to non-Tamil speakers within the Indian community preferring Malay (or German, Japanese etc to another Indian language).

Two other reasons may be advanced to explain losses in Tamil medium education. One is the fact that Indians have been represented in English medium education all out of proportion to their numbers. Some Indian migrants came from Madras and Calcutta where there was ample evidence of the advantages of English education especially in the East India Co's service. Some migrants themselves spoke English while others, petty traders, cloth merchants etc had little hesitation in availing themselves of English education for they had the examples of others who through possession of an English-medium education had found security and prosperity. It must not be assumed that this was a case of the community deserting their heritage and language; there is ample evidence of community support and concern for education in Tamil. Rather it can be seen as a rational response to the unique situation that the Tamil community finds itself in.

The Indian community's eager acceptance of English medium education has benefitted the community as a whole. Tamil medium education led only to a dead end. English medium education was the best route to positions in the civil service and the professions and though only 7% of the population our representation in the civil service, in the professions and in higher education is far greater. Current educational trends as outlined in the Goh Report will further enhance the value of English as pointed out earlier. In the light of the above, we can confidently predict that the community as a whole will be able to build upon its advantage since competence in English is highly associated with income and

status mobility. Further, the potential of English as a major, if not the major lingua franca linking the various communities will broaden even further opportunities for Indians who possess English language competence.

If we have no real cause to regret our participation in English medium education at least on economic grounds and if we must face up to some loss of speakers of Tamil given our particular historical circumstances we still have the problem of defining and on that basis ensuring the continuance of Tamil in our society. In this consideration we have to accept as a basic the government's cultural policy which is founded on the continued existence and growth of indigenous languages and culture. This is indeed a responsibility that the government has laid on the shoulders of each community.

If this premise is accepted, then, if only for the purposes of maintaining respect and a place for Tamil language and culture in multi-cultural Singapore, our responsibility for encouraging literacy in and growth of Tamil language and culture is clear. Failure to do this, means seriously damaging the cultural policies of our nation and placing ourselves at a disadvantage vis a vis other ethnic communities. Other arguments can be based on more positive grounds. The Indian cultural heritage, represents a major achievement of Man and insights into such a living tradition can only be beneficial to a nation devoted to cultural pluralism. More significantly, the continuance of such links is important to the psychic health of the Indian community. These cannot be achieved if literacy and competence in Tamil falls. Our community must therefore respond positively to this challenge and build upon the concern manifest in earlier post-war efforts to sustain Tamil medium education.

Detailed proposals will need to be developed and discussed with the Ministry of Education on what changes in policy and practice is needed to improve the quality of education in Tamil. In this paper we have only highlighted some of the problems, Given goodwill and an appreciation of bigger national needs we see no reason why improvements cannot be affected. What could be more profitably done at this Seminar is to examine a new what we as a community should do. The dangers of linguistic factionalism are still with us; we need more willing hands to help in various community projects that collectively express our concern as a Singapore community (in particular various educational and religious projects); we need to see and accept some of the inevitably limitations of being a small community while at the same time safeguarding our legitimate interest and place in the Singapore community. Are we doing

enough to foster healthy cultural development? The question of a place for Tamil language and culture cannot and will not be resolved in the educational stage alone; ultimately it will depend upon the total effort of a small community using its resources intelligently on a whole broad front.

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