

LANGUAGE PROBLEM

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It gives me great pleasure to come before you and address you on what may be called the burning question of the day - the language question. As your programme indicated, I may, in my address, be presenting an aspect which, if not unfamiliar to you, yet is not quite in favour with most of you. I am aware that most of the Christian institutions, but not necessarily most of the Christians, hold the view that both Sinhala and Tamil languages should be declared official languages of Ceylon and that both must be accorded parity of status. Your invitation to me to speak at this meeting however shows that you are prepared to listen to and give due consideration to the point of view of those like me, who held that view that for various reasons, Sinhala only must be the official language of this country. Your Teacher, Lord Jesus Christ, for whom incidentally I have the greatest regard, has asked you to "Do unto others as you would that they would do unto you." I believe that this teaching implies that it is the duty of every Christian to try to understand the other man's point of view earnestly and sympathetically before he accepts or rejects that point of view. In other words it is a Christian's duty to put himself in the other man's place, before he approves or condemns the other man's idea or his actions. How else would one know what the "other would have done unto you" in a given circumstance? I believe it is in that genuine Christian spirit that you have invited me to address you and I take this opportunity to thank the organizers sincerely for their invitation.

Whatever doctrinal differences there may be between Buddhism and Christianity, there is a feature that is common to both. That is, the ethical outlook. Both religions teach that in every deed of ours, nay, in every thought and word of ours, we must be mindful of morality; and that we should always be guided by ethical principles rather than by expediency. Both teachings are opposed to the doctrine "the end justifies the means" The language problem in this country in the ultimate analysis is an ethical problem. It is a problem that involves relations between man and man and between community and community - and in these relations it is essential that the ethical stand point should take precedence over others. It behoves us who are now faced with a grave problem, a human problem, therefore to apply strictly ethical norms or principles in finding a solution to it. It also behoves us to find solutions which would make for unity and solidarity of the diverse people who have this country as their fatherland. It is needless to say that the solution to the problem must also be in accord with democratic ideas and practices.

MEANING OF INDEPENDENCE

Sir Arthur Keith, the eminent anthropologist says in his book "Essays on

Human Evolution”:

“An evolutionary unit, be it a community tribe or nation, must, to fulfil its destiny, maintain not only its organizations and continuity, but also its independence - its right to work out its own destiny. If a nation loses its independence, then it has no longer the power to develop its separate destiny or to pursue the policy of self- determination”.

The natural corollary to this thesis is that, that the first and foremost obligation on the part of the leaders of a nation which regains its independence is to take all steps to work out and develop the nation's separate destiny in keeping with the legitimate aims and aspirations of the large mass of the people.

Now, for nearly 450 years our country was under foreign domination and our destiny was determined for us by those foreign powers. These foreign powers set out with grim determination to destroy our language, our culture, our religion and our way of life and impose on us their language, their culture, their religion and their way of life. They gave power and privilege to those elements in the country that were amenable to their policies. They discriminated against and actually suppressed and impoverished the larger masses that did not take kindly to foreign domination.

The historical circumstances being such that first thing our leaders should have done was to take all steps to work out and develop the nations destiny; firstly, by rehabilitating those people who were impoverished by centuries of foreign domination and secondly by taking steps to fulfil the legitimate aims and aspirations of the people. Now what are these aims and aspirations?

With the dawn of independence, the people of this country expected to see the material wealth of the nation pass from the hands of non-nationals into the hands of nationals, the education system organized on a national basis so as to give every child equal levels of opportunities in education; the administrative system so reorganized as to make it a genuine public service; the administration of the country conducted in the language of the vast majority of the people; the language, the culture and the religion of the people which suffered greatly under foreign dominations rehabilitated and given their due place etc. etc.

But none of these aims and aspirations were fulfilled. The only perceptible change was in the political set-up. The party that obtained political power was content to go on merely with the Colonial pattern of administration, and the Colonial policy of laissez faire - of letting things be as they are.

Thus Independence came to mean nothing to the mass of the people - or at best it came to mean an impressive ceremony and military parade at Galle Face Green once a year. At its worst it came to mean an inefficient brown bureaucracy ----- in place of the efficient white bureaucracy.

Meanwhile India and Burma which gained independence almost at the same time were fast changing from the Colonial pattern to a national pattern that suited the genius of the peoples of the countries. In their economic policy, in their educational policy, in reorganizing their administrative machinery, in their language policy and in their attitude towards indigenous culture, they took a bold line of action in keeping with the aims and aspiration of the vast majority of the people. India for example declared that Hindi would be the official language of the country within 15 years and began to take active steps to further that policy. Burma declared for Burmese and promised a gradual change from English to Burmese.

Ceylon was the only country which carried on the administration in a language that was confined to about 7% of the population and which comprised the privileged section of the community. There was not even a suggestion that a change to Sinhala, the language spoken by the vast majority of the people, would be taken in the near future.

Why was it that the Governments of post independent Ceylon ignored the aims and aspiration of the people, having got into power by exploiting those very aims and aspirations?

In the first place we obtained our independence without a struggle; by petitioning and appealing to the Imperial power. A struggle such as the one that took place in India and Burma would have meant the larger masses of the people actively participating in it and national leaders being thrown out in the course of that struggle. Such a leadership would not have tolerated the continuance of the Colonial pattern.

In the second place, the country's leaders during the post-Independence period were men who by virtue of the denationalized education - they had received, (with a few exceptions), had lost all contact with the common people, who in fact looked down on the common people and who therefore were not in sympathy with the aims and aspirations of those people.

In the third place the country's administration was in the control of a brown bureaucracy bred in the Colonial tradition and the members of which also were the products of the denationalized system of education. They too were hostile to the people. These bureaucrats were ignorant of the national language - in fact they prided in their ignorance of it. The first thing India did was to get rid of these bureaucrats who could not fit themselves to the new set-up. We however embraced them, and gave them more power and more privileges.

One of the first things our so-called leaders should have done was to declare in what language the administration of the country should be done, and in what time the change over should take place. Indian national leaders took care to do so. So did the Burmese leaders. Our leaders who had no vision, who had no idea of the aims and aspirations of the people, and who were prone to be guided by a bureaucracy created by the Colonial power took the line of least resistance and carried on the administration in English.

PUBLIC OPINION

The people however began to murmur. They found that the so-called independence meant nothing to them. Things were being done in the same old way, administration carried out in the same old alien language. There was the same old discrimination against the Sinhala educated. There was the same old attitude of disregard of and disrespect for the people among the members of the bureaucracy. They still constituted a favoured class and a high caste. The murmurs of the people, however, soon developed into loud protests.

It was at this stage that the ruling clique which was aptly described by Mr. Martin Wickremasinghe as the “Brahman Caste” conceived the idea of “the use of Swabasha” in administration. Swabasha was a very vague term. The large majority of Sinhalese people thought that by the word “Swabasha” the Government meant the Sinhala language. The Tamil people thought that the word implied the use of Tamil as an official language. What is more, no assurance was given as from what date the switch over to “Swabasha” would take place. No action was taken to implement the policy either.

What actually the U.N.P. Government wanted to do was to carry on the administration in English. There would naturally be a wrangle between the Sinhalese and Tamils over the language question - and no agreement would perhaps be possible - and that state of affairs would give the privileged classes the opportunity to conduct the administration of the country in English as long as they could.

If we had true patriots, if we had men who had the genuine interest of the people at heart, if we had people who had vision and who desired to unite the various peoples of this country while preserving their cultural identity there was no question about the choice of the language of administration.

The Census taken about five years after we gained independence i.e. 1953 showed that the citizens of this country were distributed as follows:-

Sinhalese:	5,621,100 (79.3%)
Ceylon Tamils:	908,700 (12.8%)
Ceylon Moors:	468,100 (6.6%)
Malays:	28,700 (0.4%)
Burghers:	44,000 (0.6%)
Others:	20,000 (0.3%)
TOTAL:	7,090,600

It was obvious that the language spoken by nearly 80% of the people should have been declared the only official language according to all canons of justice and democracy. Democratic practice as well as a sense of justice also demanded that adequate time should have been given to the 20% non-Sinhalese to make themselves conversant with the official language. Unfortunately for us however, our so-called leaders were blind to these facts.

GOVERNMENT AND LANGUAGE

I must digress here a bit to discuss briefly the various levels in which a Government has to use a language. A democratic Government comprises:

- (a) A Legislature elected by the people,
 - (b) A Cabinet elected by the Legislative,
 - (c) An Executive controlled by the Cabinet.
1. The Executive may be sub-divided into the Judiciary and Administration.
 - Now language has to be used by the Legislature in its discussions and in its Enactments.
 - By the Cabinet or Ministers in their directives to various Government departments.
 - By the Executives (i) Government Departments in the correspondence with the Ministers (2) In their correspondence with one another - in other words in inter-departmental correspondence, (3) In their routine minuting and keeping records (4) And in their correspondence with the public (5) and in the case of the Judiciary in the hearing of cases that come before it.
 - A language has also to be used by a Government in its correspondence with foreign Governments and Agencies.
 2. If you will examine these various levels you will see that:
 - In the case of legislature in Ceylon we have for sometime more at least to allow the use of all the languages, English, Sinhala and Tamil, in its discussions. A time may come when we may have members of Parliament some of whom may know Sinhala only, while there may be others who know Tamil only. Bilingualism or even Trilingualism is inevitable in such circumstances. The ideal state of affairs would be to use one common language understood by all members, but that, may take some time more.
 - In the Ministry to Ministry and Ministry to Department and in inter-departmental correspondence it will be necessary to use one and only one language if we are to avoid utter confusion and even a breakdown in the entire administrative machinery.
 3. In the routine minuting and keeping records within a department, only one language will have to be used if we are to avoid confusion - similarly, just imagine a Tamil clerk minuting in Tamil, a Sinhalese junior officer making his observations on it in Sinhala and the Burgher Head of Department giving his decision on it in English!

4. In the correspondence with the public, the convenience of the public has to be seen to - and until such time as the non-Sinhalese learn that language, the correspondence with public will have to be carried on in Sinhala, Tamil or English as the case may be.
5. And so it is with the Judiciary. The witnesses who appear before Courts will have to be examined in the language of the witness, and the proceedings conducted either in Sinhala and/or Tamil. But the records will have to be kept in the one language for facility of reference in the case of appeals.
6. The correspondence with other Governments will necessarily have to be done in English.

It will be seen from this analysis that at the majority of levels, it is very necessary that only one language should be used in the transaction of business - and that there are also a few levels at which other languages obtaining in the country have to be used. The language used in Ministry to Ministry correspondence, Ministry to Department correspondence, inter-departmental correspondence and in keeping its minutes, records can be said to be the official language. There is no gainsaying that in this country, that official language should be the Sinhala language.

OPPOSITION

The opposition to declaring Sinhala as the Official Language has come mainly from the Ceylon Tamils who constitute 12.8% of the population. The reason for this is that the Ceylon Tamils - especially the Jaffna Tamils have come to regard the Public Service as their industry, and they naturally fear that the dominant position they now occupy in the Public Service will be lost to them if and when Sinhala is made the official language. It is no secret that the Tamils occupy anything between 30% to 80% of posts in various departments and compared to the other communities they are essentially a privileged people.

Thus when the Commission on Higher Education (at least the majority of the members of the Commission) expressed the view that the administration of the country should be carried out in one language - the language of the majority - and that all our Higher Education should be carried out in that language - there was a chorus of protests from the North. The Government then asked His Excellency the Governor-General to advise the Commission to adhere to the Government policy of the languages, namely the use of both Sinhala and Tamil in administration.

I need not describe at length how Sir John Kotelawala promised parity of status for Tamil at a meeting in Jaffna - how the Samasamajist leader, Dr. N.M.Perera, challenged Sir John to implement his policy of parity - how there was agitation throughout the country for Sinhala only as the Official Language - how the U.N.P. reversed its two language policies - how the M.E.P. promised to make Sinhala the only official language - how they came

into power on that pledge. I do not also propose to refer to the tortuous policies, and vacillating tactics adopted by the Government after it came into power and the ultimate racial riots which came as a result of that vacillating policy on the part of the Government. All that is recent history.

In the course of my talk earlier, I said that whatever solution we find to the language problem must firstly be just and reasonable and that it must be in accord with democratic theory and practice. I shall take the criterion of democracy first.

In the course of an article in the Hibbert Journal on the "Meaning of Democracy" an eminent Christian, Dr. Reginald Lennard, Fellow of W dham College, says:

"Government by the people means that the will of the majority must prevail, but it means also that the will should be conditioned by fellow feeling for all minorities, by recognition of the fact that they too are a part of the people, by the "political sense" which refrains from outraging them or destroying their will to remain loyal fellow citizens of the majority. Not all that profess and call themselves democrats appreciate all that this implies. For it implies that all class war undemocratic, whether the class assailed is large or small, and whether its members be Jews or Gentiles, rich or poor, and it implies that all minorities should be treated as part of the people, but also that it is their duty to behave as such, and not cling to privileges which mark them off from their fellows nor let clannishness grow stronger than good citizenship".

Have the Sinhala by making Sinhala the only official language, destroyed the will of the minorities to re- main loyal citizens of the majority? My answer is an emphatic No. For the reasons I stated earlier it was necessary and in fact inevitable that the language spoken by the vast majority of people be made the only official language. But the Sinhalese were prepared and are prepared to give sufficient time and facilities to those members of the minority group who want to enter the Public Service to learn the Official Language.

It has been said that the Tamil candidate will be handicapped in the race for Government jobs if he is made to study both Sinhala and Tamil and made to sit for higher examinations in Sinhala. But it is also a fact that owing to the discrimination exercised by the Colonial power in favour of the Tamils and against the Sinhalese, that the latter have been handicapped by a greater measure in the race for Government jobs. The position that the Tamils held in the Public Service is such that they will be in advance of other communities for even 10 more years, even if recruitment of Tamils to the Public Service is altogether stopped. Will not the introduction of Sinhala as the official language be in a way a restitution of justice to a people to whom justice had been denied for centuries!

The Sinhalese do not contemplate placing any impediment in the way of any member of a minority community in the highest position in the country

provided he learns the official language and provided also he is loyal to the people of the country!

The Tamil language and the Tamil culture will in no way be affected adversely by reason of the fact that Sinhalese is made the official language. The Tamil child would be educated through the medium of his mother tongue in the primary and post primary stages; the official language being introduced as a compulsory subject in the post primary classes. He will be thus well grounded in Tamil before he proceeds to his higher education in Sinhalese. This is in fact the practice obtaining in most democratic countries with a heterogeneous population.

KANDYANS

In all its records the Government describes the Kandyan Sinhalese as a separate group. They comprise over 30% of the entire population. Now let us look at the Civil List, Clerical Services Seniority list etc., and find out what percentage of the total of each service is represented by Kandyans, you will be surprised to know that with the sole exception of D.R.O. Service and the Co-operative Department in no service do they exceed 2% of the total strength, while as I said earlier, Tamils occupy anything between 30% and 90%. Now let us ask ourselves who is it that should have a grievance. The Kandyans or the Tamils?

Let us remember that it is the Kandyan who fought for our independence with three foreign powers for nearly 300 years. Let us remember that it is the Kandyan who preserved our culture and our religion to a great extent. Let us also remember that they were the people whose lands were expropriated, who were suppressed and to whom equal levels of educational opportunities were denied for centuries. Our sense of justice and fairplay, may I say gratitude must make us realise the urgent need of rehabilitating the Kandyan peasantry and giving their children equal levels of educational opportunities.

Competition can be and must be always between equals. It will be realized that the Kandyan child who has very poor educational opportunities can never hope to compete with the Tamil child who has excellent educational opportunities. The Prime Minister by allowing the Tamils to sit for Public Examinations in Tamil for all times has made the position of the Kandyan child worse.

CHRISTIAN DUTY

The Christians in this country have a special duty to fight for justice and fairplay for the underprivileged people, for it is the early Christian Missionaries, who had the monopoly of education and who took certain communities under their wings and educated them while totally neglecting the majority community. St. Paul has said "There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision or uncircumcision, or Scythian, Bond nor free - but Christ is all and in all". Evidently the early Missionaries ignored the words of the Apostle and followed the dictates of the Imperial power who wanted to build up

certain minorities against the dissident majority. By and by these minorities obtained power, position and privilege - and naturally they try their best to cling to these privileges, even under independence. The language question has become a problem solely because the Tamils, by and long have become a privileged community.

There are those Tamils who say that the Tamils must sever all connections with the Sinhalese and determine their own destiny - But they forget that their destiny is linked up with the Sinhalese. The census figures show that fact very clearly.

In 1927 there were only 62,987 Ceylon Tamils in the predominant Sinhalese Provinces. In 1946 the number increased to 160,987 and in 1953 to 230,194. In other words, 25% of the total Ceylon Tamil population was living in Sinhalese areas.

That is to say in the years between 1921 - 1946 the increase of Tamil population in Sinhalese areas was 155% while the general increase registered was only 49%. In the years between 1946-53, the increase of Tamil population in Sinhalese areas was 42% when the general increase registered was only 21%. What better evidence to show that the Tamils were gradually drifting down South, and making those parts their home.

There is one more point I would like to refer to. One of the four points, in the Reasonable Use of Tamil language is to educate the Tamil child in Tamil and Sinhalese child in Sinhalese from the kindergarten to the University and beyond. I would ask you to address your mind to this question and ask yourselves whether this type of education in isolation, in water-tight compartments would be conducive to the unity and the solidarity of the country.

In the matter of racial relations in the modern world what we should aim at is diversity in unity. That can be only achieved by educating the children in their primary and post-primary stages in the medium of mother tongue, with the official language as a compulsory subject in the post-primary stage, and by making the official language the medium of instructions in the University stage. The four point programme of the Prime Minister will no doubt achieve diversity - but I am afraid never unity. It is the road to disunity and disintegration.