

# *The Future Official Languages of Ceylon*

## National Languages of the Country as Media of Instruction and Administration.

### I. *Introductory.*

**I**N Ceylon today there are two problems of great importance concerning language, namely, (1) the introduction of the national languages as media of instruction and (2) the proposal to adopt them as official languages of the country. The second of these can well be regarded as the first definite step taken to remove a long-standing anomaly—the anomaly of having universal franchise in a country where all administrative, legislative and judicial functions are carried on through the medium of a foreign language. The proper handling of these two problems seems to require careful investigation and far-sighted planning. They are often found to be regarded as constituting two independent subjects isolated from each other and related to nothing outside their legal boundaries. But, in point of fact, they are two interdependent subjects both together forming part of a larger one, namely, the future development of the national languages in Ceylon. The proper method of approach would therefore be first to examine the larger question as a whole and then to determine suitable measures according to the needs of its various aspects separately.

2. *Present State of Tamil.* In doing so it is perhaps necessary that a brief reference should be made to the present state of the two national languages. Of these two, Tamil has its home in India. But it also occupies an important position in the public life of Ceylon, though in this country it counts only a small fraction of the total number of its native speakers. Tamil, which is one of the most developed and most copious of Indian languages, has always held its own against the penetrating influence of English. So much so, that it has very few problems, especially here in Ceylon, and hardly any of the difficulties which Sinhalese finds itself called upon to face. At the same time, however, it can easily be linked up with any development scheme which may eventually be evolved. It must be understood, therefore, that if in the following inquiry one finds greater prominence given to Sinhalese than to Tamil, it is not because Tamil is considered less important, but because the case of Sinhalese is more complicated.

3. *Present State of Sinhalese.* Sinhalese is the only language that claims to be indigenous to Ceylon. At least, it has no other home. And it may also be considered to have for long flourished in its homeland as a school subject, though never as one related to life. In no secondary school, and in no University or University College, has it ever been treated as a living language. It is mainly owing to this negligence that Sinhalese has all along been

lagging behind and losing its once marked vitality. The extent of this deterioration can easily be seen from modern writings as well as from modern speech. No language can be hopeful of its very existence, to say nothing of its development or progress, unless it is used for practical purposes of everyday life. Sinhalese, as it stands today, finds no place in the practical affairs of the country. In the administration of Government, in matters legal and judicial, in commerce and industries, in transport and communications, in planting and organized agriculture, —in none of these does Sinhalese perform any important function. It is no wonder, therefore, that the national language of the Sinhalese is from generation to generation being relegated to the background—a subtle and sinister process that threatens to reduce the once elegant and forceful speech to an insignificant patois. Tamil, for one, is more fortunate in this respect. In India it has always maintained its grasping power and its indispensability in practical life, while in Ceylon it has held its own as a commercial language. Sinhalese, comparatively poor and weak in these respects, is being displaced by English, slowly but steadily. The vast popularity of Basic English and of various postal tuition schemes now operating in the country is an eloquent testimony to the unmistakable thirst for English among all classes of people. In the face of this ever increasing and pressing demand for English, the learning of which is admittedly the most profitable, Sinhalese finds it impossible to hold its own. With the introduction of free education in English its pressure on Sinhalese is bound to increase and, what is more, to bring about the extinction of Sinhalese as a living language within the next few generations. No amount of national sentiment can prevent this inevitable result, unless proper measures are immediately adopted to resuscitate and enrich the manifestly declining language. For in the course of recorded history many instances are found in which very powerful languages under similar circumstances ceased to exist. Iberian, which was once spoken over the whole of Spanish Peninsula, is a notable example. No less important was Etruscan, which once exercised great influence on Latin peoples. The latest, and one nearer home, to share the same fate was Egyptian which, superseded by Arabic, ceased in the seventeenth century to function as a living language.

4. *Importance of English.* This is not to say that English learning should be discouraged or suppressed in order that the national languages might develop freely. On the contrary, English should be given every possible encouragement and made as popular as any other subject intended for modern progress. Real national progress in the modern world can never be achieved without learning an international language; and the only such language easily accessible to the people of this country is obviously English, which also happens to be the most useful world language. Nor can the position of English as an official medium be undermined without serious consequences, especially at this juncture.

5. *Why Sinhalese should be revived.* On the other hand, what harm will be done if Sinhalese were to die out and English were to take its place altogether? In theory, at least, and also perhaps in the long run, there can be no great harm, if we are to judge it from the fact that nothing serious happened to the people of Iberian Peninsula, Etruria or Egypt by the extinction of their national languages. In reality, however, there seems to be very little comparison between what is now happening in Ceylon and what had happened in those countries centuries ago. There are both historical and geographical factors to be examined afresh. Without going into those scientific details one can safely say that English, with all its vast popularity and with all the advantages of free education, must take at least five centuries from now to become the domestic speech of the whole Sinhalese population. Even in a country like Wales where, unlike in Ceylon, the sway of English is absolute and has been so for many long centuries, a considerable part of the native population has nothing but the national language for domestic speech. To expect a foreign tongue like English to become the domestic speech of the Sinhalese within two or three generations is something unthinkable. As regards the stability of Tamil, there can be no misgiving whatsoever. So long as there is evidence to show that both Sinhalese and Tamil will persist as domestic languages, so long does it remain our duty to cultivate them. Any negligence on our part cannot but result in denationalization and wholesale intellectual deterioration. It is true that a few families are now using English for their domestic speech, but this manner of usage can hardly assume national proportions.

6. *Suitability of the National Languages for development.* As regards the suitability of Tamil for development for modern use, there can be no question whatever. But can we say the same thing with regard to Sinhalese? Can the damage so far done to the language be repaired within a reasonable length of time? Can the language ever be brought to an efficient standard? Unless there are satisfactory answers to these questions it will be useless trying to design elaborate plans for the purpose of its revival or its development. But the only answers warranted by systematic investigation are fortunately satisfactory: Sinhalese has not yet deteriorated beyond repair. Without going into technical details one may be justified in stating that the modern language still reveals a few hopeful signs, among which are the following:—

- (1) In the first place, the natural idiom of the language, though almost entirely unfamiliar to most modern writers, is not altogether forgotten.
- (2) Secondly, the elasticity and adaptability of the language, though submerged in an ocean of artificiality especially in the hands of modern writers, are still a dependable force.
- (3) Thirdly, the formative apparatus, though inactive at present, has not yet lost its power.

- (4) Fourthly, the language has a rich supply of both homonyms and synonyms which can well be applied to express modern shades of meaning.
- (5) Fifthly, the structure, character and historical development of the language have all been sufficiently examined to ascertain the possible directions of its future growth.
- (6) Sixthly, both enthusiasm and talent are still alive in the country, awaiting organised action to develop the language.

These redeeming features truly exist, and while they exist, an adequate plan properly designed to develop the Sinhalese language can be adopted with confidence. Only, it should be a well thought out plan commensurate with the immediate needs.

7. *Defects in Sinhalese to be remedied.* Sinhalese has many defects which must be removed if it is to function as an efficient instrument of modern thought. Any effort to introduce Sinhalese as a medium of instruction or as an official language, without first making adequate provision to deal with those defects, is bound to end in failure. Tamil does not necessarily share the same difficulty. Some of the more serious defects in Sinhalese which need immediate rectification are as follows:—

- (1) Disregard of idiom. The resuscitation of the language or its proper development will never be possible so long as the present neglect of its natural idiom continues. As a result of the promiscuous use of foreign idiom by most writers of today, and also owing to their wonted artificiality, the language has now lost much of its former vigour and force. If this defect is to be remedied, the present method of teaching Sinhalese, from the very early stages, will have to be revised.
- (2) Absence of a modern prose style. One can see how hard the present day writers are struggling to develop a modern prose style. But one can also see that all their efforts have so far met with failure. Many are the reasons for this unfortunate result. I may be permitted to mention two of them, two outstanding ones: (a) the absence of literary criticism and (b) the lack of training in literary discipline.
- (3) Absence of literary criticism. This defect not only interferes with the development of a modern prose style but also retards the progress of the language generally.
- (4) Lack of training in literary discipline and of instruction in composition. This is too obvious to need any comment.
- (5) Neglect of the formative apparatus. Scientific investigations have more than amply revealed that Sinhalese once possessed

an efficient formative apparatus which has now very nearly gone out of action. This must be revived and amplified if the language is to regain its former vigour and force.

- (6) Faulty translations. This is a drawback which is very widely felt. Good translations of foreign authors cannot possibly appear so long as there is no critical appreciation of style and idiom, and so long as the present artificiality continues to be tolerated.
- (7) Absence of suitable text books. There is undoubtedly a dearth of suitable text books in Sinhalese. This, however, is not an insurmountable difficulty, if only competent teachers can be found and taught how to produce text books. For it is always necessary that the writing of text books should be left, as far as possible, to teachers. The direct translation of text books from foreign languages, and by those who have never had the opportunity themselves of teaching the respective subjects, is most unsatisfactory. The present text books Department in the Education Office may in any case continue to function, but in such a manner as to benefit by the close co-operation of teachers.

8. *Practicability of Tamil and Sinhalese.* Time has come when definite steps should be taken to ensure the practicability of the national languages. It has also become necessary to inspire confidence in the people with regard to their usability for practical purposes. The immediate fulfilment of these conditions will not be possible unless the vocational teaching of at least a few practical subjects is undertaken. If such a step is not taken hand in hand with the introduction of free education in English, the fate of Sinhalese can well be considered as sealed. As for Tamil, there will be no such danger. There are several subjects the vocational teaching of which can be immediately undertaken in these two languages. Some of them are as follows:—

- (1) Accountancy
- (2) Book-keeping
- (3) Shorthand and Typewriting
- (4) Secretarial Work
- (5) Journalism
- (6) Authorship
- (7) Sanitation and Hygiene
- (8) Physiology
- (9) Agriculture
- (10) Co-operative work

There is no reason why young men well educated in Sinhalese or Tamil, specializing in these subjects, and having at the same time a working knowledge of English, should not be considered as competent to hold responsible positions in the public as well as economic life of the country.

9. *Transitional measures.* There is a widespread notion in Ceylon that no new or specialized subject can be taught in Sinhalese or Tamil without first getting all the necessary text books written and printed in those languages. This is doubtless true with regard to University teaching, but not necessarily so in the case of technical training and ordinary teaching. All the subjects in the above list can be taught and taught well without the help of text books, if only competent teachers can be found. This I venture to say with personal experience, having taught Comparative Religion and Comparative Philology in Sinhalese and obtained satisfactory results. The successful training of Sinhalese and Tamil Notaries without the aid of Sinhalese or Tamil text books may also be cited as a further example. I am convinced that it is only after teaching a subject in any given Vernacular that satisfactory text books can be written for the subject concerned in that particular Vernacular; and I am of opinion that in the case of a number of subjects, such as those given in the above list, teaching can be started without waiting for text books. There will of course be some difficulty in finding competent teachers to teach those subjects in the national languages, but that difficulty is not a serious one. I have just heard from one of my research collaborators in India that they have already opened a centre there for training science teachers to change their medium of instruction from English to Indian. There is no reason why a similar centre cannot be set up in Ceylon as a temporary and transitional measure, not only for science teachers but for teachers of all descriptions, who may reasonably be called upon to change their medium from one language to another. In Government Offices, too, internal training centres can be opened for acquainting the officers with easy methods of transition from English to Vernacular media wherever such is possible *without sacrificing efficiency*. With the adoption of these and other transitional measures of a similar nature, officers can be effectively trained through Vernacular media for a number of posts such as the following :—

- (1) District Revenue Officers
- (2) Sanitary Inspectors
- (3) Co-operative Inspectors
- (4) Agricultural Instructors
- (5) Nurses
- (6) Health Officers
- (7) Irrigation Officers
- (8) Vidana Arachchies
- (9) Urban Council Clerks
- (10) Kachcheri Clerks

- (11) Municipal Clerks
- (12) Overseers
- (13) Accounts Clerks (certain types)
- (14) Office Assistants (certain types)
- (15) Secretaries (certain types)

10. *A General Plan.* It will be seen from the foregoing brief account that neither the introduction of the national languages as media of instruction nor the adoption of them as official languages of the country can alone be treated as a self sufficient question. The two are interlocked and, as I have already remarked, must be taken together, as a complete whole, for necessary treatment. Any programme of work drawn up for one of them without paying sufficient attention to the needs of the other is destined to go out of balance. It would be necessary, therefore, that a general policy to be followed by all concerned and at all stages of progress should first be settled upon. In doing so, proper attention should be paid to the present state of the two languages, and, in particular, to such defects as are referred to in paras 3 and 7 in brief outline. Any future plan of work must also include ways and means to inspire public confidence. And in this respect the transitional measures suggested in para 9 may not be found amiss. The whole volume of work necessary for the purposes in view seems to include :

- (1) Research
- (2) Training
- (3) Producing Text Books
- (4) Producing Original Literature
- (5) Producing an Official Glossary
- (6) Propaganda

On a practical basis it seems to divide itself into four principal units, thus :

- A. Official Languages
- B. Media of Instruction
- C. Modern Literature
- D. Public Co-operation

Each of these units will have a number of establishments grouped together and functioning on similar lines. The grouping may be done somewhat in the following manner :—

A.	B.
State Council	Education Department
Law Courts &c.	University
Kachcheries	Law College
Municipalities	Technical College
Urban Councils	Medical Council
Village Committees	Commercial Tutorics
Govt. Departments	Public Schools
Banks	Cultural and Educational Societies

C.

Training Centres  
Translators  
Authors

D.

Research Centre  
Research Journal  
Propaganda

A. B. The centres of activity grouped under these two headings have a variety of problems to face, and they must be faced in accordance with the needs of each individual case. Attached to each Department or Institution, there should also be a small training centre for making newly introduced methods of transition as effective as possible. The whole process of transition must be planned on strictly practical lines, giving no place to the fallacy of overdoing anything at any stage.

As regards the translation of legal literature, no attempt need be made, at least at the outset, to have the whole body of laws translated. But the translation of what is necessary for practical work must be immediately undertaken, because the masses will never feel happy so long as the principal laws of the land remain inaccessible to them through the media of their national languages. The change of medium in law court proceedings should by no means be done in any haphazard fashion.

C. One or two training centres should be immediately set up for the purposes of :

- (1) re-educating teachers to change the medium of instruction from English to Sinhalese and Tamil ;
- (2) giving them instruction with regard to the teaching of new subjects without the aid of text books (as a temporary measure) ;
- (3) assisting competent teachers and others to write text books ; and
- (4) giving rapid courses in literary criticism, authorship and translation.

D. A research centre must be established for the purpose of developing transitional as well as permanent measures necessary for the successful working of any plan which may be eventually agreed upon.

A General Committee for making new terms need not be appointed as such. The task of finding new terms must be left to the specialists concerned, while adequate provision for co-ordination might be made through the medium of the proposed research centre.

Two glossaries, one of scientific terms, and the other of official terms, must be prepared in due course.

For the discussion of various problems, for collecting materials, and for securing the co-operation of private scholars, there should be a semi-popular research journal which can also be used for educating public opinion.

The proposed training centre must also make a systematic collection of terms and phrases peculiar to various arts, crafts, customs etc., with a view to adopting neglected but current terms wherever possible, thus minimizing the necessity to coin new ones.

A general progress report covering the whole plan in operation must be made available to the public once or twice a year.

There should be no hasty action of any kind. The sympathy and co-operation of all concerned must be secured by proof and demonstration rather than by appealing to national sentiment.

A great deal of complication can be avoided if Sinhalese and Tamil as official languages are restricted respectively to Sinhalese and Tamil districts, while English is retained as the medium of inter-departmental communication in all districts, at least for the present.

The entire work may in the first instance have to be organized under one central authority, but giving full freedom of action to the individual Departments and Institutions.

In drawing up a plan for language development of this kind Ceylon has much to benefit by the experience of other countries, especially of India.

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P.S.—Since writing the above, the Report of the (Soulbury) Commission on Constitutional Reform was published. It recommends (para 321, iii, a) :

“For the purpose of qualifying for membership of the First Chamber, ability to speak, read and write English shall no longer be required.”

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