

A Review of English Language Education of Jaffna Tamils

Ms. Sivagowri Sivagurunathan Rajashanthan

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Abstract

Whatever feeling one may have about the rule of British in Sri Lanka, most of us must accept the fact that they had left behind a legacy, which many of us utilize today to know more and more about various things ranging from scientific knowledge to the present day affairs of the world at large and that legacy is the English Language. The historical circumstances of Sri Lanka, being governed by the British in the first quarter of the last century, afforded Sri Lankans easy access to master the English Language. In the past, many Sri Lankans were skilled in the English Language that they even won many international awards for their creative works in English and there were times when Sri Lankans boasted of their ability to speak the Queen's Language with accurate pronunciation when even the British couldn't do. The objective of this paper on 'A Review of English Language Education of Jaffna Tamils' is not only to explore the distinctive historical and cultural aspects of English language education in a mono lingual society of the Northern part of Sri Lanka but also to emphasize that how English language education brought radical changes among Jaffna Tamils linguistically. A descriptive method is carried out in this research paper. This paper describes the slow and steady growth of English language Education in the Northern part of Sri Lanka with its unique socio linguistic features which also contributed to the development of English language education in Sri Lanka.

Key words: Education, Jaffna Tamils, Language, Socio-linguistics

Introduction

Sri Lanka, former Ceylon, the 'Pearl Island', Milton's 'India's utmost isle, Taprobane', is the homeland of over two and a half millions of Tamil speaking people. The Tamil population is concentrated largely in the Northern and Eastern Provinces and represents the second largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka, and accounts for about ten percent of the total population.

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It is presumed that Tamils settled down in the Jaffna Peninsula very early in the history of Sri Lanka. Several historical works speak about Tamil settlements in the Jaffna Peninsula. Over the years, the Tamils in the Jaffna Peninsula became a prestigious social group because of their learning, wealth, leadership and religious and cultural activities. In recent times the Jaffna Peninsula has become well known to people all over the world because of the agitation for a separate state and the civil war that resulted as a consequence. Another reason for Jaffna becoming well known is the recent migrations of Jaffna Tamils to different parts of the world. (Thiruchandran, 2006, Saravanabava Iyar, 2001)

Traditional System of Education

Before the advent of the Portuguese, Tamil Kings supported the educational system that prevailed in Jaffna. In traditional education, the Tamils had their own system. They made significant contributions to the advancement of learning. Arasaratnam (1984:115) says that

“From an early date, education spread among the people, creating a literate community which remains so to this day. Temple schools and improvised classes on the outer verandah of the village school master’s house spread basic education to the rural areas. Toward the end of the fifteen century, an academy of Tamil literature was founded at Nallur by the king. This academy did useful work in collecting and preserving ancient classical Tamil works in manuscript form. Some historical literature was attempted in this period and some translations and adaptations from Sanskrit works”.

Medicine and Astrology were the two subjects that attained high standards in Jaffna. Whatever educational institutions existed among Jaffna Tamils undoubtedly suffered under Portuguese rule. The early educational system in the Tamil region was made up of what is called the ‘thinnaipalli’ which was an ad hoc arrangement where an educated man, learned in literature, grammar and arithmetic used the raised platform constructed along the mud walls of the house to teach students more as a past time and social service. They were taught in three grades, initial, intermediate and high. In the initial grade they were taught fundamentals, in the intermediate

they were taught grammar, arithmetic etc, and in the high grade they learn philosophy, astronomy and Tamil literature. In addition to these, special attention was focused on spiritual aspects and character formation. The programme varied according to the teacher's ability and disposition. (Thiruchandran, 2006, Sivalingarajah, 2008)

English Education in Jaffna

These developments of Jaffna, however, were to cease abruptly, for in 1560, it became a vassal of Portugal. The activities of the colonial rulers brought about a great deal of changes not only in the status of the native languages but also in the entire linguistic behaviour of the masses. When the Jaffnese culture and languages came into contact with 'Portuguese', 'Dutch' and English western influence in the life style and culture resulted. These colonial rulers brought their culture, traditions and religion in addition to their languages.

British colonial rulers wanted very much to serve the needs of their existing religious and educational set up of Jaffna of that time. The Baptist Missionary, Wesleyan Missionary, American Missionary and Church Missionary were Western Christian Missionaries who arrived in Sri Lanka 'to establish themselves in different parts of the island whose object should be to instruct the natives in the real principles of Christianity and to superintend their religious conduct (Jayasuriya, 1977:57). The British allowed the missionary activities in Jaffna as the Americans' main intention was not colonizing Sri Lanka but to promote the Protestant Christian faith among the indigenous people and their main focus was centred in the Jaffna Peninsula. The reason for this restricted sphere of activity were socio-economic factors rather than political.

Christian Missionaries in Jaffna

Of these missionaries, the American missionary was the first to arrive in Jaffna and the education of Jaffna people was their great concern. They started their work in Jaffna in 1816. They were followed by the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, which started its activities in 1817 and the Church Missionary started work, a little later in 1833 and in 1849 there were nine ordained missionaries in the Jaffna Peninsula. The mission had eight stations under its supervision during the early period of British rule at Tellipallai, Batticotta (Vaddukkoddai),

Uduvil, Manepay, Pandaterrppu, Chevakacheri, Varany and Udupitti (Gunasingam, 2005, Anderson Report). The aim of establishing schools was conversion and importance was given for the three 'R's- Reading, Writing, Arithmetic which were the quill drivers employed under the rulers needed.

The first American missionary school, Union College, was founded in Tellipalai in 1816. In 1823, the American missionaries founded Batticotta Seminary at Vaddukoddai with Rev. Dr. Daniel Poor as its first principal. Its aim was to educate the top students from all other seminaries across Jaffna.

Governor Brownrigg (1812-11820) was instrumental in persuading the American Missionaries to establish themselves in the Jaffna district. At the time of the arrival of the American Missionary, "Jaffna had a population that was linguistically homogenous in that it was wholly Tamil speaking" (Jayasuriya, 1977:61).

Though the main objective of the missionary was the propagation of their religious faith, their contribution in the field of education could never be under-estimated. The orthodox Jaffna population was attracted by the employment opportunities and better positions in life and they needed English education to achieve them, and English education indirectly or directly demanded conversion to Christianity.

Education for Jaffna Women and Learning of English

Two important initiatives undertaken by the American mission were the introduction of women's education and of the boarding school system for Tamil girls. Gunasingam's (2005) statement based on the 'Ceylon Mission Report of 1865' proves this as follows:

"... two or three years after the commencement of the mission, a few pupils were gathered into women's boarding schools at the different stations, where the common branches of Tamil and English were taught and more advanced pupils prepared to enter upon a higher course of study. Upon this foundation the Batticotta seminary for boys was commenced in 1823, and the following year

collecting girls from different parts, the Oodooville Female Boarding school”
(173)

The Jaffna Society was traditionally a male –dominated one. Education and employment were said to be the sole concern of the men folk. Another contribution that the Missionaries made was the education of the Tamil females. There is evidence that women had not gone through any formal education. Interestingly there was an ad hoc arrangement later in history, through which young girls were tutored at home by the teachers. This system was of course limited to the middle and upper caste children.

The early education of girls in Sri Lanka, institutionally or in a systematic way, was connected with the missionaries and conversion to Christianity. On 15th February, 1886 when 24 girls graduated from Uduvil Girls’ School, which was the first school for girls set up in South Asia, Rev. Dr. Hastings remarked that, in 1816, when the missionaries first came to Jaffna, not a single girl could read in English, but there were now nearly 5000 girls studying in missions schools and there were 1000 native Christian female communicators in the different missions. It was also reported that there were men and boys who could read and that people did not think it worthwhile to teach the girls...’what are girls for, excepting to cook food and that girls could not learn to read any more than the sheep’ was how the attitude towards girls’ education was expressed (Leitch, Mary and Margaret, 1890:116).

Missionaries also took part in providing educational opportunities for girls, a radical notion at the time. The missionary societies are generally credited with having been responsible for the promotion of female education in Ceylon. This is generally true in so far as the Northern Province is concerned, where the American Mission and Church mission played a pioneering role in providing educational facilities for Tamil girls and persuading the parents to send them to school. (Jeyasuriya, 1977:66) American Methodist Harriet Winslow founded Uduvil Girls’ School in 1824, the first all-girls boarding school in Asia. Starting with 29 girls between age 5 and 11, the number rose to 50 students in 1833 and 100 by 1857. The girls were supported with donations of \$20 a year by benefactors from Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine and Maryland whose names they later adopted. Apart from Uduvil Girls school, the Catholic Bishop Orazio

inaugurated the Jaffna Catholic English Girls' School in November 1849, where elite women were the first pupils (Martyn, 1923).

The press media and printing press played an important role in English educational development of Jaffna Tamils. The American Mission in Jaffna established the first Press in 1820. Through this press, the first English newspaper 'The Morning Star' was published in 1841 by two natives and the newspaper was devoted to education, science and literature (Martyn, 1923:182). The Catholic Press of Jaffna was established in 1873 and 'The Jaffna Catholic Guardian' (JCG) was started first as an Anglo-Tamil fortnightly publication in 1876. Through this circulation many Catholics in Jaffna developed their English knowledge by newspaper reading. In 1862, Rev. Miron Winslow published the first Tamil-English Dictionary (Martyn, 1923:185).

The Role of Jaffna Batticotta Seminary

Batticotta Seminary undertook research and published pioneering books in the Tamil language in literature, logic, algebra, astronomy and general science. Its standard of education was judged as equal in rank with many European universities. While the school was shut down in 1855, it later reopened as Jaffna College in 1867 with Rev. E.P. Hastings as its first principal.

The British Governors of that time wanted English to be the 'Superior language'. Governor Brownrigg once stated, "... the cultivation of the English language must necessarily be a principal objective of any system of education to which I can in a public capacity give my concurrence" (Jayasuriya 1977,51).

The Batticotta Seminary, no doubt, produced some of the great scholars of that time. Speaking of the rare achievements of Jaffna College, Vaddukoddai, Sir Emerson Tennent, Colonial Secretary of Ceylon, in his book on 'Christianity in Ceylon' paid a tribute to the works of Batticotta Seminary and the scholars the Seminary produced. In 1850 Sir Emerson Tennent made the following comment on the work of the Batticotta Seminary:

‘Batticotta, the headquarters of the mission, stands about six miles westward of Jaffna, in the midst of well-cultivated rice farms and groves of Palmyra and cocoa-nut palm. The whole establishment is full of interest, and forms an impressive and a memorable scene - the familiar objects and arrangements of a college being combined with the remarkable appearance and unwonted costumes of the students; and the domestic buildings presenting all the peculiar characteristics of Oriental life and habits. The sleeping apartments, the dining hall, and the cooking-room are in purely Indian taste, but all accurately clean; and, stepping out of these, the contrast was striking between them, and the accustomed features of the lecture room with its astronomical clock, its ornery, and transit instrument; the laboratory with its chemical materials, retorts and electro-magnetic apparatus, and the Museum with its arranged collection of minerals and corralines to illustrate the geology of Ceylon. But the theatre was the centre of attraction, with its benches of white-robed students, and lines of turbaned heads, with upturned eager countenances, “God's image carved in ebony”. The examination which took place in our presence was on History, Natural Philosophy, Optics, Astronomy, and Algebra. The knowledge exhibited by the pupils was astonishing; and it is no exaggerated encomium to say that, in the extent of the course of instruction, and in the success of the system of communicating it, the Collegiate Institution of Batticotta is entitled to rank with many an European University' (Tennent,1850:178).

The special committee appointed to enquire into the work of the Seminary at the time of the Anderson Deputation wrote that

“There is a core of able and well-qualified native teachers, fitted to give instruction in all important branches, and the attainments of those under their charge we such as in many cases to do honor both to the teachers and pupils. It [the Seminary] has attained a commanding influence in the community as a literary and scientific institution, and is a stepping stone by which many have been able at a cheap rate, to rise to posts of influence and emolument”.

With regard to the graduates of the seminary Anderson says,

‘The majority are now filling situations of credit and responsibility throughout the various districts of Ceylon [...]. I can bear testimony to the abilities, the qualifications and integrity of the many students of Jaffna who have accepted employments in various offices under the government of the colony (Chelliah, 1922:56).

Anderson Report (1856) also proves that the qualified graduates of Batticotta Seminary sought white collar jobs outside Jaffna.

“Only eleven out of ninety-six pupils were members of the church; and many were looking forward mainly to government for employment, "and seemed determined," in the language of the mission, "to have nothing to do with Christianity." The introduction of pay-scholars was filling the institution more and more with the sons of rich men, or of men connected with the government, who were preparing for secular posts of honor or profit, and might be expected to prefer heathen wives, with large dowries, to a connection with our pious Oodooville girls. The studies, moreover, though adopted with no such intent, fell in with the ambitious schemes of the young men for acquiring wealth and influence. These studies were mainly English, which had gained on the Tamil, until, as we learned from the Principal, the purely vernacular studies of the three classes were only twelve, while the English were thirty-five; and there were fourteen others in which there was a mixture of English and Tamil”.(Anderson Report, 38)

The Wesleyan Mission consisting of five missionaries arrived in Sri Lanka in 1814. In course of time, the Wesleyans were not satisfied with merely supervising schools and teaching English, and drew up plans for the establishment of a regular chain of native mission schools. According to Jayasuriya (1977), the Wesleyan Missionary established a large number of ‘Native Schools’ as they were called. They belonged to three categories of which the first type of schools were for the mass of the ordinary children and provided instruction in Sinhalese and Tamil only.

The second type of schools were for the children of relatively prosperous parents, generally living within close proximity of mission stations and provided instruction during part of the day in English. The third type provided education for girls. The objective of the colonial education as summarized by the colonial historian Lord Macaulay in 1835 is quoted here:

“It is impossible for us with our limited means to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern: a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Cited in Sivasubramaniam, 2005:12).

The Jaffna Central College was established by the Wesleyan Mission in 1817. The school was earlier known as Jaffna English School. In addition to this they established schools in Vannarpannai, Kantharodai and other places. They opened 121 schools in different parts of the peninsula, which included schools for the girls and Training Colleges to train the teachers. But in due course of time, “They did not support English education and they found it inappropriate for the country.”

The Emergence of English-educated Jaffnese

English dominated the spheres of administration and medium of instruction in Jaffna, it paved the way to create a class of people who were predominantly Western in their thoughts and habits, a group that was shorn of its traditions by an alien culture. This cultural colonialism helped to consolidate economical and political subjugation, while the real and long term issues of social uplift suffered by default. Often the most insidious forms of control are exercised in areas of culture and education and the medium through which they operate is that of language. This the British did when they introduced English into their educational establishments.

English education provided an income for life through prestigious white collar government jobs. Further it guaranteed regular working hours and pensions for widows. In addition, English education helped Jaffna Tamils to get lucrative jobs in British colonies like Burma, Singapore, Malaysia, etc.

The Tamils in Ceylon in the colonial period who moved overseas (to Malaya) from their homelands as economic migrants since the end of the 19th century kept their roots and identity intact at least until the 1950's (Sivasubramaniam, 2005).

During British rule, literacy in English was higher in Jaffna than elsewhere in the island (Jayasuriya, 1977, Suseendrajah, 1994). As a result Jaffna Tamils were in an advantageous position to get a good number of jobs in the government service. They were also in a position to go to distant countries like the former federated Malayan state, Singapore and Burma and get different position in the government service some of which were very lucrative (Suseendrarajah, 1994:249-50).

According to Anderson,

"they are so much elevated by their education above the mass, that they feel unable to live on the income they would receive in the ordinary occupations of the country, become discontented, and seek employment in other places" (Anderson Report, 1856,:38).

While commenting on the English education of Jaffnese, Gunsekera (2005) says 'English in Jaffna had enjoyed a status and English has a long history in Jaffna and Jaffna Tamil teachers credited with successfully teaching English in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, in the early 20th century. The belief that the levels of English education were higher in Jaffna than rest of the country is accepted by many' (38).

With Jaffna emerging as an eminent centre of learning, the British colonial government recruited numerous Tamil graduates into the civil service for its colonies in Malaysia and Singapore in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many worked as administrators in the Malay Railways, some in positions of authority in the civil service and rubber plantations. Many of the first doctors, engineers and teachers in colonial Malaya and Singapore were of Jaffna Tamil descent, among them was Dr. S.S. Thiruchelvam, the world's first Asian surgeon. By the dawn of the 20th century, Ceylon Tamils were well established in Malaya, attaining positions of eminence in medicine, education, civil administration and the law (Sen, 2013).

English education divided the society linguistically into two – the monolinguals and the bilinguals and indeed the gap between the elite and the masses. Bilinguals differed among themselves in their command of English. The command ranged from good fluency to smattering knowledge of English. Among the Jaffnese, English prevailed as the group language in the social and religious life of converted Protestant Christians and Catholic elite. For several families English was the home language. The initial educational advantages gained by the Tamils continued from one generation to the other, Protestants maintaining a disproportionate share over the non-Protestants. The impact of this was reflected in the relative preponderance of Tamil students gaining admission to the University of Ceylon as late as in 1844 (Chelliah, 1922, Anderson Report, 1856).

Quite naturally, those who were first to enter the public service, the professions and other employment were graduates of the Jaffna College, the first to receive an English education in Jaffna. In 1855, the Anderson Deputation found that 158 of them were already in the public service, and another 111 in the professions and other employment.

An analysis of available data reveal that during this relatively early period of British rule, most of the graduates of the college were occupying important and responsible positions as judges, magistrates, headmen, shroffs, road commissioners, postmasters. Medical officers, translators, interpreters, teachers, surveyors, landing officers, notaries, clerks, collectors of customs, engineers, and civil servants: they were the first men of Jaffna occupy such high positions and their numbers were probably not exceeded by any ethnic group (Chelliah, 1922, Suseendrajah, 1994).

The other 111 graduates of the college occupying no less important positions, but outside the public service included lawyers, physicians, teachers, editors, book makers, printers, business men, and the like. By education and economic and social standing they too, commanded equal influence in the community and it so happened that these two group-public servants and professionals -together with the native evangelical assistants in the mission service formed to the nucleus of the emerging English educated elite in Jaffna (Chelliah, 1922).

Strangely enough, there was a remarkable continuity between this new elite and the traditional elite, a feature which is also characteristic of the westernization of India. In Jaffna, members of the higher castes exclusively secured advantages of an English education in the college and as a consequence, began to dominate the public service and the profession thus transforming themselves to the new elite. Clearly it was another case of 'old wine in new bottles', thus the traditional elite had transformed themselves into the new elite.

As is to be expected, the new elite desired an English education for their children and had means of providing one. Moreover they generally lived in towns where the best schools were. The wealth of Jaffna lay not in their land but in their men to whom the college first gave the English language and challenged others to do likewise, when they did that they set off a social revolution.

In overseas, the enduring contributions of English educated Jaffna Tamils (Ceylonese) have been recognized by Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990:

"In terms of numbers, the Ceylonese Tamils, like the Eurasians, are among the smallest of our various communities. Yet in terms of achievements and contributions to the growth and development of the modern Singapore and Malaysia they have done more than warranted by their numbers. In the early days of Malaysia's and Singapore's history the civil service and the professions were manned by a good number of Ceylonese. Even today the Ceylonese community continues to play a prominent role in these and other fields of civil life" (cited in Sen, 2013).

In the first half of the 20th century, the children of the Jaffna-Malayan Tamil pioneers received better English education than most. Crude individualism that accompanied the colonialists had not eroded the extended family values amongst the pioneering Malayan Tamils significantly and the other children in the extended families of the Malayan pioneers continued to benefit from their generosity. This care for others extended at least to the extended family limit. By the 1940's a few of these beneficiaries successfully entered the local University College and thence into professions like medicine, engineering and administration (Sivasubramaniam, 2007:15).

Hindu Revivalist Movement in Jaffna and English Education

When the Christian Missionaries were thus working in full swing for the propagation of their religion and European culture, a section of people revolted against their activities. They could not bear to see the ancient heritage of their forefathers belittled and their countrymen converted from the old faith which their ancestors professed. They also saw that the Tamil culture was being replaced by the Western, the English language was gradually gaining in importance and Tamil was being neglected. If this state of affairs continued long, they thought, everything that their ancestors held dear would be lost and the Tamils would lose their individuality.

The Saiva revivalist movement among the Sri Lankan Tamils reached its peak earlier than that of the Sinhalese. The chief man who led this opposition against the activities of the Missionaries was the famous Arumuka Navalar. Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879), the champion of this revival, was a generation senior to Anagarika Dharmapala, the Sinhala Buddhist revivalist. Navalar began working as an English teacher to the lower grades and as a Tamil teacher for the upper grades of a Wesleyan Methodist School where he had earlier completed his studies (Cheran, 2009).

In 1888, N. S. Ponnampalappillai, one of Navalar's close associates, founded the Saiva Paripalana Sabai. *The Hindu Organ*, an official fortnightly Anglo-Tamil newspaper of the Saiva Paripalana Sabai, founded in 1889, played a vital role among Hindus in the propagation of Saivism. The paper was converted into an English language weekly in 1899 (Martyn, 1923:247, 48).

After 14 years of living and working in the Methodist Christian environment, Navalar understood the missionary strategy and tactics for propagating their religion. Education was used as a main tool. However, Navalar's revivalist movement did not object to the learning of English. Navalar began to use the same strategy to propagate Saivism - a form of Hinduism practiced by Jaffna Tamils. Navalar effectively took the preaching methods of the Christians into the Hindu temples of Jaffna. Navalar's other major activity was the establishment of Hindu-Tamil schools in Jaffna. In September 1848, he founded a Veda Agama School and a Saiva

Prakasa Vidyasaalai. This school imparted English education with a Hindu background. This reflects the negative response of Orthodox Hindus towards English education in a Christian background. As a result, some philanthropists started English medium schools in different parts of Jaffna such as Jaffna Hindu College, and Somaskanda College where the education was given in English.

Influence of Gandhian Movement

In addition, many English educated youths who proceeded to Madras for higher education, were captivated by Gandhian movement in India. Little by little with the growth of the Indian freedom struggle a nationalist sentiment also influenced the Jaffna youths. In consequence two types of oppositional tendency appeared among the English educated youths in Jaffna, initially against the British politics and then against the western system of Education. In fact they did not oppose English learning but stressed national resurgence in the economic, social, cultural, educational and political life of the country. Further the revival of Tamil language and Literature was stressed. As a result, the Youth Congress was born in 1920 in Jaffna. The founders had had their English education and identified western liberal values, democratic and nationalist ideas.

The nationalism of the Jaffna Youth of the 1920s to the 1930s has to be seen in the global context. The men of that generation in the evening of their lives took pride in the stand that they had taken. To them in the words of the poet ‘bliss it was in that dawn to be alive’. The turbulent happenings in India filtered into Jaffna through the leading English language newspapers from India. The English educated Jaffna youth of that day read, discussed and were deeply influenced by what was happening in India. The very proximity to India and ties of language, religion and culture between the people of Jaffna and India, especially South India make the bonds between the two people strong and travel across the Palk Strait for variety of reasons - pilgrimage, education, employment and conferences-exposed Jaffna youth to the rapidly growing Indian nationalist movement and freedom struggle.

Education Not Divorced from National Identity of Jaffna

In his devotion to education, the Jaffna man is ready to spend more than he can afford to educate his children. He will mortgage his land or his wife's jewellery to continue the education of a promising child and education was/is regarded as the very ethos of life in Jaffna. Some have referred to it as Jaffna's main industry. 'The school on par with temple and church was the centre and heart of the social life of the community'. (Holmes, 1982, Kadirkamar, 2009) The content of the education received in the 1920s especially in the humanities was far superior to what we have had in the past decades. The products of Jaffna schools, even those who had come under strong missionary influence and converted to Christianity, were not culturally divorced from the people of the peninsula, in contrast to the English-educated elite that emerged in the Western province, and in Colombo in particular. The very 'Indianness' of the Gandhian movement struck responsive chords amongst the English educated in Jaffna both young and old and made it possible for the youth of Jaffna to respond to the Gandhian movement in the way that they did.

These youths also accepted emancipation of the oppressed commonly but insisted on mother tongue education up to secondary level. The two champions of this period were Handy Perinpanayagam and his friend Nesiah. They fought for the children's right to learn in their mother tongue and the people's right to be governed in their own language.

English Brought Together Tamils and Sinhalese

To the people of the North, English meant even more than economy prosperity. For century, historical, political, cultural and other reasons had kept them isolated in their dry zone habitat. But now, political, administrative and economic unification of the country under British rule linked their destinies with those of the Sinhalese and this would not have been possible without a common medium of communication. In time, English educated from all ethnic group formed one common English educated middle class. The new middle class formed the most influential part of the community, but had little political power. However, they did not rise in rebellion against the British, instead they agitated for political reform and by 1912 gained a few concessions and thereby began to exercise the certain amount of control over the government. In

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the next stage of the struggle, they exercised greater political power through the state council (1931) and captured most of the high posts in the government which were exclusively held by the British. The struggle continued in 1946 and they persuaded the British to leave, giving them a parliamentary form of government. Little had the British heeded the century old warning that to educate the natives was the 'high road back to Europe'.

Changes after Independence

In Sri Lanka English functions not only as a lingua franca, but also as the vehicle of elitist civilization, the means of economic and social mobility and an instrument of religious conversion after the independence.

After the independence of the country, language in Education was very much discussed. In 1956, the leadership true to its battle-cry went ahead with a policy promising 'Sinhala in 24 hours'. But in the election held in 1956 many of the members of the British educated elite, who had carried the country forward to independence were rejected by the electorate and political power shifted to other groups. The new groups upgraded Sinhalese to the status of the official language in the place of English. It created a complex human problem, complicated by many factors, political, educational and territorial and it engendered a situation that reacted adversely on national integration. This created agitation among Tamils in Sri Lanka to admit Tamil language as language of administration in North and East and Tamil language issue coupled with some other socio-political issues culminated in Civil war between the Tamils and Sinhalese (Suseendrajah, 1994, Sivasubramaniam, 2005).

Changing Social and Political Conditions Reduced the Importance of English

Social condition that demanded the use of English gradually changed. This is a prime factor that led to the decline in the use of English. English became socially restrictive and did not meet the need for popular participation. The day to day use of English in Jaffna Tamil society was reduced. It is presently difficult to speak of any community in Jaffna that owns English as its group language in social life. Among Jaffna Tamils the impulse to use their mother tongue seems to be greater than in the past and people feel more comfortable to use their mother tongue. The requirement of English learning turns out to be very low.

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Though the overall picture of the language in Sri Lanka on the eve of independence showed the growing importance of the national languages, English continued to dominate by virtue of its privileged position as the language of the rulers.

Conclusion

Today the pattern of life in our society is changed and within Sri Lanka one's mother tongue can satisfy his or her private or public linguistic need in their life. However, there is a need for Tamils to learn Sinhala language to move about freely within Sri Lanka as most of the Sinhalese are monolinguals. However, with the spread of English among the Sinhalese, the situation is still very fluid. In addition, historical and political factors also will continue to guide the Tamils as to the usefulness and status of English in their community.

Historically viewed, it is undoubtedly possible to argue that the English language has served as a sword of division in that it created English educated elite who were cut off from the rest of the indigenous population. It seems clear that at least today the English language is serving as an agent of unity between the educated Tamils and Sinhalese.

The most favourable prospect is that since English is given the status of a compulsory second language, there will be more and better opportunities to gain proficiency in it. There are other aspects, too, to viewing the English language as an agent of unity. Its compulsoriness as a second language ensures its being taught and learned, but its usefulness as an agent of unity is that it would provide a common language for the Sri Lankan linguistic communities.

The teaching and learning of English went on in Jaffna and Sri Lanka for more than 150 years. Though there were great educational institutions with great teachers produced talented Tamils from Jaffna, today we are in a different position. Now that the sound and fury for national language has subsided, we can look back to that era when Tamils had the benefits of an English education. Is this an attempt to idealize the past? One certainly does not wish to go back to the past. Tamils of Sri Lanka have become increasingly aware of the value of their indigenous heritage. But commercially, educationally, nationally and internationally, in terms of the pursuit

of knowledge and the advancement of civilization, the facility of the English language is indeed an enviable asset.

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Ms. Sivagowri Sivagurunathan Rajashanthan
Lecturer
English Language Teaching Centre
University of Jaffna
Jaffna 4000
Sri Lanka
gowrijaff@yahoo.com