

Towards a Trilingual Sri Lanka

Prof. J.B. Dissanayake , Advisor to HE the President

Chairman, my fellow speakers, the vice chancellor, members of the academic staff, delegates, ladies and gentlemen; the title of my speech is national languages policy and reconciliation.



Prof. J.B. Dissanayake

The language is the most cherished posture of mankind; the most distinctive feature that separates man from beast. But for language, we would still be among animals without a culture or civilization. So language is the distinctive feature that distinguishes us from animal. It is not only an element of culture but the most important element of culture because all other elements of culture depend on language. Nothing else could be done without language. The language is the most powerful medium of communication, because the amount of information that can be transmitted by language is infinite. You can say almost anything if you know your language. There is no limit to the ideas and number of things you can say.

All these aspects highlight the positive contribution language has made to human civilization. However, there is one other aspect that makes language a bone of contention. This arises from the fact that language is also a symbol of ethnic identity. Sri Lankans are identified ethnically as Sinhalese or Tamils not on any other criterion but on the fact of their affiliation to either Sinhala or Tamil as their mother language. As such, language can lead to problems of unprecedented magnitude. Bangladesh, which was referred in the morning, is an excellent example that showcases the importance of language as a symbol of ethnic identity. When Pakistan came into being as a single

nation, yet in two different geographical areas, one in the west and one in the east of the sub continent, it was felt that Pakistan will prosper in peace and harmony. But that is not what happened. It was proved otherwise. Language was found to be stronger than religion of these two countries in two different places had one common religion but two different languages as mentioned in the morning, Urdu and Bangla. Religion is not a symbol of ethnic identity but language is. Therefore, a new nation Bangladesh came into being because of language although they both belong to same religion.

Sri Lanka was also a nation that was on the verge of dividing itself into two on the basis of language. The declaration of Sinhala as the only official language in 1956 was a political move that made Tamils feel unhappy about the status given to their language. Of course this was rectified in 1987 by an amendment made to the constitution by making Tamil also an official language. Today both Sinhala and Tamil share the status of official language with English as the link language.

Steps are now being taken to make Sri Lanka a tri lingual nation. The President himself has presented a ten year plan for a tri lingual Sri Lanka 2012 to 2022. So this is the copy I have, a ten year national plan for tri lingual Sri Lanka presented to cabinet and revised on the basis of cabinet decision on 1st February 2012. Now in this, the President sets out the foundation for a national initiative to encourage the acquisition of tri lingual skills and competencies by all citizens of this country by 2022. It also provides impetus for the equal development and promotion of two languages in all spheres of life with special focus on the revival of the culture of language learning. In order to implement this policy the President has appointed a six member committee, called task force for tri lingual Sri Lanka, which Mr. Lalith Weeraratunga himself as its chairman. The composition of this task force is very balanced; three Sinhalese, two Tamils and a Muslim.

Now this task force is entrusted with guiding, supervising and coordinating the activities of stakeholders to carry out proposed activities under the ten year plan and review them periodically to prevent replication of work. This task force, which I am also a member identifies three distinctive phases; piloting, expansion and consolidation. First phase is spread over the first four years, the second over the next four years and the final over the last two years. However the success of the implementation of these activities will depend on many variables and as such activities year marked for the first phase may differ to the second and so on.

The first phase called piloting will involve a series of interrelated activities such as restructuring of language courses, the publication of new techniques and material, the recruitment of language teachers, the training of trainers, the establishment of a national cadre of second language teachers, the establishment of a national cadre of language translators and reforms in evaluation and examination.

The second phase, expansion, will expand the activities initiated in the first phase. It will for example continue to recruit and train second language teachers in three languages for all sectors of education primary, secondary and tertiary; including public service officers at national and provincial levels, update data bases of language teachers, enhance linkage or exchange programs, produce new text books, compile tri lingual dictionaries and glossaries of technical terms. The third phase named, consolidation will involve social and cultural integration and reinforcing programs. Steps will be taken to document the progress of the tri lingual initiative in the country for perma-

ment record, motivation of the public to participate in the tri lingual initiative, reflection and lessons learned. This phase will also focus attention on induction of second language learners into mutual appreciation of their cultures, their customs and rituals, dance, drama, literature music and so on. In order to foster inter cultural understanding, Sinhala and Tamil cultural centers will be established where learners will begin to appreciate not only the similarities but more importantly the differences between the two cultures. It is also hoped that provincial ministries of education will initiate language Sinhala and Tamil teacher exchange programs between provinces with mutually enhancing cultural integration at school and community levels. In the exchange programs visiting teachers should live in with families of different linguistic groups in the host villages to share cultural practices and enhance inter communal understanding.

This task force is now in progress in the assessment of resources. There are already many government, semi government and non – governmental organizations, institutions that engaged in the promotion of bilingual and trilingual skills. It is hoped that such a resource survey will help in employing short term measures that are viable and fundable to improve the programs and activities already in progress; because there are many stakeholders in this matter. The ministry of national languages and social integration for example will be able to identify and coordinate with non sector institutions involved in promoting the teaching of Sinhala and Tamil as second language. Such a survey will help the state to determine the depth of interventions required in the short term. The ten year plan categorically states that presidential task force will assist the process of modernizing language training and making inroads into researching, acquiring and incorporating up – to – date language technology such as e – learning and e – translation books tools. It will organize and support conferences, seminars and workshops to promote dialogue and debate on language development. It will also develop e- learning courses in Sinhala, Tamil and English languages and software for e- translation between Sinhala, Tamil and English. One of the immediate concerns of the task force is the preparation of new teaching materials for Sinhala and Tamil. They will be prepared to serve different levels of competence.

So tri lingual Sri Lanka, needless to say, is a highly ambitious venture. It is a challenge of highest magnitude. As a linguistic teacher at the University, I am fully aware of the immense problems we have come across in the teaching of English to undergraduates; the lack of qualified teachers of English for some of the most critical problems that we had to face. So teaching bilingual skills was difficult, now that left much to be decided now, tri lingual Sri Lanka will be a dream, however it will not be a dream but it can be realized if we place it on a war footing and set about in the right way so that all Sri Lankans can soon live in peace, harmony and dignity.