

KemanabahasaMelayu di Sri Lanka?

Whither the Malay language in Sri Lanka? - by B.D.K. Saldin

Who are the Sri Lanka Malays? Many of our own children, leave alone other ethnic groups in this island, do not know our origins. We as children had heard of Java, Jaminissu, Ja-Ela, and were aware of the name change of the islands of the Netherlands East Indies to Indonesia, in 1945. Sadly our children, schooling in the eighties, were denied the study of history, geography and civics individually and were taught these in a truncated form under the subject social science. Hence they could not relate to Indonesia being associated with the Malays of Sri Lanka.

The early part of the last century was the heyday of British imperialism. All the races in Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, aped the west. The English language had been enthroned so much so that those who spoke in Sinhala in the schools were punished. The ambition of Malays who excelled academically was to join government service in which they gained recognition for their loyalty. Those who showed their prowess in sports adorned the Police service. Nearly all children were given English names in addition to their Malay names. Sheilas, Doreens, Joyces and Eileens, Toms, Dicks and Harrys gamboled in Malay households. Those who did not have English names anglicised their names. Tuan became Tuany and then Tony, Daghlan became Dougie, and Saam became Sam. Even in pronunciation the names were given an anglicised twist. Anon was pronounced so as to rhyme with cannon!

However, this penchant for aping the west did not have a deleterious effect on the Malay language. Whatever competence that was gained in the English language was in the schools and their usage was confined to that sphere of activity. At home it was always Malay. The mothers did not go to work for in those leisurely days there was no need. The money earned by the father was ample for their daily needs. Malay customs and traditions were religiously followed as was also our religion of Islam.

When English was the medium of instruction in schools, Malay was spoken in the home. Whereas earlier parents turned to English to express their more advanced ideas, with the change to Sinhala, the children now found Sinhala or Tamil a convenient means of expression. The standard of English in Sri Lanka schools dropped drastically and the parents had to step in to impart knowledge of English in the home. So whilst Malay was being spoken in the homes earlier, English was now being spoken because the parents realized English was still the gateway to employment. The Sinhala Only Act could thus be considered to have indirectly been

a major factor contributing towards the deterioration of the Malay language.

The symposium “DuniaMelayu” held in Colombo in 1985 was a watershed in the history of the Malays when they once again became conscious of heritage. What is more, it made the Malay-speaking countries aware of the existence of members of their community who against all odds were maintaining their cultural traditions of their forefathers. The Malay speaking world was also made aware of the wealth of literary material in the form of ancient manuscripts which had been discovered in the island. The symposium also gave a fillip to the desire of Malays to preserve and develop their language.

Since then books have been written about the Malays and their language, classes have been held, Malay has been introduced as a subject for the GCE ‘O’ and ‘A’ level examinations. Malay organisations like BangsaMelayu di Kotikawatte and COSLAM, to my knowledge, conduct their meetings as far as possible in Malay and whenever a function is held Malay is given a prominent place. However, in trying to read and write Malay, there is a controversy as to the type of Malay we should adopt. Is it the Malay we speak without a formal syntax or grammar, or should it be the time tested standard Malay prevalent in the Malay speaking world? There are arguments galore on both sides.

The only similarity between standard Malay and Sri Lanka Malay is the lexicon. The grammar and syntax are all different. So long as we ceased to read and write our language, grammar and syntax did not matter. But can we write the way we speak? The Sinhala language is a good example of this phenomenon where the spoken is far different from the written. The usage of standard Malay forms (though it was not called standard Malay then) is not entirely new to the Sri Lanka Malays. In the heyday of Baba OunusSaldin all the kitabs and newspapers were written in standard Malay. If we are to preserve the present Sri Lanka Malay we must not forget that it is a spoken language and has never been translated into the written word.

Writing is an entirely different ball game. Grammar and syntax are the bare bones of a language. It is literature that provides the flesh and blood. Sri Lanka Malay literature is non-existent. We have to create it. Such a task to my mind is near impossible and will need generations to achieve. In contrast, there is an abundance of standard Malay literature from which we can benefit.

All languages evolve and so must Sri Lanka Malay. SL Malay too evolved but in being cut off from Nusantara for centuries, the influence of the local languages came into play. Now, with the development of communications, inputs from the source of our original languages are available. In this evolutionary process, why don't we evolve towards standard Malay? In practice, in all languages there is an

element of diglossia, as can be seen in Sinhala, where the ordinary man in the street speaks differently from the electronic and written media. Let us continue to speak as we do now, but try to make more and more people speak our language.

The Malays will have a place in Sri Lanka which, after all, in practical terms, is our motherland even though we may have emotional and cultural ties with Nusantara whence our forefathers came. Our youth are intelligent and will shine in any sphere of activity they choose to undertake.

For the last twenty years I have been encouraging, persuading, cajoling, my fellow Malays to speak Malay. It has been an uphill task. Whether I have succeeded only time will tell. There seems to be a mental block where even those competent to talk Malay are reluctant to do so. Sri Lanka Malay has been considered endangered but there is no enthusiasm towards its preservation. Any attempt at revival has been a case of froth and bubble only to fizzle out. There are several persons who are as enthusiastic as I, but they are all past their prime. I have been looking out for a young person to whom I can pass the baton but have not succeeded. Unless we break this mental block and bestir ourselves, the Malays will continue to speak Sinhala or English and we may go the way of the South African Malays who know no Malay.

“Tak’kanBahasaMelayuhilang di Sri Lanka” tetapibagaimana?

Let not BahasaMelayu disappear in Sri Lanka, but how?

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