

Language As Unifying Force

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At the very outset, let me express my deep sense of gratitude to the organisers for inviting me to this World Classical Tamil Conference. This conference stands out in history because it is the first conference being held after Tamil was conferred the status of 'classical language'. We feel specially proud because this status was conferred during the period of the first UPA government, when the Left parties were supporting it along with some other parties like the DMK.

I am happy to be here on a personal note too. Though born in a Telugu family, I can claim a share of Tamilnadu – I was born in the then Madras or today's Chennai or what we used to call as Chennapatnam. And of course, we share many common traits in terms of language and culture. *"Yathum Oore, Yavarum Kelir"* 'Every place (in the world) is my home town; Everyone is my kin'

There is an interesting episode in the BBC series *The Story of India*, which talks about the earliest human migrations from Africa. Thanks to the development of science and technology and the Human Genome Project, it was found that the gene M130 which was found in the remains of the earliest human migrants from Africa was found among the Kallar people in the Western ghats of Tamilnadu. Professor A. Pitchappan of the Madurai University, who had stumbled upon this discovery states that these people might have provided the "basis for the genetic inheritance of the rest of us. In other words, the world was populated from here: If Adam came from Africa, Eve came from India. So it is truly Mother India, indeed". We should be rightfully proud of today's Tamilnadu, for being the place where this process started from.

It is this long history that we are celebrating today, noting that the evolution of language is intricately linked with the evolution of the society.

I

Karl Marx had called language as "the immediate actuality of thought". Tracing the origin of language in the *German Ideology* he states, "Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men".

Explaining the evolution of language over the years, in his '*Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*' Stalin writes, "Language is one of those social phenomena which operate throughout the existence of a society. It arises and develops with the rise and development of a society. It dies when the society dies. Apart from society there is no language. Accordingly, language and its laws of development can be understood only if studied in inseparable connection with the history of society, with the history of the people to whom the language under study belongs, and who are its creators and repositories.

"Language is a medium, an instrument with the help of which people communicate with one another, exchange thoughts and understand each other. Being directly connected with thinking, language registers and fixes in words, and in words combined into sentences, the results of the process of thinking and achievements of man's cognitive activity, and thus makes possible the exchange of thoughts in human society.

"Language has been created precisely in order to serve society as a whole, as a means of intercourse between people, in order to be common to the members of society and constitute the single language of society, serving members of society equally, irrespective of their class status. A language has only to depart from this position of being a language common to the whole people, it has only to give preference and support to some one social group to the detriment of other social groups of the society, and it loses its virtue, ceases to be a means of intercourse between the people of the society, and becomes the jargon of some social group, degenerates and is doomed to disappear".

The very fact that Tamil language continues to develop and thrive, unlike other classical languages in the world like Latin, is because of the fact that it had maintained its liveliness by being constantly among the people and common to the entire people.

II

The logo of this conference depicts Thiruvalluvar's statue in Kanyakumari, lashed by tsunami waves and encircled by seven icons from the Indus Valley Civilisation. The depiction of the icons of Indus valley civilisation in the logo deserves a mention. It brings out the continuity and coalescence between the various cultures and the common thread that runs through them. A research paper submitted in one of these earlier conferences by Dr Iravatham Mahadevan an archaeologist of repute, pointing out that Indus valley inscriptions may belong to Dravidian culture, in fact, tries to establish the link between the people of the Indus valley with those who had inhabited these lands. The work of Dr Asko Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Script*, winner of the 'Kalaingar M. Karunanidhi Classical Tamil Award' also gains its importance from the fact that he had suggested Dravidian, close to old Tamil, as the language of the Indus script.

And of course the motto of the conference inscribed on the logo "*pirapokkum ella uyirkkum, All living humans are one in circumstances of birth*" portrays this universalism. Its relevance today, as Thiru Karunanidhi explains, lies in its emphasises on the "ideal of humankind, that it should always be free of narrow walls of race, creed, and caste". This is one important lesson that the history of our country, particularly this region teaches us.

The element of commonality in the languages and the harmonious manner in which they have blossomed into what they are today, leaving along the way a rich legacy of culture, in itself constitutes interesting study. To better understand this phenomenon, let us take a brief example of the three south Indian languages Tamil, Telugu and Kannada. Befittingly, while Tamil was awarded the status of classical language in 2005, Telugu and Kannada were conferred similar status in 2008. As a generation, we grew waking up early in the morning everyday to the smell of brewing coffee and listening to M.S. Subbalakshmi on the radio. The trimurthi of Carnatic music – Thyagaraja, Shyama Sastry and Muthuswami Dikshitar – all composed their music in Telugu, though having different mother tongues. Yet, the music is called 'Carnatic'. The harmony of our diversity is such that Telugu compositions can be effortlessly rendered in Tamil – or in Kannada. This is the beauty of the universalism, that our tradition teaches us. Instead of recognising this simple truth, there were ugly expressions of chauvinism when M.S. Subbalakshmi was once sought to be prevented from performing at the annual Thyagaraja festivities, Thanjavur, simply because she used to sing in Tamil.

Language, which historically acted as a binding agent for the people, was sought to be used, against its basic characteristic, as a vehicle to promote chauvinism and divisions. These attempts need to be resisted by promoting the universal values that we learn from history.

III

We communists, look at language as a unifying force in the struggle and development of the society. We look at it as one among the four necessary conditions, not the only condition, that defines a nationality. It is based on this understanding that from the days of the freedom struggle, the Communist Party fought for the formation of linguistic states – Vishalandhra for Telugu speaking people, Aikya Kerala for those speaking Malayalam and Samyukta Maharashtra for the Marathi speakers. Similarly in Tamilnadu, communists played a prominent role in championing the cause of Tamil. Here it is apt to remember martyr Sankralingam, who died observing fast unto death for 64 days, to have the name Madras Presidency changed to Tamilnadu. He expressed his desire that his body be handed over to the communist party. P. Ramamurthy, a veteran freedom fighter and trade union leader from this part of the state, P. Jeevanandham and N. Sankaraiah declared that they would speak in Tamil in the state legislature and did speak in Tamil. A. Nallasivam, while he was an MP fought for the usage of Tamil in telegrams. Indeed they were pioneers in the struggle to get due recognition for Tamil. They believed that democracy does not have any meaning if, at least, the administration of the state is not carried out in the language of the common people. As Saint Thiruvalluvar says in his Thirukural,

Katchik keliyan kadunchollan allanel

Meekkurram mannan nilam

The whole world will exalt the country of the king who is

easy of access, and who is free from harsh language”.

(39:386)

For a democracy to be successful, accessibility to the Administration constitutes one of the important aspects. Language is one of the many aspects that not only connects both the ruler and the ruled but also defines the level of accessibility of the ruler/ruling class. Language plays an important part in the society by the means of exchange of thoughts “both in the sphere of

politics and in the sphere of culture, both in social life and in everyday life”.

It is in this context that the government of the day has got an important role to play. Without falling into the pit-hole trap of the Nehruvian model of imposing a three language formula, it should ensure that the language of the land prevails. This of course in no way should be construed as an advocacy for narrow minded linguistic chauvinism. All languages must be treated equally and allowed to thrive equally.

In today's world no person can be bound by a single identity. The frontiers of discussion on multiple identities is extended by including the conterminous use of various languages by Indians. The extension of this understanding to include languages is important in the context of it often becoming a bone of chauvinistic contention. It is shown that in much of recorded history and in today's realities, we, in India, live using, at least, three languages simultaneously – the mother tongue, the language at work, and the language of creative expressions. This explains our earlier example of Carnatic music. It thus becomes the bounden duty of the government to nurse this interpenetration of various identities, of course without belittling the importance of the 'given' identity.

Here I am, born in Tamilnadu, mother tongue Telugu, settled in Hindi-speaking Delhi, representing the people of West Bengal in the Parliament and addressing the august gathering here of Tamil speaking people from all over the world. This is India.

IV

Before I conclude, I would like to place some suggestions before the Conference for its consideration. Tamil has a rich tradition and produced literature that is highly relevant even today. Apart from it, there are huge treasures of oral history that need to be immediately documented and preserved for eternity. Music, drama, folk arts are all repositories of such invaluable treasures. I hope the conference initiates some measures in this regard. Tamil society is also enriched by the various movements like the national movement, the self-respect movement, the Dravidian movement, the communist movement, the dalit movement and the feminist movement. The rich treasures of literature each of these movements have left and the way they have influenced and helped in the evolution of Tamil and the society too needs to be thoroughly studied with a scientific perspective. Organisations like the Progressive Writers' Association should not only be made part of this conference but should also be associated with such a

project.

The Thirukural says *Perumai udayavar aatruvar aattrin*

Arumai udaya seyal

The man endowed with greatness true

Rare deeds in perfect wisdom will do. (98:975)

Let us, together, learn from the rich traditions of Tamil language in order to create conditions for it to flourish and develop further.