

The Language Issue

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"YEAR FOR A TRILINGUAL SRI LANKA" was the heading given to a news item in top position on P. 2 of your issue of Saturday, 26th November.

"The Cabinet has decided to declare 2012 as the Year for a Trilingual Sri Lanka.

Because the Government has observed that one of the far-seeing initiatives that needs to be taken, to prevent the resurgence of terrorism which ravaged the country for over 3 decades, is to encourage the people of Sri Lanka to

communicate effectively in all three languages" It goes on to say that a 10-year-programme has been presented to the Cabinet by the President and approved for implementation and that a Co-ordinating Unit will be established at the Presidential Secretariat.

It amazes me that the Government hasn't had the grace to acknowledge its failure - and certainly that of previous governments as well - to try to implement the Official Languages Act for so long. Cold comfort to the Tamils who have waited in vain for several decades to receive official communications in Tamil and to have the right to use their mother-tongue when dealing orally or in writing, with Govt. departments. Last week, a neighbour of mine - a Tamil widow - came to me in great distress. She had gone to the Rent Control Board about an urgent matter and the official who listened to her had told her to bring a letter written in Sinhala to enable him to deal with the matter. My friend speaks Sinhala quite well, but is unable to write in Sinhala.

In this context, a few weeks ago your paper published the very illuminating text of a keynote address given by Professor Sasanka Perera on "Language and Social Cohesion" at the 9th International Conference on Language and Development held in Colombo on the 17th October. The speaker was the former Head of the Dept. of Sociology University of Colombo. The title of his address, as given in your paper, was: Reflections on Issues of Language in SL POWER, EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION. I shall resist the temptation to quote too much from Prof. Perera's talk but I would highlight some very pertinent comments made: "The vast gap between the official recognition of Tamil as an Official Language and the practical implementation of the provisions and conditions it entails, is yet to be bridged. As recently as 2005, the Govt's Official Language Commission made the following crucial observations.".....

.... The facilities of communicating with the central government in obtaining its services in Tamil are minimal. The situation amounts to a violation of constitutional rights of the Tamil speaking citizens of this country. Apart from the indignities they are made to suffer, they are put into innumerable inconveniences in transacting business with the Government. The provincial administration including that of the North and East miserably fail in serving citizens inhabiting those areas....." Finally, Prof. Perera quotes a memorable remark made by Nelson Mandela who said:

"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language that goes to his heart." Professor Perera concludes his address thus: "My wish today is that our political leaders would somehow find the wisdom to be guided by this simple logic. I also wish that wisdom would come to govern our politics in general and our politics of language in particular." To which I say "Amen!"

Anne Abayasekara