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Too few Tamil speakers in SL Govt service

PK Balachandran

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Sri Lanka's Official Languages Commission has reported that there are far too few Tamil speakers in government service and has suggested measures to correct the glaring imbalance.

The Tamil-speaking population in Sri Lanka comprises Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Origin Tamils and Muslims. Together they are 26 per cent of the island's population.

But in the 9,00,000-strong public service, Tamil-speakers are just 8.3 per cent. The rest are Sinhala-speakers.

Out of the 36,031 employees in the Police Department, 231 are Tamils and 246 are Muslims.



Since Sri Lankan Muslims are also Tamil speaking, the total number of Tamil speakers in this vital department is just 477.

Wellawatte, a suburb of Colombo, is an overwhelmingly Tamil area, with 21,417 of its residents out of a total population of 29,302, being Tamil speaking. But in the Wellawatte police station, out of the 156 personnel, only 6 are Tamil speaking.

The Sri Lankan armed forces are also almost completely Sinhala or Sinhala speaking. The few Tamil-speaking personnel there are Muslims, rather than Tamils as such.

There is a such a shortage of Tamil-speaking senior and competent officers that in the predominantly Tamil-speaking North Eastern districts, officers are asked to stay on after retirement.

There are Government Agents and Assistant Government Agents (counterparts of the Indian District Collectors) who keep serving well past their official retirement age.

There are only 166 official translators in Sri Lanka. And out of these, only 58 are Tamil-speaking.

But translators are required in large numbers because of the existence of a

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massive linguistic barrier in the country.

In the Sri Lankan school system, Sinhala learn through the Sinhala medium, and Tamils through the Tamil medium. This is so even in the universities. Very little English is taught, if at all, at any stage.

This is the reason for the massive linguistic barrier between the two major communities in Sri Lanka, a barrier which has added to the distance between them since independence in 1948.

Speaking to Hindustan Times on the state of affairs, the Chairman of the Official Languages Commission, Raja Collure, said: "Successive governments have failed to implement the constitutional provision in regard to the use of Tamil as the second official language."

This is regrettable especially in view of the fact that Tamil had been made the second official language of the country, through the 13th amendment, 18 years ago, following the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of July 1987.

No concern for employment of Tamil speakers

At that time, it was presumed that the acceptance of Tamil as an official language would automatically lead to the recruitment of more Tamils and that there would be no glaring ethnic imbalances.

But Tamil has been an official language "only in name" as The Sunday Times put it. Recruitment of Tamil-speakers, especially ethnic Tamils, has been abysmally low.

If at all the state wanted to remedy the situation, it was only in respect of the use of the Tamil language in official work. The accent was not on the recruitment of more Tamils or Tamil-speakers.

In the latter part of the 1990s, President Chandrika Kumaratunga tried to introduce an 'Equal Opportunities Bill' to redress the linguistic and ethnic minorities' grievances in regard to employment. The statistics brought out by it were telling.

Notwithstanding the powerful case made out for such a bill, it raised a storm of protest among the Sinhala majority, which considered ethnic, linguistic and religious reservations as undermining the unity of Sri Lanka and its destiny as a Sinhala-Buddhist country.

However, there has never been any vocal opposition to the greater use of Tamil in official work. Governments could thus move on this matter more easily.

Commission set up

Following a parliamentary enactment in 1991, an Official Languages Commission was set up to oversee and monitor the use of Tamil across the island.

The commission, headed by the veteran communist leader, Raja Collure,

began working in 1994. In June 2005, it gave a comprehensive report on the state of affairs and submitted its recommendations to remedy the situation.

Detailing the recommendations, Collure said that the commission favoured immediate steps to recruit more Tamil-speakers.

But he was aware that this could run into trouble with the Constitution which did not allow recruitment to the public service on a communal basis.

"But some way has to be found to take more Tamil speakers immediately," Collure said.

Simultaneously, steps should be taken to teach Tamil to non-Tamil public servants. Either they should have a working knowledge at the time of recruitment, or they should become bilingual within a specified time frame, he said.

The Department of Official Languages should be turned into an institute with branches in all districts to train officials and others in Sinhala and Tamil. The universities should be asked to organise diploma courses.

At the high school level, both Sinhala and Tamil should be made compulsory so that in 12 to 15 years' time, Sri Lanka would have a large group of people knowing both the languages, Collure said.

Showing the Mahinda Rajapaksa government's interest in solving the ethnic conflict by promoting inter-ethnic relations, Constitutional Affairs and National Integration Minister DEW Gunasekara recently announced that every public servant would be taught both Sinhala and Tamil.

But as an observer put it, unless bilingual ability is made compulsory at the time of recruitment, the government's plans may go awry. He recommended the way IAS probationers in India are made to learn the language of the state they are assigned.

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