

Is Sri Lankan Malay Language doomed?

Language is the soul of the race. A community is identified by the language its people speak. The Sri Lankan Malays are a minority group which seems to be drifting away from the Malay language. Even in their homes Malay language takes second preference. There is even a marked absence in the use of Malay language among some Malay organizations. This is critical when no Malay language is used. Most Malays communicate in English or in Sinhala thus creating the way for the language to meet its Waterloo. Will the Malay race survive if the Malay language dies?

This is what is foremost in the minds of most Malays. There are Malays with a feeling of Malayness in them perhaps this is one of the reasons why Malay language has survived. About fifty or sixty years ago, Malay was freely spoken. There were non-Malays who spoke Malay quite fluently. Those were days of an earlier generation but with the passage of time, the language began to lose its lustre. Most of the older folks began to depart one by one and Malay language began its decline. What we have today is Malay with a mixture of Sinhala, Tamil and English and spoken as Malay, a kind of pidgin Malay.

I write this feature more as a soliloquy for I lament on this dilemma in what direction the Malay language is heading. Our Malays are far from realizing that we are an endangered species in Sri Lanka. We are as endangered as an Amazon Indian Tribe of Brazil - The Wauras, who have now become extinct. If we don't take serious view of this appalling situation our fate is sealed. According to statistics available the Malay population in Sri Lanka is about 60,000. Half this number do not know the language.

Some have lost their identity having merged with other communities while the rest are struggling to keep the race from being obliterated without a trace. It is out of the question to get back to speaking standard Malay. What we can do is speak our good old Sri Lankan Malay rather than not speak Malay at all or else take our choice of Sinhala, English or Tamil and be name-sake Malays as an alternative.

The Historical chronology of the Malays is very interesting; it takes us back to the 13th century A.D. to the time of King Parakrama Bahu II. During this period there was an invasion by the Javanese under the command of Prince Chandrabanu.

These Javanese invaders from the Indonesian Archipelago were predominantly Buddhists. Some historians have recorded in their chronicals that Chandrabanu had founded a kingdom in the Jaffna Peninsular and had ruled for a brief period.

History has also recorded that two other Malay kings of the Kalinga dynasty had ruled this Island. Whether these Javanese founded a colony here or not remains unknown but names like Ja-ela Jakotuwa, Chavakacheri are very familiar. It was actually after the Dutch and the British period that Malays established a foothold here. Hence from the Malays of these two periods we trace our roots. There were also Malays who were domiciled here as exiles having been banished from Indonesia by the Dutch. Most of these exiles were noblemen who refused to surrender and paid the penalty of banishment.

When the Dutch came here in the 17th century to fight the Portuguese they had in their ranks Malay soldiers with a reputation in warfare. About a hundred years later another contingent of Malay soldiers arrived with the British and this time it was to wage war with the Dutch. Both groups of Malays besides being militarily disciplined were also spiritually disciplined.

Most of them being followers of Islam ,vetured to build mosques in important towns in the country. This is a brief sketch of the Malays of a by- gone era .These un-sung heroes of that era were our ancestors.

They left us a rich legacy -the legacy of their culture and language and most importantly their Malayness .If we are to call ourselves "PROUD TO BE A MALAY "Let that pride go to those great Malays of a past generation .At the break of dawn and at the setting of the sun let us solemnly remember them with gratitude.

Malay Organizations are doing their utmost to propagate Malay awareness but what can they do if the individual makes no effort .If Malays cultivate the habit of speaking in Malay in their homes ,the language will get a lease of life .At this juncture ,I wish to highlight a few lines of a memorable poem by Mr.B.D .K. Saldin from his book Sri Lankan Malays and their language .It's about a Grandpa's Lament

"What do now the children speak
Malay is like talking Greek
How can one a Malay spot
If to talk they know not

Where are all our customs gone?
Rarely do we see them now
Bahasa Melayu's gone away
To a Moyang's great dismay

The time's they are a' changing
We cannot live by only praying
New things there are aplenty
But don't reject our identity.

Adat, Bahasa our heritage
Preserve them is my message
Let them emerge from the gloom
And preserve our race from doom

What great thoughts from a truly great Malay .This emphasises what Malayness is about. This is what is called patriotic feeling .A feeling that should be present in all Malays to love and cherish the language of our forefathers. Let us then carry forward these valuable thoughts and pass them on to our next generation so that it may flourish and when our thoughts take shape we can call ourselves' PROUD TO BE A MALAY" .

I presume my message to my melayu saudaras and saudaris in this essay is very clear .In my brief sojourn with this piece of writing, I shall epitomize with these lines :-"KALAU LUPA BAHASA ,NANTHI HILANG BANGSA". If Language be lost ,so will be race.

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