

A Trilingual Sri Lanka

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`Sri Lanka is speaking the language of peace` - President Mahinda Rajapaksa could not have put it across more lucidly and touchingly. The 30 year conflict has drawn to a close and the task before the country is to not only rebuild itself in a physical sense but to bring about its rejuvenation in the profounder sense of establishing durable national unity and harmony. One of the surest paths to rebuilding in this latter vital sense is the recognition of the language rights of all our communities. To this goal, we are glad to note, the government is fully committed and the world had a fresh reassurance on this score from the President himself at the ongoing 9th International Language and Development Conference being held in Colombo.

We hardly need go over the highly beaten track of the language debate in this country at this juncture to point to the very vital importance of Sri Lanka adopting a trilingual policy, with English playing the role of a link language. One of the triggers to our conflict which dragged on destructively for 30 long years, was perceived language discrimination and there is no better way to see an end to our problems in this regard than by adopting successfully a trilingual policy, which would make it obligatory on all citizens to have at least a working knowledge of the three main languages used in this country - Sinhala, Tamil and English. President Rajapaksa's enlightened approach to governance is reflected in his commitment to a trilingual policy. With the adoption of this policy he has indicated also his commitment to seeing a complete end to language policy linked controversial issues which literally tore this country apart in the past.

Among other things, this policy line amounts to also a complete rejection of language chauvinism which had a destructively divisive impact on Sri Lanka and which had helped in no small way to sustain our conflict, although no justification could be made for the LTTE's policy of terror which was dehumanizing and destructive in the extreme and which necessitated a strong military response on the part of the state. But having decisively put down the LTTE, the state has chosen to start anew as it were, by rejecting language chauvinism in all its forms and by choosing, very rightly, to follow a course of according complete parity of status to our official languages, Sinhala and Tamil, while encouraging the cultivation of English by the citizenry as a link language. In other words, a Trilingual Sri Lanka would be the ideal which would be striven towards by the state and among the right-thinking this, indeed, is the right way to go.

The most immediate task is to establish the capability and capacity to bring about this aspired to state of affairs in the country and the exertions in this regard of Sunimal Fernando, who, among other things, is the Coordinator of the Presidential Task Force for A Trilingual Sri Lanka, besides other key officials, should be appreciated. They have pursued this project of the first importance with single-minded zeal and given their degree of commitment, the aim would not prove difficult to achieve.

The state should be commended for its highly pragmatic approach to resolving these language-linked issues. President Rajapaksa has committed himself to building a Sri Lanka where community would not matter at all, and there is no better way to put it but by stating that in Sri Lanka from now on, there would not be any ethnic minorities as such but only those who are loyal to Sri Lanka and those who are not. Since in this new dispensation community would not matter, language-linked parochial issues that divide the citizenry rather unite it, would cease to matter too. The underlying principle is that in post-conflict Sri Lanka only one's humanity would matter, since all citizens would enjoy parity of status. The perceived discriminations of the past would not figure in contemporary Sri Lanka because what would matter vitally in this context is one's Sri Lankan identity only.

However, all relevant languages in this country would be taught in an unbiased manner and all citizens would be encouraged to learn all these languages, for, in the world of today, interaction among peoples and countries, in a multiplicity of spheres, would not be possible if languages that matter, such as English, are not learnt and used effectively. Thus, multilingualism becomes the hallmark of a country on the march to progress and it is a matter for rejoicing that Sri Lanka has decided to figure prominently among these positively-oriented countries.