

Tamil version of the national anthem

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Rather than banning the Tamil version of the national anthem, Sri Lanka must officially adopt Sinhala, Tamil and bilingual versions of the anthem.

by Nimal Rajapakse

(December 22, Colombo, Sri Lanka Guardian) Following the recent news regarding the alleged banning of the Tamil version of the Sri Lankan National Anthem by the government, there has been a plethora of associated arguments and counter-arguments for and against such a ban. The arguments of the Sinhala hardliners expressed in support of the ban have been made purely based on their racial intolerance. They clearly demonstrate that they are ill-informed of the facts they cite as well as are not sensitive to the damage this issue can cause to the fragile restoration of the confidence of the Sri Lankan Tamil community in the country and the Diaspora. The world opinion on the efficacy of the reconciliation efforts following the 30 year bloody unrest in Sri Lanka last year is that a lot needs to be done to even begin to win the respect and commitment of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

The reason for the onset of post-independence peaceful struggles for Tamil rights in Sri Lanka and the subsequent 'liberation terrorism' to create a Tamil Homeland that lasted over three decades, are the results of successive majority Sinhalese governments ignoring the grievances of the Tamil community. If the Sinhalese majority genuinely desires to have a lasting peace, they must understand the fact that destroying the LTTE has merely put on hold the agenda of the separatist Tamils. Winning the war against LTTE, however remarkable it was, will only be a temporary reprieve unless winning the hearts and minds of the Tamils everywhere

is realized. The majority Sinhalese must, at every occasion, go out of their way to accommodate the sentiments of the Tamil community in sincere anticipation of winning their trust.

The alleged ban on the Tamil version national anthem will quite definitely damage the most delicate and minute healing which has occurred following the defeat of the LTTE only 18 months ago.

At a moment like this, the Sinhala majority must study the issue carefully before jumping to conclusions prematurely, based on racial sentiments. It has widely been reported in the media that very responsible and highly regarded members of the Sinhala majority have categorically stated that no other country in the world has the national anthem in more than one language and 'it is a joke' to sing Sri Lankan national anthem in Tamil.

There are many countries in the world that has official versions of their national anthems in more than one language. For example, Canada, one of the world's most respected democracies, have three official versions of their national anthem.

The Canadian Ministry of Heritage, which oversees the issues of national anthem, has defined the English, French and Bilingual versions as all legal. In practice, the most suitable version for the occasion at hand is used.

For example, in a region where English is the most preferred language, the English version is used whereas in the Province of Quebec in which French is the first official language, the French version is sung. However, in an occasion in which both the language groups are represented, such as a Federal Government function or a sports encounter between teams of English and French speaking regions, the Bilingual version is sung. This version begins and ends in English while the middle verse is in French.

Therefore, hopefully, the Sinhalese nationalists should realise that 'it is not a joke' to sing a national anthem in more than one language. There are many more examples like this in the world if anyone is eager to find out. However, the Canadian example is quite sufficient to demonstrate and justify having more than one language version of a national anthem.

To add more insight into the origin of the Canadian national anthem, it must be noted that the original versions were written and music was composed by French artistes over 100 years ago before it became official in 1980. More information on this subject is available in Ministry of Canadian Heritage website, www.pch.gc.ca. Follow the link to Anthems and Symbols.

Another misconception given exposure in the media is that the Indian national anthem is sung only in Hindi. Of of course, in a country like India, where official business is conducted in some 60 languages, it is not practical to have versions in all recognized languages. However, the Indian national anthem was written by well known poet Rabindranath Tagore, in Bengali. It is ironic that Tagore also belonged to a minority group. Even though the words in the lyrics sound very close to being in Hindi, Bengali was the original language in which Tagore composed the original version.

Rather than banning the Tamil version of the national anthem, Sri Lanka must officially adopt Sinhala, Tamil and bilingual versions of the anthem. Or, perhaps, they can set an impressive precedence by adopting only the bilingual version as the only official version and force all Sri Lankans to learn and sing at least a few words of the other official language.