

Peace through Language Policy as a Solution to the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

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Abstract : Sri Lanka, which is officially called the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is an island nation situated near India. It is a multi-lingual, multi- religious and multi - ethnic country, where Sinhalese form the majority and the Tamils form the largest ethnic minority. The composition of the population (ethnic basis) in Sri Lanka is as follows: Sinhalese: 74.5%, Tamil (Sri Lankan): 12.6%, Muslim: 7.5 %, Tamil (Indian): 5.5%, Malay: 0.3%, Burgher: 0.3 %, other: 0.2 %. The Tamil people use the Tamil language as their mother tongue and the Sinhala people use the Sinhala language as their mother tongue. A very few people in both communities use English as their mother tongue and however, a large number of people use English as a second language. The Sinhala Language was declared the only official language in Sri Lanka in 1959. However, it was not acceptable to Tamil politicians as well as to the common Tamil people and it was the beginning of long standing ethnic crisis which later became a military war where a lot of blood was shed. As a solution to the above ethnic crisis the thirteenth amendment to the constitution of Sri Lanka was introduced in 1987 and according to it both Sinhala and Tamil were declared official languages and English as the link language in Sri Lanka. Thus, a new programme namely, second language teaching programme under which Sinhala was taught to Tamil students and Tamil was taught to Sinhala students, was introduced at government schools. Language teaching includes knowledge of the culture of the target language. As all cultures are mixed and have common features students have reduced their enmity about the other community and learned to respect the other culture. On the other hand as all languages are mixed, students came to the understanding that there are no pure languages. Thus, they learned to respect the other language. In the case of Sri Lanka the Sinhala language is mixed with the Tamil language and vice versa. Thus, the development of second language teaching is the prominent way to solve the above ethnic problem and this study clearly shows it. However, the above programme suffers with lack of trained second language teachers, infrastructure facilities and insufficient funds and, they can be considered as the main obstacles to develop the second language teaching programme. Yet, there are no satisfactory answers to those problems. The data were collected from relevant books, articles and other documents based on research and forty five recordings, each with one hour duration, of natural conversations covering all factions of the Sinhala community.

Keywords : ethnic crisis, official language, second language teaching, Sinhala, Tamil

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