

## **Sustainable Preservation: Language Choice in Complex Multilingual Settings**

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### **SUMMARY**

Do the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) conflict with the UN Declaration of Indigenous Rights when it comes to attempts to maintain the Sri Lanka Malay vernacular?

The Sri Lanka Malay (SLM) are a minority group in Sri Lanka. When we look at the MDGs, they include the right to education to ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. But what to what extent are minority rights taken care of?

When it comes to Sri Lanka Malay there is a perception of endangerment. Sinhala is the dominant language, followed by Tamil, the language of the largest minority, with English used in education.

Malays are an invisible minority. They have many different social and economic backgrounds. Despite these differences, they regard themselves as a community.

The Sri Lanka Malay vernacular is a linguistic compromise between Malay, Sinhala and Tamil. In the south of the country, SLM is the language of the home. They don't speak English.

Right now a change is taking place. Efforts are being made to learn and promote standard Malay, which differs from the SLM vernacular. If we compare the two languages we see that standard Malay is the language of the center and urban areas, whereas the traditional language is the language of the periphery, though the people may wish to join the center. Meanwhile, there is a shift to using English in the home, particularly in urban areas, as the language is viewed as the key to a good job and a comfortable life.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century there was a move by a local scholar to revitalize Malay. Standard Malay (Bahasa Malay) was introduced, with support from the Malaysian High Commission, including scholarships and access to higher education. At the same time, there has been interest in revitalizing SLM, to preserve the vernacular, starting classes for urban youth, and producing educational material.

This competition between the two forms of the language has produced tension.

Standard Malay is thought to represent modernity and development, whereas the vernacular SLM is associated with tradition, diversity and identity.

If the SLM periphery shifts to standard Malay, this will mean a loss of the vernacular language. However, SLM serves the periphery best, and there is an easier shift from mother tongue to the medium of instruction because of how SLM borrows from Sinhala and Tamil. Use of the vernacular minimizes the cultural gap between ethnicities

In the case of MDGs, is vernacular maintenance compatible with MDG 2.A? Where revitalization is called for, should achieving MDGs be subordinate to the UN Declaration of Rights for Indigenous people?

### **DISCUSSION**

Question: Given there are national, local and an international language, what should be done?

Answer: Languages get into conflict. There are often political reasons behind this, as seen with Sinhala and Tamil. What is the function of language? It is to bring people closer together. We can see how what happened after Sri Lanka's independence. Language became a source of conflict after the introduction of the Sinhala-only policy. We see the results in the civil war between the Tamil separatists and the Sinhala-led government.

Question: What is the relationship of standard Malay to Sri Lanka Malay? Is the problem ideological rather than linguistic?

Answer: The relationship is very distant. The languages are mutually unintelligible. You are right that this is an ideological issue. Sri Lanka Malay has low prestige. Plus we see the influence of the Malaysian High Commission. They are quite aggressive in promoting what they feel is the better language.

Question: What authority does the Malaysian High Commission have?

Answer: They are always supportive. They offer scholarships for those using standard Malay.

Question: Why are there Malays in Sri Lanka?

Answer: The people are by and large of Indonesian origin who became Malays in Sri Lanka. They are proud of the link to Malaysia. This is important because they are Muslims, they have a guarantee of ancestry. It is a complex situation.

Question: Why are they called Malay? Does this come from linguistics?

Answer: It seems the language could be closer to Sinhala and Tamil. It is a way to identify their group. This is a construction and it is more complex than one culture and language.