

# Vibhasha

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Issue II

## Language rights violated; legal action against the University Grants Commission

The Centre for Policy Alternatives is presently in the process of initiating legal action against the University Grants Commission, as the language rights of the Tamil citizens of Sri Lanka have been violated as a result of many of the courses conducted by the Institute of Human Resource Advancement (IHRA) of the University of Colombo being available in the Sinhala and English mediums alone.

Chapter IV of the Sri Lankan Constitution sets out the provisions on language, of which Article 21 covers the legal framework regarding the medium of instruction. The constitution states thus:

21. (1) A person shall be entitled to be educated through the medium of either of the National Languages:

Provided that the provisions of this paragraph shall not apply to an institution of higher education where the medium of instruction is a language other than a National Language.

(2) Where one National Language is a medium of instruction for or in any course,



department or faculty of any University directly or indirectly financed by the State, the other National Language shall also be made a medium of instruction for or in such course, department or faculty for students who prior to their admission to such University, were educated through the medium of such other National Language:

Provided that compliance with the preceding provisions of this paragraph shall not be obligatory if such other National Language is the medium of instruction for or in any like course, department or faculty either at any other campus or branch of such University or of any other like University.

(3) In this Article "University" includes any institution of higher education.

According to Article 12(1) and (2) of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, no citizen should be discriminated against on the grounds of language. The fundamental right related to language in Article 12(2) provides thus:

12(2) No citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any such grounds.

However, several courses conducted by the Institute of Human Resource Advancement (IHRA), such as

- Diploma in Drug Abuse Management Studies
  - Bachelor of Labor Education
  - Certificate Course in Counseling Psychology leading to Diploma
- are limited to the Sinhala and English mediums.

Speaking on the issue, Mr. Niran of the Legal Unit of the Centre for Policy Alternatives told the Vibhasha Newsletter that his investigations confirmed that no other University within to the University System of Sri Lanka carried these courses in the Tamil language. He added that the Tamil citizens would not face this injustice if, at least, another University in Sri Lanka conducted these courses in Tamil.

He further stated that he will be taking necessary steps in the near future to bring legal action against the University Grants Commission, as several Universities other than the University of Colombo conducted a number of courses that are limited to one language.

## A collective formed for the promotion of language rights

The formation of a collective of Civil Society Organizations, aimed at promoting language rights in Sri Lanka, took place recently. The Centre for Policy Alternatives, Eastern United Women's Organization, Movement for the Defense of Democratic Rights, National

Fisheries Solidarity Movement, People Help Foundation – Mannar, Rural Development Foundation – Vavuniya, Foundation of Rural Economic Development – Panama and the Trincomalee Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, act as members of this collective.

Thus far, this collective has established approximately 150 language committees in the North and East, and have conducted approximately 600 awareness raising programs on language rights.

The collective had also made preparations to conduct

a public discussion regarding the promotion of language rights in commemoration of the International Human Rights Day which fell on the 10th of December.

A special report on this discussion will be published in the subsequent issue of Vibhasha.

# Language battle at the railway station; Announcements in all three languages commence



As a result of complaints received, regarding the lack of railway traffic information in all three languages, Sri Lanka Railways has taken steps to enable announcements at all railway stations, in all three languages in the near future.

Numerous complaints regarding this issue had been received by several organizations including the Official Languages Commission in the recent past. The Centre for Policy Alternatives, has also lodged a complaint with the Official Languages

Commission, regarding announcements at a number of railway stations, including the Anuradhapura railway station, being made only in the Sinhala language.

According to a statement made by the Sri Lanka Railways

Director Planning Mr. Vijaya Samarasinghe in the recent past, except for at key stations, announcements were not being made in all three languages at the majority of railway stations. Citing personnel related problems as the reason; he added that the staff will be provided the necessary training and employed in the task in the future.

In keeping, the necessary staff training commenced recently under the initiative of the Official Languages Commission. As at present, 50 persons engaged in announcement activities at railway stations, have received this training.

While the first group comprising 25 persons received their training on the 28th and 29th of November, the second group received their training on the 6th and 7th of December.

The resource contribution for this training conducted under the initiative of the Official Languages Commission was made by the Institute of Human Resource Advancement of the University of Colombo.

Railway traffic announcements at all stations are expected to be made in all three languages in the near future.

## Complaints made to five organizations requesting language rights in the marketplace

The Centre for Policy Alternatives has lodged complaints with 5 organizations, regarding usage and other essential information related to medication sold in the local market, not being made available to the consumer in the official languages of this country.

As we had highlighted in the lead story of the previous issue of Vibhasha, the basic information related to the majority of medicinal products available in this country, is provided solely in the English language. As emphasized therein, this violates not only the language rights of the citizens of this country, but also their rights as consumers.

As such, with the intention of seeking redress against this problem, the Centre for Policy Alternatives has submitted complaints to the Official Languages Commission, as well as the Consumer Protection Authority. In addition, complaints have also been made by the Centre for Policy Alternatives, to the Cosmetics, Devices and Drugs Authority Technical Advisory Committee (CDDATAC), the Presidential Initiative for a Trilingual Sri Lanka, and the Drug Regulatory Authority of Sri Lanka.

## Cadre of 350 capable of working in Tamil join the Police

Addressing a public discussion held in Colombo to commemorate Human Rights Day, the Minister of National Languages and Social Integration Vasudeva Nanayakkara stated, that the government has taken steps to enroll 350 persons capable of working in the Tamil language, as Police Constables to work in the North and East areas, with the intention of providing a solution to problems faced by Tamil citizens of these areas in seeking Police assistance in their mother tongue.

The Minister added that this measure was taken as a first step, and will be expanded on in the future.

The Minister voiced these opinions while addressing a Public Discussion on the Promotion of Language Rights in Sri Lanka, held on the 12th of December at the Mahaweli Centre, organized by the Civil Society Organization Collective formed to promote language rights in Sri Lanka.





## An “accelerated” plan to win language rights as well

It seems that a new discourse on an old subject is emergent within the country at present. However, the skeptics that question the sincerity and meaningfulness of this discourse, and renewed interest in the language rights in Sri Lanka, are also not in shortage.

This skepticism is also not unfounded. The numerous harsh and disappointing experiences of the past form the basis for this doubt.

If one were to list out all the problems faced by Sri Lanka throughout her history, the aforementioned language rights would top the list.

It is also no secret that this problem, which intensified in the years following independence, was a key factor that resulted in the country eventually plummeting into a dreaded war zone.

Even in those early days, it is not that there were no leaders who understood the gravity of the problem and attempted to set the country on the right track. Some even put their lives on the line in their efforts. However, the victors were those who overpowered these efforts with their own attempts to intensify the problem. In the end, the country's inheritance was the 30 year unending flames of war.

Now the flames have died and the war has ended. And pledges of

never letting a repetition occur are being made.

It is within such a backdrop that the present discourse on language rights in Sri Lanka is unfolding. Numerous workshops, conferences and lectures are at present being conducted to raise awareness on language rights amongst the citizenry of this country.

At first glance, this seems a positive development. Various issues that were suppressed during the last thirty years by the terrorizing war environment are yet again being brought up for discussion as a result. However, key amongst the questions raised, is that which asks how helpful this discourse will be in providing solutions to the problems people at the grassroots level face in their daily lives. **While such doubt and dismay founded in past experience may be justified, we must understand that an increase in public interest is step one of any process of resolution. In this light, we must be able to view this renewed interest with positivity.**

The media's ability to draw public as well as policy makers' attention to problems related to language rights, is also due for special consideration. While our past experiences with the media have been less than satisfactory, not all hope should be lost. It is the media that is responsible for bringing the problems related to language rights faced by the average

person, to the attention of society at large. Journalists, as well as the various pressure groups working on language rights should understand this ability that the media possesses, and work towards using it for societal progress.

What is meant here is not the use of media to create media circuses, but rather the use of media as a platform through which to bring society's attention to real problems related to language rights, and seek solutions for the same.

However, this responsibility should also not be underestimated as one that can be fulfilled by the media alone. What the media has at present is a journey that is merged with the parallel social activism related to language rights. When examined in comparison to the past, one could say that the situation today is somewhat positive, as neither the various social forces working on language rights, nor the media, seem to be faced with the kind of direct adverse pressures they were faced with a few decades ago.

The main obstacle today is the inadequate dedication and enthusiasm seen on the part of responsible parties. The article published on page 16 of this issue of Vibhasha can be cited as one simple example of this.

The article speaks of a problem related to a government sponsored billboard displayed in proximity to the Colombo Town Hall. As the billboard was not displayed with sensitivity to language rights in Sri Lanka, the Chairman of the Official Languages Commission was faced with the need to rectify this problem. As such, while the Chairman contacted the relevant responsible parties of the Ministry of Health several months ago, informing them of the error, no change whatsoever is seen on the billboard as yet.

The Minister of National Languages and Social Integration Vasudeva Nanayakkara presented another example of a language rights violation from the recent past. A large number of Sinhala as well as Tamil speaking persons visit the Colombo National Museum on a daily basis. The

majority of them are students from far flung areas of the country. There is not a single Tamil speaking employee at the National Museum to provide them with information related to the exhibits. Having understood the gravity of this problem, the Minister has over the last few months been pressuring the Museum authorities to hire two Tamil speaking staff members. However his efforts have yielded no results thus far.

Both incidents do not bode well for the dream of a future Sri Lanka with established language rights. What they indicate is the same old country that is insensitive to language rights. One might cite the problem of inefficient administration that we all face often in this country as the reason for this. Another might say “the laws exist but are not enforced”. But what the country is in need of today are not excuses, but solutions to the problem.

Mr. S.G Punchihewa in his publication ‘Language and Humanity’, points out administrative shortfall is nothing new by citing the following representation made by the All Ceylon Tamil Congress at the Soulbury Commission Evidence Hearings.

“Discrimination against the Ceylon Tamils arises not so much from legislative as from administrative or executive acts of commission or omission.”

If this allegation made by the ACTC at a time before independence, is still valid for the present day, what does it say of the independence we have achieved?

On the other hand, proof that administration is not a problem when the need exists, is aplenty.

This fact has been proven time and again both in the case of the war as well as through subsequent post war “urban development” and “accelerated development” projects.

As such, this administrative passivity should not be allowed validity as a reason with regards to problems of language rights alone.

Because language rights issues, and related arising problems, are second to none amongst the problems faced by this country.

# Complaints flood in to the Human Rights Commission

The Minority Language Rights Promotion and Empowerment Program of the Centre for Policy Alternatives has to date submitted 14 complaints related to the violation of language rights in this country, to the Human

Rights Commission of Sri Lanka and its regional offices.

According to the response received by the Human Rights Commission when queried, investigations into the complaints are already underway.

These complaints have been filed on the grounds that the fundamental right "All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to the equal protection of the law" as set out by Article

12(1) of the Constitution, have been violated.

A summary document regarding these complaints submitted to the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka is available below.



No.	Respondent	Complaint	Office reported to	Date of complaint	Case number
1	Senior Superintendent of Police Vavuniya and Inspector General of Police	Police Officers of Police Stations within the Vavuniya Police Division recording complaints and statements made by Tamil speaking persons in Sinhalese	Head Office Colombo	08/11/2011	HRC/3464/2011
2	Senior Superintendent of Police Ampara and Inspector General of Police	Police Officers of Police Stations within the Ampara Police Division recording complaints and statements made by Tamil speaking persons in Sinhalese	Head Office Colombo	08/11/2011	HRC/3467/2011
3	Senior Superintendent of Police Trincomalee and Inspector General of Police	Police Officers of Police Stations within the Trincomalee Police Division recording complaints and statements made by Tamil speaking persons in Sinhalese	Head Office Colombo	08/11/2011	HRC/3465/2011
4	Senior Superintendent of Police Batticaloa and Inspector General of Police	Police Officers of Police Stations within the Batticaloa Police Division recording complaints and statements made by Tamil speaking persons in Sinhalese	Head Office Colombo	08/11/2011	HRC/3463/2011
5	Station Superintendent Maho Railway Station and General Manager Railway Department	Announcements regarding railway traffic not being made in the Tamil language at Railway Stations	Head Office Colombo	08/11/2011	HRC/3470/2011
6	Station Superintendent Polgahawela Railway Station and General Manager Railway Department	Announcements regarding railway traffic not being made in the Tamil language at Railway Stations	Head Office Colombo	08/11/2011	HRC/3471/2011
7	Station Superintendent Galoya Railway Station and General Manager Railway Department	Announcements regarding railway traffic not being made in the Tamil language at Railway Stations	Head Office Colombo	08/11/2011	HRC/3469/2011
8	Station Superintendent Anuradhapura Railway Station and General Manager Railway Department	Announcements regarding railway traffic not being made in the Tamil language at Railway Stations	Head Office Colombo	08/11/2011	HRC/3468/2011
9	Chairwoman Urban Council Maharagama	Street signboards not containing the street name in the Tamil language	Head Office Colombo	08/11/2011	HRC/3462/2011
10	Chairman Pradeshiya Sabha Thirappane	Street signboards not containing the street name in the Tamil language	Regional Office Anuradhapura	08/11/2011	HRC/AP/555/11/I
11	Chairman Pradeshiya Sabha Thirukkivil	Street signboards not containing the street name in the Sinhala language	Regional Office Kalmunai	08/11/2011	HRC/KL/177/11/R



## Language rights, education rights and the role of Community Based Organizations

It is a frequently seen fact, that most groups that speak of language rights focus their attention solely on its related legal provisions. Their importance cannot be underestimated. However, when looking beyond legal provisions, it becomes evident that it is a grave shortfall to not focus attention on the impact of social, economic and political factors on language rights.

For example, education can be considered a key factor that impacts language rights. It cannot be accepted that universal equality of language rights could be realized within a situation in which the right to education is unequal. If this point were to be explained quite simply, literacy could be cited as a key factor that affects language rights. As is the case with a multitude of resources, it is no secret that a discrepancy exists with literacy as well in this country. While on the one hand a discrepancy in literacy exists within the city and the village, on the other hand a discrepancy also exists within the city and the plantation, as well as the village and the plantation.

This discrepancy is founded within the education sector. This inconsistency can be identified via a number of visages. According to the 1997 report of the Presidential Task Force on General Education, of the total population of children of Sri Lanka, 14% of the children

within the ages of 5–14, which is considered the compulsory school going age, do not attend school. It also stated that only 1/5th of the students of grade 5 had reached the Expert skill level in writing. Of the students that sat the GCE Ordinary Level exam in 1995, 10% had failed all 8 subjects. Of the Advanced Level students, 1/11th had failed all 4 subjects. This was the general situation within the country at the time. Given that the plantation sector is in a much more regressive state in comparison to other zones within the country, its situation was far more pathetic. According to reports by the Ministry of Education in 2006, of the total number of students between grades 1 and 6, only 58% continue studying beyond the 6th grade. In other words 42% leave school at the 6th grade. 93% leave school between the 11th and 13th grades. Only 0.002% qualifies for University. As such only 10 children representing the plantation sector qualify for University each year.

The discrepancy in literacy is also the same. When literacy is 94.5% amongst the urban segments, it is 76.9% within the plantation sector. The publication "Human Security in the Hill Country" quotes the PALM Foundation's 2004 Interim Plan January Issue, according to which a survey conducted in 1996/7 showed that while

the non schooling population in the urban and rural sectors were 5.9% and 7.9% respectively, the non schooling population amongst the plantation sector was 23.9%.

The teacher shortage is a key problem that drastically affects education in the plantation sector. As at May 2003, while the teacher shortage for Tamil Medium schools was 10121, the teacher excess for Sinhala Medium schools was 6704 (Education Progress - 2003). Teacher problems have had their impact quantitatively, but also qualitatively. Often they have been recruited for service with minimum educational qualifications as well as training. The in-service trainee teachers' situation is also no different. While the shortage of Sinhala Medium in-service instructors was 9%, the shortage of Tamil Medium in-service instructors was 51%.

While increases and decreases in these figures may have occurred over time, one does not however need a numbers tally to make clear that a drastic inconsistency exists in the distribution of education resources even today, between the city and the plantation sector, as well as the village and the plantation sector. The discrepancy is plainly visible.

On the other hand, it is not only direct facilities that impact education. The state of transportation facilities, housing,

water, health, sanitation and the family's level of income also have a decisive impact on it. Accordingly, the National Education Commission calculated a Composite Index in 1990 encompassing these factors.

This amply illustrated the discrepancy, with Colombo District showing a score of 77, while the Monaragala District showed a score of 41. While the Western Province showed a score of 65, the Uva and Central Provinces showed a score of 45 and 50 respectively. Given that the Uva and Central Provinces represent the plantation sector, there is no doubt that this inconsistency has most adversely affected the plantation sector. Even within the Provinces, it is evident that there is inconsistency in the distribution of these resources between the village and the plantation. As such, this inequality in the distribution of facilities which can be considered infrastructure for education has undoubtedly drastically impacted education within the plantation sector.

In addition, five other factors of influence that are directly tied in with formal education can be identified.

- I. An increase in educational opportunities
- II. An increase in the quality of education
- III. The development of practical and technical skills
- IV. Teacher education and teacher training
- V. Provision and management of resources

It is clear that the situation in the plantation sector regarding these five factors is also not one which is healthy. According to all these reasons, the plantation sector is in a severely disadvantaged position with regards to the equal right to education. On the other hand what is evident is that there is also no short term solution to this situation of disadvantage.



## International Language and Development Conference

An international conference that is of great significance to Sri Lanka's current post war era, following a 30 year conflict, was held for 3 days in Colombo last October from the 17th to the 19th.

Known as the International Language and Development Conference, its theme this time was Language and Social Cohesion. It is no secret that language rights were at the fore amongst the issues that post independence Sri Lanka battled over. It is also no secret that language was key amongst the various factors that led to war.

While it is of great importance that a conference of this nature was held in this country under such a backdrop, its results should also be felt by society.

The President, Senior Minister Scientific Affairs and a considerable number of participants from ministries including the Ministry of Education represented the government sector, while Universities and Educational Institutions were represented by a considerable number of academics. There was also significant representation of Non Governmental Organizations and as well as the international community at the conference.

It is reported that many great ideas were voiced therein. There is no debate on that fact.

However, questions arise as to what the results received were from this conference in a post war country, and whether a conference of this nature received adequate attention. Did an adequate discussion take place within society regarding it? Is society's knowledge on the discourse therein sufficient? Such awareness is not at present visible amongst the groups interested in the subject, nor amongst organizations within the community. Under such a situation, the question as to whether this conference became just another amongst a multitude of conference held in this country, cannot be avoided.

As a country that battled with language rights throughout its post independence history, and has many scars to show for it, this need not be the case in Sri Lanka.

This discourse should be taken to the people. A change that can be felt by the people should occur.

In any case, a few ideas brought forth by the President and the Minister of National Languages and Social Integration Vasudeva Nanayakkara while addressing the conference are published herein for the reader's attention.



### Sri Lanka is committed to protecting language rights of all ethnicities

President says at the International Language and Development Conference

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“In the field of education we see the important role that language can play in social integration. It is for this purpose that we have introduced new policies for teaching English and Information Technology, to take the latest advances in knowledge and technology to all parts of our country.”

”

Let me first express my appreciation of your decision to make Sri Lanka the venue for this Ninth Conference on Language and Development. I believe at this time of our history, the holding of this conference is significant.

In Sri Lanka, today we are speaking the language of peace. I am sure that your decision to hold this conference in Colombo is further proof of the peace that prevails in our country after a long period of conflict, terror and immense hardship to our people. During the three decades of terror and mayhem that we experienced, not many wanted to come here. With the elimination of terrorism, the situation has drastically changed. Sri Lanka is becoming a destination for business, leisure and tranquility.

Language, as we all know, is a means of communication and understanding. However, our own experience shows that language can be an instrument of division and conflict, too. I am, therefore, pleased that this conference with its theme of “Language and Social Cohesion” will have special relevance to Sri Lanka, as it would also

be of much value to other countries of the developing world.

Sri Lanka is at present implementing a policy that seeks to use language to bind our people together. We are committed to safeguarding the language rights of our people and also transforming Sri Lanka into a tri-lingual country with the use of English as a link language among our communities. English would also be the vehicle for our children to access knowledge, as we envisage becoming a knowledge hub in the region. Our primary focus however would be to ensure that people of this country, irrespective of their ethnicities will learn the main languages, Sinhala and Tamil, to communicate with each other.

We are ready to learn from the advances of language teaching that can help the progress of pluralism in our society. We see the importance of language for economic development, especially in improving employment opportunities for our youth, enabling social mobility among our people, and opening the way for us to participate in the global economy.

In the field of education we see the important role that language can play in social integration. It is for this purpose that we have introduced new policies for teaching English and Information Technology, to take the latest advances in knowledge and technology to all parts of our country.

In pursuance of this objective 2009 was declared as the year of English and IT, purely to give strong emphasis to the teaching and learning of these two vital areas of education. We look at English as a Life Skill that would enable our children to forge ahead in life and become global citizens.

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It is no secret that virtually all Sri Lankan indigenous communities are presently faced with numerous challenges with regards to their language and cultural identities. The most at risk amongst them is the language and cultural identity of the Vaakarai indigenous community. Their indigenous Veddah language has all but disappeared from use. This article examines the lives of the Vaakarai Coastal Veddahs that are commonly known as the Tamil Veddah community.

"We have no transport to get anything done. We have to walk six miles on foot before we reach the bus route. This is the reason as to why we see no development" Kannamuthu Sellathamby says with tearful eyes.

He is the indigenous leader of the Koongnankulam village. This community commonly known as the Tamil Veddahs, live in the Batticaloa Vaakarai area. The number of indigenous families that live there is 67. What is special about them is that they speak Tamil instead of the Veddah language, and some of them have adopted Christianity. Before being moved to the Koongnankulam colony lands, they lived in the jungles of Karamunai. Later they were given 3 acres of paddy land and one acre of land from the Mankeni area, and relocated. Subsequently, some of them moved to the Koongnankulam village due to the war that



## Without a mother tongue The Coastal Veddah Community

ravaged their areas in the 80s.

"We rarely go to the woods to gather honey now. If we do intend to go we need to obtain permits from the Army. Most of us are engaged in farming. We travel to Mahiyanganaya to work as labourers on paddy fields. We fish from the lake. Produce dried fish for sale" the leader of the Veddah community tells us. The leader of the Coastal Veddah community also attended the Indigenous Peoples' Conference which was held recently. The requests he made while there, are as below.

01. Renovate the roads
02. Provide the village with a bus
03. Provide the village with hospital facilities
04. Provide the village with electricity
05. Provide the village with water for drinking and irrigation facilities for farming

The Veddah leader anticipates that at least one of these requests will be provided for, following participation at the conference.

A few Veddahs commented that their God was

Muththukaattu, but that they worshipped God Mariyamman at present.

"There are only two wells for the entire village. We walk about a mile to fetch water. We have no place to bathe as the lake dries up. There is no one to even tell the President of our plight. It has become hard to go to bathe. Please at least tell the President of our sorrows" Kanapathi Raasamma, the wife of the leader of the Kungnankulam village says. She adds that the house they live in was built by the Army camp and that assistance in varied form has also been received from various organizations.

**Vijaya Kumar, the Chairman of the Mankeni coastal village is married to the eldest daughter of the indigenous leader. Her name is Dayabadee. Their eldest son is Norbert. The second is Jemson Raj. This shows the nature of their names.**

"Now many are mixed with Tamil people. Therefore they don't know their mother tongue. They speak Tamil. Sometimes Muslims scold us calling us

Veddahs. The reason for this is confrontations that occur when doing business in fish sales" says Vijaya Kumar, who is the President of the Mankeni Fisheries Association. "Our indigenous community lost their property to the tsunami. We managed to gather what was missing with the aid of the government and other organizations. We got 12 boats. We have received 120 boats through the committee" Vijaya Kumar said.

**Pakayarasa Siri Nandani is the mother of one.**

Her husband makes a living working as a labourer. She states that her father speaks the Veddah language fluently, though she herself only knows Tamil as a result of growing up in a Tamil speaking society from childhood.

"Many lost their Identity Cards during the war. Identity cards were made and given to us. The gentlemen of the Army intervened to get a Registrar to marry the families that were living without marriage. Of the 67 families in our village, 33 live as actual indigenous people. But this factor changing soon is a cause for disappointment" Pakayarasa Siri Nandani said.

The children of these indigenous people study in Tamil medium schools. As such, their socialization as a community that belongs to the Hindu culture is evident. Ranjani Jayanthi Mala who studies at the Madurankelikulam Arasinal Tamil medium school, is preparing to sit for the 2010 GCE Ordinary Level exam. But she feels uncertain of the future due to deficiencies at the school. "Four people will be sitting the exam with me. But we don't have teachers for Mathematics and Sinhala. There is a Christian Church as well as a Kovil. Therefore during prayer time in

# Do not violate citizens' right to work in the mother tongue

## Advice from Minister Vasu

Mihiri Fonseka

13.10.2011 Lakbima

Action will be taken against government officials who, when spoken to in a mother tongue, by a person seeking assistance on an official matters, reply in a different language though they have knowledge of the mother tongue, Minister of National Languages and Social Integration Vasudeva Nanayakkara said.

He added that his Ministry is currently in the process of teaching Sinhala to Tamil officials and Tamil to Sinhala officials, but that he has observed that officers, who have passed language proficiency exams and received an increase in pay, do not conduct their

work in the second language.

The Minister requested that officials refrain from doing so as it violated the citizens' right to work in their mother tongue. He pointed out that Sinhala officials would have to be transferred to Tamil areas and Tamil officials to Sinhala areas in order to prevent this from happening, stating that they would then instinctively become familiar with utilizing the language.

He stated that enabling any citizen to work in his or her mother tongue is the Official Language Policy, adding that his Ministry is at present in the process of teaching 26,000 government officials a second language with the objective of providing this facility.

Minister Vasudeva Nanayakkara stated the above at a press conference held at the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration located at the Rajagiriya Buthgamuwa road. He further stated that sending official documentation, leaflets and forms printed in Sinhala alone to the North and East, has been stopped. He added that he should be notified with details if any official is violating this order and is sending documentation printed in Sinhala alone.

The Minister added that his Ministry has a unit that is capable of working in both Sinhala and Tamil languages, and that it was his goal to establish a unit that could work in both languages at all Ministries.

Media can play an immense role in human rights and engendering social discourse

Below are a few news items on the Sinhala and Tamil language newspapers in the region and how language rights issues are depicted



## No incentive payments if translators are used when language knowledge exists

### A circular by government administration to organization heads

Jayantha Samarakoon

20.10.2011

The Ministry of Public Administration and Home Affairs has decided to halt incentive payments of government officials who have language proficiency but use the assistance of translators.

Secretary to the Ministry P.B. Abeykoon has notified all ministries, ministerial secretaries, provincial councils, and the heads of all organizations of the same via a circular. This circular has been issued as a result of the majority of government officials proficient in Sinhala, Tamil and English using translators for official tasks while also collecting on the incentive payments.

The circular states, that government officials who have language proficiency, should not seek the assistance of translators, and that their incentive payments will be halted in the event that they do. Junior government officials who have passed the National Language Proficiency Exams receive an incentive payment of 15,000 rupees, while officials of the clerical grade receive a payment of 20,000 rupees and staff grade officials receive a payment of 25,000 rupees.

## A survey to study the implementation of the Official Language Policy

Anusha Gurusinghe

12.10.2011 Dinamina

A special survey is being conducted to study the proper implementation of the Official Languages Policy within government organizations of the Western Province.

Implemented under the advisement of the Minister of National Languages and Social Integration Vasudeva Nanayakkara, the survey is intended to cover 12 Police Stations, 13 Provincial Secretariats, 14 hospitals and 04 Courts complexes within the Colombo, Gampaha and Kaluthara districts.

A survey team of approximately 75 persons has been employed to study the manner in which

the Official Language Policy is implemented and to identify problems that exist therein. The survey team that consists of University students, was recently provided the necessary training at the Ministry, and instructed on the objective of conducting the survey.

It is also intended to identify the tactics used in the proper implementation of the Official Language Policy within the Western Province, with the intention of incorporating them into future programs.

It is anticipated that steps will be taken to conduct the survey in a manner that covers other provinces of the island upon completion of the Western Province.



# Steps will be taken to ensure productivity of the language training provided to government officials

- Minister Vasudeva Nanayakkara -

**Maheshwaran Prasad**  
Dehiwela Mount Lavinia  
Special Correspondent  
13.10.2011 Thinakaran

The Minister of National Languages and Social Integration Vasudeva Nanayakkara stated that programs will be implemented to enable government officials who have received language training to make use of and develop on their training.

The Minister pointed out that there is a segment of officials who have received training, but are not showing enthusiasm in utilizing it, and that future steps and program implementation will

be done with the intension of eradicating these weaknesses and obtaining increased productivity from the training that has been provided. Over 20,000 government officials have received training in Tamil and Sinhala languages to date. They have also passed the Grade Three language examinations. But Minister Vasudeva Nanayakkara added that they show an inability to practically utilize the language.

The Minister further stated that a special mechanism will be implemented in order to study issues related to government officials who have received training not utilizing it

properly, and that the necessary facts are being gathered for it.

He added that steps have been taken to emphasize the usage of the Tamil language in ministries and government departments.

The Minister stated that a document printed in Sinhala alone was sent to a government department in the North during the previous election, and that it has been brought to his attention.

He added that the necessary steps will be taken at the necessary time in future in order to solve such problems, and that measures have already been taken in this regard.

பயிற்றுவிக்கப்பட்ட மொழியின் பயன்பாட்டை உறுதி செய்ய திட்டம் இழை பாடசாலைகளில் மொழி ஆசிரியர்களை நமாறு கோரிக்கை

மலதிக நிருபர்  
அதிகமானோருக்கு சிங்கள மொழி தெரியாது. சிங்கள மொழி பேசுபவர்களுக்கு தமிழ் மொழி தெரியாது. இதனால் மக்கள் பல்வேறு பிரச்சினைகளை

## Language Committees countrywide to promote ethnic harmony

**Vasudeva Nanayakkara**

**M.I. Muhammad Faizal**  
21.10.2011 Metro News

The Minister of National Languages and Social Integration Vasudeva Nanayakkara stated that a program has already been implemented via the establishment of island wide Language Committees, to enable people to learn various languages, and create national harmony.

In the past, language has been used to incite hatred and emphasize differences. But this situation has now changed. The terrorism that existed for three decades has been destroyed and democracy has been properly implemented in the North and East as well. Emergency Regulations have also been lifted.

Minister Vasudeva Nanayakkara pointed out, that it is a highly productive course of action to additionally establish Language Committees countrywide, with the intention of providing the necessary facilities to create bilingualism amongst the ethnic groups, and thereby engender mutual understanding and coexistence.

## Tamil medium schools request the appointment of Sinhala language teachers

Anuradhapura Central Special Correspondent  
18.10.2011 Thinakaran

Parents of students from Tamil medium schools located in the Anuradhapura District have made requests asking for the appointment of Sinhala language teachers.

Tamil and Muslim children living in the Anuradhapura District face difficulties due to their lack of Sinhala language

knowledge. The majority of the Tamil speaking populace does not know Sinhala. Similarly, the majority of Sinhala speakers do not know Tamil. This situation has resulted in a great many problems.

Considering this fact, parents of the area emphasize the need for responsible parties to take action in appointing Sinhala language teachers to Tamil and Muslim schools.

## Requests to appoint a Sinhala language teacher

Deniyaya Correspondent  
23.10.2011 Thinakkural

Parents and former students of Tamil medium schools located in the Matara District request the appointment of teachers who are able to teach Sinhala as a second language.

Tamil and Muslim students studying in Tamil medium schools in the Matara District face language problems.

The majority of these Tamil speaking students do not know the Sinhala language. We have learned that they face various difficulties as a result of this.

Considering these factors, the parents and former students of Tamil medium schools located in the Matara District, state that responsible authorities should act to appoint teachers who are capable of teaching the Sinhala language to Tamil medium schools.

# Official Language World Cup to South Africa

## South African Language Policy

South Africa has succeeded in recognizing a language spoken by a mere 1.6% of the country's population, as an Official Language.

This article examines how South Africa sets an example to the whole world by recognizing the language rights of even an extremely small minority community, affirming the country's cultural diversity.

A 50,586,757 strong population resides on 1,221,037 square kilometers of land within the Republic of South Africa. It is a country that has a heritage of vast cultural diversity. Citizens of not only African and Asian but also European cultural heritage live here. South Africa which was plagued for a very long time by a dark period of administration based on black and white divisions, later emerged from these shadows entering a new path in 1996.

Language, which is one essential aspect of culture, uniquely affects the South African people due to the fact that a multitude of languages and dialects are spoken therein.

It is only natural that a great many challenges will be faced in the process of drafting the language policy of a country with such diversity. However they have successfully faced this challenge. They have done so by granting Official Language status to 11 main languages used in the country, by way of the 1996

Constitution. Amongst them is a western language as well as Afrikaans which is a language of western origin. The remaining 9 are African languages which are home languages to the various ethnic groups.

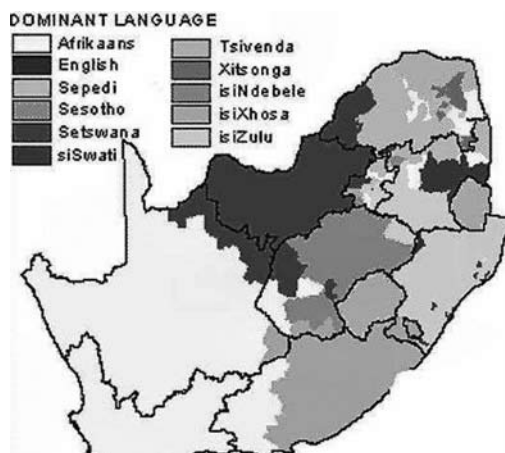
As such, the inclusion of IsiNdebele, which is spoken by a mere 1.6% of the population, as an Official Language, makes evident the effort taken by way of the South African Constitution to acknowledge its cultural diversity.

Further, the Pan South African Language Board

established under the Constitution, has set out conditions for the development of all Official Languages as well as indigenous, pidgin and sign languages. South Africa has focused its attention on promoting these conditions, as well as on the promotion and respect of languages such as German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu, Urdu and other languages spoken within South Africa, as well as languages such as Arabic, Hebrew and Sanskrit which are affiliated with religions.

Population and language use in South Africa as per the 2001 Census

Language	Speakers	%
IsiZulu	10,677,315	23.8%
IsiXhosa	7,907,000	17.6%
Afrikaans	5,983,000	13.3%
Sesotho sa Leboa	4,209,000	9.4%
Setswana	3,677,000	8.2%
English	3,673,000	8.2%
Sesotho	3,555,000	7.9%
Xitsonga	1,992,000	4.4%
SiSwati	1,194,000	2.7%
Tshivenda	1,022,000	2.3%
IsiNdebele	712,000	1.6%
Other	217,000	0.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>44,820,000</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



Note:

**Jagath Liyana Arachchi**  
Attorney at Law

## Language rights, education rights...

*From page 5*

These needs will have to be met via a long term development plan. The fields of policy making, development plans and reform procedures are relevant to herein. As such, an essential first step is to create pressure for such a broad course of action. However, waiting to see results in the long term via such a program is also insufficient. It is a social responsibility to also design an accelerated program through which to seek solutions to this problem. As such a major responsibility falls on Community Based Organizations in and around the plantation sector.

In order to realize language rights, a program that leads from literacy, across a bilingual education, to a broad educational outlook, needs to be designed.

An expansive education program that not only targets children but also educates the parents within the plantation sector is intended herein.

Two key features such an education program will need to have can be identified thus. It should

1. Be designed to fit the specific conditions of the plantation sector
2. Not be limited to the framework of a formal education

A program that can empower the populace of the plantation sector, taking them from the right to their mother tongue, to the right to bilingualism, needs to be designed under this. In the final analysis it will not only be a victory with regards to language rights, but also a way towards a life of advanced culture.

In studying the history of Sri Lanka's language policies, through the previous issue of Vibhasha, we discussed the manner in which, the declaration of Sinhala as the Official Language via Act No. 33 of 1956, became a decisive turning point. Subsequently the passing of another Act was necessitated. That was the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act No.28 of 1958. This Act provided for the use of Tamil in state affairs. While it contained many provisions ensuring Tamil language rights, through this issue of Vibhasha we examine whether it was able to bring about the desired results.

# Then and Now Language Policies

## The 56 Act and the 58 Act

S.G. Punchihewa  
Attorney at Law

“

“The government has generally failed to provide facilities to citizens in those areas where Sinhala is used as the Language of Administration to receive communications and to communicate and to transact business in the Tamil language.”

”

As a result of strong opposition to these Articles by nationalist elements, it became just another document. Laws, regulations and circulars are of no relevance within a culture of non enforcement of the existing law. Where there is no attitude of providing rights, there is no punishment when the laws providing for such rights are broken.

Between Sinhala being enacted the Official Language in 1956, and the non implementation of the 1958 Tamil language Act, the requirement of Tamil civil servants to gain fluency in Sinhala within a given period of time (3 years) began to take effect. Pay raises were stopped. A Tamil civil servant, Mr. Kodeswaran filed a case at the Colombo District Courts, challenging that this situation was in violation of the Constitution, and won. This decision was overturned by the government's victory at the Appeals Court. However, Mr. Kodeswaran subsequently appealed to the House of Lords. It was decided therein to be in violation of Article 29(2) of the Constitution. This decision was only received around 1970. Instead of giving Tamil civil servants their right, the government committed a historic offence. To be free of British bonds, it was also necessary to be freed from the influence of the House of Lords. Further, to keep with nationalist sentiment that was on the rise, Sri Lanka was made a Republic. What was the historic offence that was committed by this?

- 1972, Article 6 declared Buddhism the State Religion

- 1972, Article 7 reinstated Sinhala as the Official Language as per Act No.33 of 1956

Both above Articles were in direct contradiction of Article 29(2) of the previous Constitution.

As such, would it not hurt the feelings of Tamil speakers and persons of other faiths? Though two Tamil language Provisions Bills were approved, they fell into irrelevance with the 1972 Constitution. As such, while Acts turned to inactions, the language struggle became an armed struggle. One solution to this was the inclusion of Tamil as an Official Language in 1987.

However, the acts of “omission” continued. The Official Language Commission was established in 1991 as one solution. Later it fell under the Ministry of Constitutional Affairs and National Integration. At present, a new program has been launched under the “Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration”, with changes to the name and subject matter.

The greatest proof, that the discrimination against the Tamil language by administrative and executive acts referred to in the Soulbury Commission report, continued well into 2005, is seen in the report issued by the Official Languages Commission in June 2005. It reads:

“The Secretarial Divisions which have been directed to use both Official Languages as Languages of Administration have so far failed to provide a satisfactory service to those speaking the Tamil Language.” (page 5)

“The government has generally failed to provide facilities to citizens in those areas where Sinhala is used as the Language of Administration to receive communications and to communicate and to transact business in the Tamil language. Nor are adequate facilities available to citizens in those areas to obtain copies of or extracts from any official register, record, publication or

other document, in the Tamil Language. Similarly adequate facilities do not exist for them to obtain translations in Tamil of documents executed by an official and issued to them. In those areas where Tamil is the Language of Administration similar problems are faced by citizens who are entitled to obtain these same services in the Sinhala Language.” (ibid)

Such injustices caused by the administrative and executive cannot be changed by the law alone. It should change through our actions, with intent. If we have love for all humanity, the language that understands this love has no sound or image. No words. By making language a tool of suppression, discrimination and suspicion, we invite tumultuousness and anarchy to humans – to humanity. The time for change has passed by for too long.

### The unjust treatment that the Soulbury Commission saw

A submission made by the All Ceylon Tamil Congress, at the evidence hearings of the Soulbury Commission which was appointed to make recommendations for a Sri Lankan Constitution, is presented thus on page 41 of its report (1945) under chapter VIII paragraph 138:

“Discrimination against the Ceylon Tamils arises not so much from legislative as from administrative or executive acts of commission or omission.”

The Commission's opinion regarding this evidence follows, and is presented thus:

“If discrimination is practiced against a minority, it is usually by means of administrative actions which are more difficult to detect and expose than are legislative measures.”

The situation indicated herein is from approximately 100 years ago. Yet despite countless laws and regulations, evidently, this discrimination by way of administrative and executive acts continue to date.

To the next issue...



# When language rights are violated

## How to seek redress

Most citizens of this country are aware of the existence of a legal system that protects their language rights. 'Most' is used herein as there may be some who may not be aware. In any case, having laws alone does not ensure that a right is protected.

In order to do so, there needs to be a mechanism through which to enforce the laws as well as to provide redress when such a law is broken.

Another essential factor is citizens' participation in seeking solutions when a right is violated.

As such, the citizenry's knowledge is a key necessity.

A citizen of this country should gain awareness regarding their language rights, the steps to be taken in the event these rights are violated, and the organizations through which such a process can be initiated. Through this series of articles beginning herein, we intend to inform you of the organizations through which redress can be sought in the event a language right is violated. As such, today we will provide you with information regarding the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka.

### *The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka*

“ If your complaint falls within the scope of the Commission, the accused parties will be allowed the opportunity to make a statement in response, and attempts will initially be made to bring the issue to resolution. If resolution is not possible an investigation into the issue will be conducted and recommendations will be made. ”

#### **The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka**

The law has established four organizations through which a Sri Lankan citizen can seek redress with regards to the violation of a language right.

They are

1. The Supreme Court
2. The Human Rights

Commission of Sri Lanka

3. The Official Languages Commission
4. Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (Ombudsman)

Of these, through this article we will discuss how to file a complaint with the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka and its remedial procedure in the event a language right is violated.

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, established by the Parliamentary Act No. 21 of 1996, is an independent commission. The Commission has the power to:

- Investigate and conduct hearings on any infringement or imminent infringement of fundamental rights
- Intervene in any proceedings relating to the infringement or imminent infringement of fundamental rights pending before any court, with the permission of such court
- Monitor the welfare of detained persons by regular inspection of their places of detention, and make such recommendations as may be necessary for improving their conditions of detention
- Undertake research into, and promote awareness of, human rights, by conducting programs, seminars and workshops to disseminate and distribute the results of such research
- Take such steps as it may be directed to take by the Supreme Court, in respect of any matter referred to it by the Supreme Court
- Summon any person residing in Sri Lanka to give evidence or produce any document or other thing in his possession, and to examine him as a witness
- Do all things necessary or conducive to the discharge of its functions

#### **What problems related to language can be forwarded to the Commission?**

Article 12 of the Fundamental Rights Chapter of the Constitution provides that all persons are equal before the law and are entitled to the equal protection of the law. As such, an aggrieved person, group of persons, or a

person acting on behalf of an aggrieved person or group of persons, can seek redress from the Human Rights Commission if they are discriminated against by a government institution on the basis of language, if a government official acts in violation of the Official Languages Policy, if a government institution violates an Administrative Circular on the Official Languages Policy, or if a government official obstructs any citizen's right to speech and expression in their mother tongue as provided for by Article 14(1)(a) of the Constitution.

#### **Complaint procedure**

A complaint can be made via a letter or by visiting the Head Office or a Regional Office of the Commission.

#### **Investigation procedure**

If your complaint falls within the scope of the Commission, the accused parties will be allowed the opportunity to make a statement in response, and attempts will initially be made to bring the issue to resolution. If resolution is not possible an investigation into the issue will be conducted and recommendations will be made. The presence of an Attorney is not essential in the case of a hearing by the Commission. There is no stamp duty or any other charge for this process.

#### **The nature of recommendations**

If the accused parties are found to be guilty during an investigation, the following action will be taken.

Recommendations will be made to

- Rectify the error
- Reinstate the status quo
- Pay a fine
- Take remedial action to prevent such a violation from being repeated

The Human Rights Commission can be described as a simple, low cost and widely accessible (10 Regional Offices) institution established by the government to enable to protection of a citizen's Constitutional language rights.

Note:

**Jagath Liyana Arachchi**  
Attorney at Law (L.L.B)



“

The reason behind the majority of these complaints is the Police recording complaints and statements made by Tamil speaking persons, in Sinhala.

”

It is reported that a significant number of the complaints lodged at the Human Rights Commission with regards to the violation of language rights, are in relation to the violation of language rights committed at Police Stations.

The reason behind the majority of these complaints is the Police recording complaints and statements made by Tamil speaking persons, in Sinhala.

While citizens in the North and East are the most frequently affected by this problem, it is reported that Tamil speaking persons from several other areas of the country have also been affected.

A complaint, filed at the Human Rights Commission against the Senior Superintendent of Police Vavuniya and the Inspector General of Police, based on the

findings of a study conducted in the Vavuniya area, states thus.

- ..... Via a survey conducted in the Vavuniya District, the complainant has learned that citizens' complaints are recorded in Sinhala at the majority of the Police Stations under the Vavuniya Senior Superintendent of Police Division.
- Having to place their signature on a statement or complaint recorded in a language they do not know, results in Tamil speaking citizens being disadvantaged legally, as well as discriminated against.
- Information has been received that indicate that the Tamil speaking populace suffers great inconvenience as well as injustice as a result.
- The complainant also states that the vast majority of the populace of this Police Division speaks Tamil as their mother tongue.
- The complainant emphasizes that the Vavuniya SSP Division is based within the Northern Province, and that Tamil is the language of administration of the area as per Article 22(1) of the Constitution as amended by the 16th Amendment.
- Further, as per Article 22(2) of the Constitution as amended by the 16th Amendment, a person other than an official acting in his official capacity, has been given the right to interact with any official in his official capacity in Sinhala or Tamil as is relevant.
- The complainant states that when recording complaints or statements at the Police Stations, by not recording them in Sinhala in the case of Sinhala speaking citizens and in Tamil in the case of Tamil speaking citizens, Police Officers at these Stations violate the fundamental right provided for by Article 12(1) of the Constitution, which reads "All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to the equal protection of the law", with regards to persons whose mother tongue is Tamil.
- Similarly, the complainant states that this process violates the right of Tamil speaking residents of Vavuniya set out by Article 14(1)(f) of the Constitution, which provides "the freedom by himself or in association with others to enjoy and promote his own culture and to use his own language".
- The complainant has learned that the main reason for this problem is the shortage of Police Officers who can work in Tamil at Police Stations located within the Vavuniya Senior Superintendent of Police Division.
- He states that as the Officer in charge of the Division, the 1st Respondent is therefore responsible for these fundamental rights violations.
- Similarly, as the Head of the Department, the 2nd Respondent is responsible for these fundamental rights violations.
- The complainant adds that the persons who have had their fundamental rights violated by not being able to lodge complaints or statements in Tamil, are fearful of taking legal action against the Police.
- The complainant states that he is able to, as provided for under Article 14 of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka Act No. 21 of 1996, lodge and pursue this complaint with the Commission as "a person acting on behalf of an aggrieved person or a group of persons".

As per the above stated facts, the complainant requests the Commission to:

- a) Provide a decision stating that, as per the complaint, the Police violate the rights of the Tamil speaking community set out in Article 12(1) of the Constitution, by recording complaints and statements made in Tamil, in Sinhala.
- b) Provide a decision stating that these actions violate the right provided to these people by Article 14(1)(f) of the Constitution.
- c) Provide a decision that states that the 1st and 2nd Respondents are responsible for the above stated violations of fundamental rights.
- d) Provide a decision ordering the 1st and 2nd Respondents to take immediate and practical remedial action to prevent this problem from continuing.
- e) Provide other and additional redress as desired by the Commission.

## Complaints flood in to the Human Rights Commission... From page 4

12	Station Superintendent Mahawa Railway Station and General Manager Railway Department	Announcements regarding railway traffic not being made in the Tamil language at Railway Stations	Head Office Colombo	07/11/2011	Registered Post
13	Senior Superintendent of Police Mannar and Inspector General of Police	Police Officers of Police Stations within the Mannar Police Division recording complaints and statements made by Tamil speaking persons in Sinhalese	Head Office Colombo	08/11/2011	2011-12-05
14	Mayor Municipal Council Kalmunai	Street signboards not containing the street name in the Sinhala language	Regional Office Kalmunai	08/11/2011	HRC/3466/2011

## International Language and Development Conference... From page 6

We also see language playing a very important role in the development of the arts. The fusion of languages, and through this the interaction of different cultures, enriches the cultural patterns and standards of arts in society.

I observe that there is a very distinguished list of participants at this conference, drawn from diverse fields of knowledge and experience in aspects of language. You have a very interesting agenda set out for your discussions. I strongly believe that your deliberations will bring about solutions to some of our long standing language issues.

I warmly welcome all foreign delegates to Sri Lanka and trust that you will take back with you the best memories of the friendship and hospitality of our people. I wish this conference every success.

**Senior Minister Scientific Affairs Professor Tissa Vitarana**

The differences in language and culture between people from different countries of the world, becomes a barrier to us forming close

relationships with them.

We should learn to respect any language of any country in the world the same way we would our mother tongue.

The English language is used extensively as a link language at the international level. At the very least we should learn one international language. Knowledge is not isolated in the present world. Knowledge is of prime importance to economic development.

This conference should be used as an opportunity to increase knowledge of international languages. Then we will be able to find shared solutions to many problems. Choosing Sri Lanka to host this conference this time is very timely. We accept the challenge related to language that the world is faced with today.

**Minister of National Languages and Social Integration Vasudeva Nanayakkara**

The opportunity to host a conference of this nature after the end of a civil war that lasted over several decades is a historic occa-

sion. This can be considered a privilege that our country has received.

No culture lasts within any country without a language.

Language plays a large role in enabling the exchange of ideas as well as in forming social connections.

We are in the process of taking steps to reestablish social connections that had grown distant between two communities of our society, having ended a war that shed blood. We are establishing the necessary programs to create a social transformation.

We will bring humanity to the highest level through language and communication.

We anticipate a Sri Lanka in which all communities act together in cooperation.

The German Ambassador to Sri Lanka Jens Ploetner, Director of Tamil Schools' Development of the Ministry of Education S.P Muralitharan, and the Secretary to the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration M.S. Wickramasinghe also spoke at the conference.

## Without a mother tongue The Coastal Veddah Community

From page 6

school the two segments engage in their religious rites separately".

According to the Grama Niladhari of the Madurankelikulam division, he is responsible for part of the Koongnankulam village. He states that the preparation of Identity Cards for some has become a difficult task due to the lack of Birth Certificates.

"On several occasions we contacted depots asking for a bus, but we have not received a reply to date. They say there are no busses to give. Everything is like this. But we always try to give these people some relief".

"The Board says that they will provide electricity by next year. The Red Cross has given loans to start self employment projects. However ensuring the protection of these indigenous peoples' lives is our responsibility" the Grama Niladhari said.

Though indigenous communities are seen living in several areas, it is the Vaakarai Veddahs that have become a community whose language and cultural identity are in the process of being completely erased. What is unique is their efforts to live in harmony with both Tamil and Muslim communities. However they are still behind both of these communities in terms of economic strength.

Extract from the report of a study conducted on several marginalized communities within Sri Lanka.

A publication of the Centre for Policy Alternatives.

**Note: Thimbiriyagama Bandara**





## Response

We have thus far received numerous responses from the readers of the debut issue of the Vibhasha Newsletter.

Along with well wishes for its continued journey, there were also many ideas and suggestions for its further development.

A few such selected responses, suggestions and ideas are presented below. We greatly value all your responses, and anticipate continued feedback with the issues to come.

**Editor**

### Well wishes

Of the problems Sri Lanka has faced in its history, the language problem is one of the biggest. I believe that the politicians and media of this country are responsible for it. They fuel problems further rather than show adequate commitment towards fixing it.

It is a pleasure to see a newsletter such as Vibhasha within such a context. It contained a lot of information that was useful in increasing awareness on the language policy of this country. We wish Vibhasha the best in its efforts to solve the language problem in Sri Lanka, and build a cordial relationship between the communities.

**N. Priyantha - Panagoda**

### Consider cultural problems as well

Focusing our attention on each others' language is very useful in building a dialog between the Sinhala and Tamil communities of Sri Lanka. It is evident that Vibhasha is working towards this end.

It's my opinion that it would be even more useful if the focus could include each others' cultures as well, in addition to language, as in my opinion, language and culture are very closely tied in.

I anticipate that the Vibhasha Newsletter will consider it in the future.

**M. Zuhaib - Maradana**

### Numerous problems with English medium education

The role such a newsletter can play in engendering a bilingual culture in Sri Lanka, is significant. In addition to Sinhala and Tamil, it would be best if your attention could focus on English medium education.

The damage resulting from the breakdown of English medium education in this country is immense. We are currently suffering from the impact of these results.

As a solution to this problem, English medium education has also been given an opportunity via the implementation of a trilingual policy. As such a significant number of students have opted to study in the English medium as opposed to in their mother tongue.

Students, who successfully complete this journey up to the GCE Ordinary Level standard, face great difficulties when attempting to sit for their GCE Advanced Level exams in the English medium. This is as a result of a shortage in teachers and other resources. As such these students are often forced to seek other schools. This is a grave problem faced today by students today step forward to study in a language medium of their choice.

It would be great if Vibhasha could also focus on such problems in the future.

**Priyani Marasinghe - Delkanda**

## Half the teachers of the plantation sector lack adequate training

A study conducted in the Uva, Passara zone has revealed that while half the teachers of the plantation sector lack adequate training, some schools do not have even one trained teacher.

This information was gathered during a study conducted by Transparency International in 21 selected schools located within the Passara Education Division of the Badulla District, where the majority of students are from the plantation sector.

The report also states that approximately half the teachers surveyed within the zone, had not received their letter of appointment in their mother tongue. As such, a significant number of teachers of the plantation sector serve without even having knowledge of their terms of employment.

## The establishment of Language Committees in Monaragala commences



*The establishment of the first Language Committee, launching the Language Committee program in the Monaragala District*

The Language Committee program was launched on the 19th of November 2011 in the Monaragala town under the initiative of the Institute for Human Rights and Community Development.

While 19 such committees established within the district under this program, have been registered under the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration, steps have been taken to establish several more committees within the district in the near future.

## Write to us

The Sri Lankan language policy is a topic which has been subject to extensive discussion. Through the Vibhasha Newsletter, we aim to further foster this discussion. It is our belief that reader contribution is vital in building up this dialogue. Write to us with your various ideas, news and information. The Vibhasha Newsletter is open to all who are sensitive to the language rights of this country.

### Regarding language rights

Send us your ideas, suggestions, problems and feedback.

Editor,  
Vibhasha Newsletter,  
The Centre for Policy Alternatives,  
24/2, 28th Lane,  
Flower Road,  
Colombo 07



Telephone : 0112 370801/4 Fax : 0112 370802

# Being sensitive to language rights

“

The Mental Health Unit should understand that disregarding language rights is also detrimental to the mental health of a nation. The 30 year war in this country stands testament to the fact that it is not only detrimental to mental health, but also to the physical.”

”

“The best for the children” is a great saying. “Let’s keep our children happy” is also a similarly great saying.

Affixing billboards that raise society’s awareness is another good thing.

As such, the display of the “Let’s keep our children happy” billboard at the Eye Hospital Junction, visible to the Lipton Circus, should without a doubt be called a good thing.

Displaying the billboard in one language alone however, can in no way be called a good thing – the reason being, that the Mental Health Unit that is responsible for the billboard has failed to show sensitivity towards the language rights of this country.

The Mental Health Unit should understand that disregarding language rights is also detrimental to the mental health of a nation. The 30 year war in this country stands testament to the fact that it is not only detrimental to mental health, but also to the physical.

A news item published a few



Sensitive to children – sensitive to language rights



A healthy use of language

months ago stated that the Official Languages Commission had decided to take legal action against the Mental Health Unit of the Ministry of Health, on the grounds that this billboard violates the Official Languages Policy of this country.

The news item in full, which appeared on the Lankadeepa of 19th of September 2011, was as below.

“Legal action against the Psychiatric Unit of the National Hospital? A decision of the Official Languages Commission

The Official Languages Commission decides to take legal action against the Mental Health Unit of the Ministry of Health on the grounds that it has violated the Official Languages Policy.

According to the Chairman of the Commission Nimal

Ranawake, such action will be taken as the Psychiatry Unit of the National Hospital failed to take any remedial measures despite being informed that their billboard displayed at the Eye Hospital Junction, visible to the Lipton Circus and bearing the message ‘Let’s keep our children happy’, should be displayed in all three languages.

He added that the Mental Health Unit of the Ministry of Health had been informed on several previous occasions that the billboard should be trilingual in keeping with the Official Language Policy.”

Though it has been three months to date since the publication of this news item, there has been no change whatsoever to the billboard, as is evidenced by the picture published herein.

However, another billboard on public health, constructed a few feet away from the said billboard, sets a good example to everyone. It has been constructed in close proximity to the mental health billboard, with content displayed in both Sinhala and Tamil in a manner visible to all.

Despite its visibility however, it does not appear to have been seen by the powers that be of the Mental Health Unit. If they had seen it, they would have at least had the opportunity to follow its example and correct the error of their own billboard.

However, no correction whatsoever can be seen thus far, and a remedy to this problem is urgently needed, as history has shown us that the impact of such error affects the nation as a whole.