

Late January, 2012; Madurai, Tamil Nadu

### **Tamil Language, Caste and Race, and *The Hindu***

The Tamil people are justifiably proud of their distinct culture and language, one of the oldest, if not the oldest living language in the world today. On a recent Sunday afternoon the J.X. Miller Auditorium of LDC (Lady Doak College) was jam-packed with more than 400 teachers of Tamil and students enrolled in Tamil Language and Literature courses to hear a prolonged, passionate "sermon" from Madurai's 'Collector' (parallel to Mayor). He was bemoaning the decline of their language; and, I think, using rhetoric, political and moral suasion (for three hours), to instill linguistic and cultural pride and motivate students and faculty alike to actively use Tamil and keep the language relevant for the 21st century. I have no idea to what degree he was successful; and, honestly, I don't know exactly what the Collector said, but given the electronically amplified shouting; his Pentecostal-preacher cadence and tonality; and the regular cheers, applause, and laughter from the audience, there must have been some measure of success. From my (Welsh) perspective, 72 million speakers is a huge number ... in excess of most tribal and indigenous languages and far more than the minority languages across Europe. Still, in a nation of more than one billion — with a population set to exceed that of China by the mid-century mark— well, 70+ million does qualify, I suppose, as a minority.

English, not Hindi, is the second language of the 70 million Tamils who live in Tamil Nadu; and there are several millions more who live across India, Southeast Asia, Europe and North America. (Just yesterday I met Elbert Jeyapaul, a personable young guy from Madurai who is now working as an aerospace engineer at Langley in Hampton, Va.) Most often when Indians visit from other Indian states on business, as tourists, or as pilgrims to worship at the Sri Meenakshi Temple, they speak in English to each other — one of many colonial legacies of the British. The political and cultural dynamics of bilingualism and cultural diversity in Tamil Nadu are fascinating. Of course, my hosts are fully conversant in English and Tamil and many have personal and professional connections in the UK or USA. In general, it appears that the Tamil elite are at least bilingual and many are multilingual, also speaking Hindi or one of the other languages of South India (including Malayalam, Kannada, and Telugu).

Given my own experience — knowing many well-educated, cosmopolitan Tamil women and men — I've been surprised to read in Indian literature about a wider set of Indian prejudices in which the Tamil people are regarded by some as second-class citizens; and, indeed, one fiction author explicitly refers to the Tamils as the "African-Americans of India." And, although it is true that the Tamil skin pigmentation is markedly darker than those in mid-to-North India, it seems to me that racial/ethnic categorization is less important than caste and religious identity. Just the other day, one of the English faculty at nearby American College of Madurai told me that when Rev. Martin Luther King visited the Gandhi Museum of Madurai in the late 50's, that he was introduced as the leading spokesman for the Dalits (the Untouchables) of American society. At first, I was told, Rev. King was not entirely comfortable with this dubious title but later during his visit, he embraced this Tamil-bestowed title.

One of the major daily English language papers across India is *The Hindu* (with a Madurai City edition). Frankly, it is both fascinating and humbling to read an English-language paper and still not truly

comprehend the daily news. There are distinct Indian-English words (lakh and crore); there are occasional British -English usages; and there is a mature and evolving Tamil adaptation of English. This is not the same feel at all as reading a Chinese-English-language paper where one sees clear evidence of a sometimes painful process of translation from one language into another. In the Sports section, there is a 75 percent focus on cricket (featuring the national team's "shameful loss" to the Australians) with about 25 percent dedicated to tennis and a few other sports. On the other hand, the entertainment section is full of reviews, promotions, and feature articles about Bollywood and India's leading stars; the Chennai film industry and Tamil entertainment; as well as the top films and actors of Hollywood ... giving equal billing for popular culture and entertainment in Hindi, Tamil, or English. Believe me (aside from *Slumdog Millionaire*), Tamil youth know *far more* about American pop culture than we know about either Bollywood or Tamil films and TV shows.

Of course, *The Hindu* covers major international news including updates on America's Republican primaries, the electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the bombing of Christian churches in Nigeria by Islamist radicals, and the U.S. Congress decision to place anti-online piracy bill on hold. It is the regional and national feature stories that are fascinating and revealing: *Rajasthan Police Invented Plot to Keep Away Rushdie; Magistrate Who Issued Warrant Against Chief Minister Jayalithaa Suspended; DMDK MLA's Gesture for Expectant Mothers; Number of Atrocity Case Against Dalits on a High in 2011; A Red Letter Day in the Life of Gypsies*. The same edition includes an editorial titled *Govt. Should Intensify Drive Against Maoists*. The editors describe the Maoists (in the state of Jharkhand in NE India) as subversives and anti-national militants, condemn their recent land-mine attack against state security personnel (killing 13), and compare them to the Naxalites, another left-radical militant group prepared to use violence to overcome class/caste/economic divisions.

The Dalit article (in *The Hindu*) in particular reveals the continuing social stigma associated with the sizeable population once known as untouchables, the notorious caste sub-category rejected by many Indian reformers and nationalists — particularly Gandhi and Ambedkar. Rarely does a day go by when the paper doesn't have an article about some act of caste-based discrimination or violence; sometimes these reports focus on romantic entanglements across caste, other times the reports focus on clashes stemming from land rights and indebtedness. Most recently a Dalit legislator claimed that her upper-caste colleagues were systematically discriminating against her making it impossible for her to represent her constituency; and she has filed suit against them. Although Tamil students seem to deny any validity to caste in India today, their parents and the faculty readily acknowledge that caste remains part of the cultural landscape both in terms of legislation and social and educational outreach programs for lower caste peoples as well as in terms of continuing patterns of caste-based discrimination and violence. At least at the rhetorical level, both institutions with which I am affiliated (LDC and the Gandhi Institute) take pride in actively reaching out to support the enrollment of former lower-caste people ... not dissimilar from MBC's pride in reaching out to first-generation college students and achieving such a high percentage of racial/ethnic minority students, especially African-American and Hispanic young women.

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