

**Theme 4: Research Systems and Specific Challenges for Social Development:  
(Outreach to key social partners, multiculturalism, changing demographics)**

**ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXTS:  
Considerations and Challenges**

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**Introduction**

Transmigration has been a feature of many nations in the past century and is increasingly attaining prominence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This has resulted in many nations having a greater intensity in the multi-ethnic and multicultural landscape of their citizenry. In many of these nations, loyalty to the nation, does not override all other competing loyalties. "Family, tribe, locality, religion, conscience, economic interest, and a host of other appeals may at any given time and place prevail over national allegiance for particular individuals or groups." (Emerson, 1959: 97) Therefore this raises the main challenge for nations, irrespective of whether they are newly developing or mature - this is the challenge of ensuring political, sociocultural and economic security amongst its citizenry so that "national allegiance takes precedence over all other claims which may be made upon them when they are confronted by alternative choices of allegiance ..." (Emerson, 1959: 97) In this paper, it will be the sociocultural security manifest through linguistic cultural identity that will be focused on. From which bases do multi-ethnic communities operate in terms of their linguistic cultural identity? Is it that of the nation or is it that of their ethnic communities?

**The Role of Language in Nation-Building and Identity Formation in a Multi-Ethnic Society**

For a start, we will examine the concept of nationalism and the role of national languages, which are integral for the establishment of a national linguistic cultural identity. This will be followed by addressing the issue of what constitutes ethnic linguistic identity and whether a pursuance of it reflects an ethnocentric stand that contributes to the divisiveness of a nation or does a multi-lingual population contribute to the strength of the plurality of the nation?

**Nationalism and Components of National Identity**

Rupert Emerson in his seminal work "From Empire to Nation" (1959: 95) draws in the sociocultural authenticity as a defining factor in his definition of a nation describing it as "a community of people who feel that they belong together in the double sense that they share deeply significant elements of a common heritage and that they have a common destiny for the future."

Nationalism, then is the nation-level sociocultural dynamics integral for nation building. As a consequence, identity formation, which hinges on culture, is an integral part of nationalism. Anthony Smith links the three dimensions together when he reminds us that,

"...we cannot understand nations and nationalism simply as an ideology or form of politics, but must treat them as cultural phenomena as well. That is to say, nationalism, the ideology and movement, must be closely related to national identity, a multidimensional concept, and extended to include a specific language, sentiments and symbolism." (Smith, 1991: vii)

It would be pertinent to broaden the perspective here and state that it is not only language that constitutes a dimension of national identity in a multi-ethnic demography but also includes the historical, cultural and religious dimensions.

The complexity of this is reinforced in the Malaysian context by Mahathir, (who was our former Prime Minister who ruled for 22 years), who early on in his political career, unequivocally stated that all immigrants to a country should be willing to assimilate totally with the “definitive race” in terms of language and culture for true national identity to be established especially in the early throes of nation-building. (Mahathir, 1970: 134)

Given this, is the message we are receiving one that emphasizes that it is essential for the peoples of a nation to ensure a common culture and language since they are contributors to establishing a national identity? Religion and culture are very closely linked in many Asian ways of life and especially the Muslim way of life, which is the practice of the dominant Malay ethnic group in Malaysia. For a multi-ethnic nation, the pragmatic reality of the implementation of this approach is not as unambiguous as the articulation of rhetoric. The complexity of this issue in a multi-religious, multi-cultural society is explicated by Saravanamuttu, who in discussing the recognition provided to communal societies and their heritage in a multi-ethnic environment, puts forth a crucial consideration, when he argues that,

“A particularly important point in the politics of recognition or equal worth is the suggestion that ontological differences stemming from culture and religion are often deeply incompatible, especially when survival of a culture or religious formation is at stake.” (Saravanamuttu, 2004: 107)

It is the survival of a culture or religious community that is very pertinent in the Malaysian context since many of the cultural, religious identities of the ethnic groups are communal based and communally protected. The change of one’s ethnic identity is relatively difficult, if not near impossible, for most individuals because it involves change of one’s race, religion and culture, which are deeply embedded in the psyche of many ethnic individuals. Thus, the deep psychic attachment to one’s culture and religion is in most cases not contestable.

Therefore, does this mean that multi-ethnic nations can never have integrative sociocultural bonds? If there is any cultural dimension that can transcend the ethnic and religious differences, and establish the bonds across ethnic lines that will provide a means for a sense of national identity, it is that of language. This is because it is language that enables a person to be culturally ethnically rooted and yet to reach out communicatively at a national level - it provides the bridge between the “segmental attachment” and the “civil ties of the nation.” (Das Gupta, 1968: 19).

In Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu, the mother language of the dominant ethnic group, the Malays, was instituted as the national language which made it the language of education and administration. This resulted in educational systems that used Bahasa as the medium of instruction. This decision was made in negotiation with the other significant immigrant ethnic groups, the Chinese and the Indians, who in return for citizenship accepted Bahasa as the national language and Islam as the national religion but with the guarantee of freedom of worship for all other religions and the use and practice of all other languages. (Gill, 2004); Gill (2009)

## **The European Experience: Language and Citizenship**

In present times, almost 50 years later, the concern of language requirements and citizenship is an issue that seems to have emerged and is of increasing concern in some European nations. In Malaysia, these concerns were largely predominant during the post-1957 period where concerns for nation-building were paramount, whereas many European countries are only now facing these very same issues.

In Germany, recent (January 1, 2000) changes to naturalization legislation reveal that “when the coalition government ...attempted to simplify the naturalization process, a central plank of the new criteria for acquisition of German citizenship was proof of German language proficiency.” (Piller cited in Blackledge 2004:74).

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Blackledge emphasizes that, one of the requirements for citizenship is “sufficient knowledge of English, Welsh or Scottish Gaelic and sufficient knowledge about life in the United Kingdom.” (Blackledge 2004:89)

Blackledge strongly criticizes the above decision saying, “..... the strongest voices represent the most powerful institutions, and belong to those who see the future of Britain as a homogenous, monolingual state.” (Blackledge 2004:89).

Criticisms of such a nature does make one wonder how the state should go about developing national identity through a language in a population that is multi-ethnic? When governments make efforts to establish an official language (which in most countries would be the language of the dominant ethnic group) to forge bonds between the varying cultural communities and to establish a national identity, is it fair to describe their efforts as advocating a “homogenous, monolingual state?” If by establishing the national language, the government goes overboard and stifles other languages and identities, then, it may be a fair criticism to make. But, if, simultaneous with the moves to establish a national language and to make it a requirement for citizenship, are moves to allow for educational needs to be met via the vernacular languages, and opportunities are provided for the teaching and learning of the community languages, then it may not be a fair criticism to make of the governments of various nations.

Parallel with this, there is also a need amongst the immigrant populace to understand and accept the need of the dominant ethnic group for a national language, which for most post-colonial countries is the indigenous language of the nation to signify a break from the imperial domination to one of independence for the national good of the citizenry.

In line with this, Das Gupta provides sound advice in the context of continuous nation building, when he says,

“the greater the institutional capacity revealed by the political community to handle such divisions through pluralistic coordination, the greater the prospects of national development in the long run. This institutional capacity cannot be built by denying or deriding the existence of the language divisions in a multi-lingual society.” (Das Gupta, 1968: 24)

Handling such divisions through pluralistic coordination means accepting the existence of and understanding the linguistic cultural needs of varying ethnic groups (especially the minority groups, both the significant and the smaller groups).

The next section will unravel the differing concerns of the minority ethnic communities and why an understanding of these complex dichotomous positions is crucial for the well-being and stability of any nation. We will begin by establishing, what is ethnicity, why it is important for ethnic groups to retain their ethnic identity, and whether this stand leads to a process of divisiveness and the role of language in identity formation.

### **Ethnic Linguistic Identity – Pluralism Or Divisiveness?**

To belong to an ethnic group means possessing a common descent, cultural heritage, religion, language and a distinctive history and destiny and to feel a sense of collective uniqueness and solidarity. (Smith, 1981: 66; Joseph, 2004: 162) Of these, the one integral distinctive characteristic relevant for this paper is that of language.

In contrast to those who feel that the maintenance of minority languages is an integral part of their ethnic identity, there are some sectors of society who feel uncomfortable with the strong links that exist between language, especially minority languages and identity. These are the people who espouse that the concern with minority languages and ethnic identities will lead to greater divisiveness in a nation made up of diverse ethnic groups. To ensure greater homogeneity they recommend that the focus should be on just a national identity and not all else and therefore it should be just the promotion and use of the national language. These are usually members of the dominant ethnic group.

Schmidt describes these two groups as the “advocates for minority language equality ... (who) speak in the language of justice, while proponents of national unity speak in terms of national good.” Therefore, this results in one of the most challenging complexities of language policy conflict, which is that “its partisans often appear to be speaking past each other – participating in parallel discourse – rather than to each other, seemingly motivated by differing concerns.” (2000: 42)

This brings us then to one of the major challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century amongst many developing nations – a concern of many ethnic groups around the world, the sustenance of ethnocultural and national identities in our multicultural societies.

The last part of the paper will concretise some of the above issues through the challenging experiences of one of the smaller minority communities in Malaysia – the Punjabi-Sikh community.

### **Reasons For Gradual Decline Of The Functional Roles Of The Punjabi Language**

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic nation with a rich and colourful multilingual environment, where languages possess multi-functional roles and varying status. The breadth of language variety and spread in Malaysia is discussed extensively in *Language and Society in Malaysia* (Asmah 1982), *The Linguistic Scenery in Malaysia* (Asmah 1992) and *Language Planning in Southeast Asia* (Abdullah Hassan 1994).

A broad paintbrush of the minority community’s linguistic scenery in Malaysia further contributes to this multilingual richness. Many of Malaysia’s minority groups have had a long immigrant history and they are not native to the country. Therefore their languages are regarded as “ethnic minority languages” as opposed to “native minority languages” (May 2001, 16)

Malaysia (encompassing both East and West Malaysia) has a population of 25 million. The dominant ethnic group, the Malays, are regarded as natives of the soil<sup>1</sup> as manifest in the term used to describe them politically--the bumiputera, which translated means "sons of the soil". They make up 65.1% of the population, numbering 16,275,000. In contrast, a large proportion of the population is of immigrant ancestry and is made up of two significant minority groups--the Chinese and the Tamil communities. They make up 26% (6,500,000) and 7.7% (1,925,000) respectively. (<http://www.statistics.gov.my>) (Census 2000) In addition, there is a host of other smaller minority groups, one of which is the Punjabi--Sikh community. In the 1999 census, the Punjabi-Sikhs in Malaysia numbered 46,800.

This paper will focus specifically on the minority Punjabi--Sikh community and the challenges faced in the maintenance and sustenance of the language. This will be examined against a backdrop of the ideological views on minority languages of the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, who has played a dominant role in the policies and development of the nation over an extensive period of 22 years.

The working paper on the Historical Background of Punjabi Education in Malaysia (Randhawa, 2004) and the cover story of the Sikh Magazine (Jaspal S., 2003: 24) aptly and timely trace the challenges facing the development of Punjabi education in Malaysia and its gradual demise from the 60's to now. There were many varied reasons for this gradual marginalisation of mother-tongue education. Among them was the Education Policy of the Government through which significant resources were channeled to the national language, the lack of economic profitability for mastering the minority language, few trained teachers, lack of suitable books, lack of leadership and no anchor organization to support the measures that needed to be taken (Randhawa, 2004: 2).

In addition, for the Punjabis, as a minority ethnic group, whose immigrant ancestry moved to Malaysia during colonial times to work at improving their economic standing in life, the priority then for this group, like many other immigrant minority groups was to succeed educationally, economically and socially.

This is elaborated on by Skutnab-Kangas who when discussing other minority groups in the European context explains, "You are born into a specific ethnic group, and this circumstance decides what your mother tongue ... will initially be. But what happens later to your ethnicity, your identity, and your language (s) and how they are shaped and actualized is influenced by economic and political concerns and by your social circumstances and later life. These things also influence to what extent you are aware of the importance of your ethnicity and your mother tongue and the connection between them." (Skutnab-Kangas in Fishman, 1999: 55).

As a result of all these challenges, religious and language studies began to deteriorate amongst the Punjabi community. They seemed to have lost a "cultural core value" of attachment to one's language or mother tongue. The rapid decline in mastery of the mother tongue impacted deeply by creating the "lost generation" – a generation of Sikh children who could hardly speak Punjabi. This painted a darker picture of the fact that this heralded a fast decline in the Sikh identity itself. This is because once the language is lost in carrying out cultural practices, traditions and in practicing the religion, then these aspects of culture can only be conducted in a superficial,

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<sup>1</sup> There exists in Malaysia a "native-minority" community known as the Orang Asli (translated meaning the indigenous peoples of Malaysia). In addition, there is a rich multilingual population in East Malaysia. These communities and languages are not covered in this paper. (See Kua, 1998, "Mother Tongue Education of Malaysian Ethnic Minorities" for articles on these areas)

memorized manner without much meaning. To lose out on the meaning of aspects integral to one's culture in one's ethnic group, is to lose out on an intrinsic part of one's inner identity.

This therefore raises the question of why and how should a minority community sustain and maintain their ethnic language? Should they not just ensure that their children are able to compete educationally and economically through the national language and English and not worry about their ethnic socio-cultural values and identity?

### **Dynamic Tension Between National Collective Identity And Ethnic Community Identity**

Our pursuit of an answer to the above brings us then to the issue emanating from Tun Mahathir's interview carried out in 2003. (This was an interview carried out with him as part of a two-year research project on "Language Policy and Planning in Higher Education in Malaysia: Responding to the Needs of the Knowledge Economy") Of the numerous interview questions, the following pertinent to this paper was: "Should the government support or enhance the teaching of minority languages in this country?"

His response was:

"That will end us into a lot of problems because we have about 30 different dialects in Malaysia including Tamil. We cannot do for one minority without doing for the rest. In the end, of course we will become vegetable soup .... such a mixture that we find ourselves being divided.

We are liberal but to keep on chipping away at the national policy will end in us being so mixed up that we really cannot identify ourselves."

The message that is being conveyed is that it is alright to learn one's mother tongue, but to expect the government to support this measure is a different consideration altogether. This is because strengthening of ethnic identity will lead to division of the multi-ethnic population of the nation. In addition, it will lead to a lack of identity, which in this case presumably refers to national identity – the strengthening of ethnic identities negates the building up of national identities.

The statement above directly contradicts one of the nine central strategic challenges for Malaysia's full development by 2020, which was spearheaded by Mahathir himself. In this blueprint document for Malaysia's aspirations to attain developed nation status, he states that the nation had to confront:

The challenge of establishing a matured, liberal and tolerant society in which Malaysians of all colors and creeds are free to practise and profess their customs, cultures and religious beliefs and yet feeling that they belong to one nation. (Mahathir, 1993: 405)

How then does one reconcile the above contradictory statements? It is very clear that the government is liberal with regards to rhetoric re: communities being free to practise and profess their cultures. This is encouraging for cultures and communities that have a strong ethnic language and as a result strong cultures. But some minority communities whose cultures and languages are in a state of decline may not be able to benefit from this liberal stance. This is

because what they need at this point of decline in their ethnic language, culture and religion is concrete assistance from the government with regard reversing language shift.

How does one face the challenge of assisting minority communities to practice and profess their “customs, cultures and religious beliefs and yet feeling that they belong to one nation?” If one is sure of one’s ethnic roots then one can have a strong sense of collective identity which is based on the language of the dominant ethnic group. But if you take that away from the ethnic groups then it will be difficult for them to reconcile to their loss of ethnic identity whilst at the same time face the challenges of working towards a collective identity. After all, “... an accepting and unconflicted view of one’s own culture may be a building block of and a pre-condition for accepting unconflicted views of other cultures. Security begets security.” (Fishman, 1991: 31)

Stephen May in his discussion of this very same issue articulates what is clearly a disagreement with the ideology adopted by Tun Mahathir. He says,

“Such a position considerably understates the possibilities of holding dual or multiple identities, except oppositionally. And yet it is clear that many of us can and do hold multiple and complementary identities – social, political and linguistic – at one and the same time .... Certainly, one can hold both a regional and national identity without these necessarily being conflictual. Why then should this not also be the case for ethnic and national identities (Stepan, 1998; Taylor, 1998) (cited in May, 2001:106)

Given this, it will be appropriate at this stage to remind ourselves of the relationship between mother-language and ethnic identity. How crucial is a mother language to a community and its people?

The importance and value of mother languages is highlighted through UNESCO’s recognition and support of linguistic and cultural diversity which represent universal values that strengthen the unity and cohesion of societies. The recognition of the importance of linguistic diversity led to UNESCO ’s decision to celebrate International Mother Language Day on the 21<sup>st</sup> February every year throughout the world. (<http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/language/> accessed on 8th March 2009)

Therefore in any multi-ethnic community, should it not be possible to help its population sustain identities at varying levels depending both on ethnic community and national needs? We move on now to explore the measures in existence for the sustenance and to initiate reversal of Punjabi language shift.

### **Community-Driven Reverse Language Shift (RLS) Measures: The Punjabi Language**

Out of despair in this situation, came a strong realization that if anything was to be done it has to be initiated by the community. Therefore, as a base force to activate and energise the collective spirits, the Sikh elders, led by Santokh Singh decided to do something about the increasingly demoralizing situation.

Working hard and putting in their best efforts, the committee first established the now famous Punjabi Education Trust Malaysia (PETM). After many discussions, group dynamics and negotiations, the PETM, by November 2000, was ready to launch the new Punjabi education programme. There are now 20 Punjabi Education Centres nationwide with more than 3000 students and 220 teachers.

Santokh Singh strongly feels that it was crucial for the community to first show the powers-that-be that “we are serious about our own language and have taken serious steps to set up and run the Punjabi education centers. ... Only then can we convince the government about our mission and appeal for the allocation ...” (cited from Jaspal S., 2003: 28).

To ensure that the Punjabi education keeps expanding, the Punjabi Education Trust Malaysia (PETM) has submitted a special memorandum, (25<sup>th</sup> February 2004) titled, “Development and Growth of the Punjabi Language in the Malaysian Education System” to the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, seeking a meeting to present budget details and plans for the long-term sustenance of Punjabi language teaching. After many many years of patience and perserverance, the meeting was finally held early this year and was successful when the Prime Minister allocated RM 2 million for the sustenance and maintenance of Punjabi language teaching.

### **From community-driven initiatives to government support**

What can we do for other minority communities? How then can we move from community-driven initiatives to obtaining support from the government? At the 7<sup>th</sup> Asia-Europe Foundation seminar that was held on 22-25 February 2006, in Budapest, Hungary on “Human Rights and Ethnic, Linguistic and Religious Minorities” the issue of minority linguistic rights was discussed. In personal communication with Prof. Gudmunder Alfredsson, who is the Director of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute and an expert in human rights and humanitarian law, we discussed how minority communities could move from community-driven initiatives to obtain support from the government. Together we came up with four areas that can drive this initiative.

The first is to bear in mind that politicians do not read academic papers. Therefore papers need to be written in short, succinct forms to convince them of plans. It is politicians who have the power to make the relevant decisions to assist minority communities.

Secondly, there is a need to educate society as a whole. There is a need to build up awareness of these issues through the mainstream media. Society transcending all the ethnic groups needs to be made aware that identity is multi-dimensional. One does not retain ethnic identity to the exclusion of a national identity.

Thirdly, is the sad reality that minority groups whose numbers are small do not wield any political clout. They just do not have sufficient numbers for electoral power. They therefore need to obtain political support through other means. For this, they need to convince politicians from the dominant ethnic group to understand and be sympathetic to their cause.

Fourthly, it is integral for these communities to speak through one voice and work collaboratively with each other to develop concrete community-based plans for mother language sustainability and development.

Finally, only after having tried all the above should minority groups then resort to international charters and documents and seminars to draw higher-level attention to this issue.

## Conclusion

This raises the delicate balance that needs to be maintained for the development of both national and ethnic identities as manifest through language policy and management in Malaysia. Effective management requires the state to be sensitive and provide opportunities for the revival in some cases and enhancement in others of the various languages that are utilized in this nation, minority or otherwise. At the same time, communities need to be proactive with the provision of language education for their various ethnic groups. The state support and the development and rooting of ethnic identity is essential for the multi-ethnic population to possess a sense of inclusion which in turn will spur and enhance loyalty for the national language of the nation.

In fact, what needs to be worked on for many nations is a blueprint of language planning and policy for our nations to plan and assist its multi-ethnic population in establishing ethnic, national and international identities. This will be a blueprint that will work out the resources and plans for the continued enhancement and development of Bahasa Melayu as our national language and ethnic minority languages that form the base of ethnic identities. In discussing the justice of the distribution of resources, Wright explicates that, "Clear functional differentiation and secure financial support for the weaker language are the most basic of requirements ...and other protective mechanisms will probably be necessary." (Wright, 2004: 188) Only through these crucial considerations can there be the pursuit of the integral balance needed between the collective national identity and the individual ethnic identity.

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