

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



MJSSH
Muallim Journal of
Social Science and Humanities

THE INTANGIBLE LINGUISTIC HERITAGE OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS OF MAURITIUS: THE CASE OF TAMIL LANGUAGE.

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Abstract

Mauritius is a multilingual and multicultural country with people of different ethnic groups cohabiting together ever since the settlement of slaves and indentured labourers. Each ethnic group has been very much preoccupied in the preservation of their respective linguistic and cultural elements. Among the Indian languages that survived the colonization pressures, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu and Marathi, in order of their uses, are noteworthy. The Tamil community hitherto managed to maintain their ethnic language to some extent. This paper attempts to uncover the various strategies employed by the Tamil community and the role of other individuals and organisations in the maintenance of the language in Mauritius.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Curriculum, Indian languages, Language maintenance, Language shift

Received 5th May 2018, revised 10th July 2018, accepted 20th July 2018

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1.0 Introduction

Mauritius became inhabited only after the arrival of settlers from Portugal and Dutch in 1505 and 1638 respectively (Teeluck, 2009)¹. When the Dutch left the country in 1710, the French took over in 1725 and ruled Mauritius until 1810 (Teeluck, 2009)¹. During this period, slaves were brought mainly from African and Asian countries to work on the Islands. There were also a number of workers from Pondicherry, South India to cater for more skilled jobs such as

construction of buildings, roads, bridges, just to mention a few (Addisson & Hazareesingh, 1984)². The British took over Mauritius 1810 and ruled until 1968 when Mauritius became independent. With the implementation of abolition of slavery in 1835, labourers were brought from India to replace the slaves in the sugar cane plantations as indentured labourers (Addisson & Hazareesingh, 1984)². As a result, from 1835 till 1922, Indians from various parts of India from different ports, namely, Madras, Bombay, Calcutta came to Mauritius. However, a larger Tamil population also migrated to Natal and the Straits settlements (Tinker, 1974)³. It is worth mentioning that the different Indian linguistic groups migrated to Mauritius as indentured and free labourers, traders and skilled workers.

The above migrants could not bring any of their valuable belongings with them to Mauritius, except their religious practices, customs and traditions, rites and rituals, folktales, folk songs, and of course their respective languages (Dinan, 1986)⁴. Today, after four generations, these languages have become intangible heritage of the country. As a result, today Mauritius has a very rich linguistic heritage that many Indian diasporic countries could not afford to preserve.

After the independence, Mauritius has witnessed a rapid growth in almost all the spheres of life. The country has moved from an agricultural based economy to an economy based on financial and other services; the system of education has moved from area health centres to private and sophisticated hospitals. All these developments have also impacted on many spheres of the population of Mauritius, including the linguistic elements of the country. Amidst these conditions, the Indian immigrants hitherto preserved their ancestral languages as an Indian intangible assets of their forefathers and as symbols of their link to their mother country- India. (Hookoomsingh, 1980)⁵. Among the languages, Tamil is one. It is against this background that the present study is taken up.

2.0 Aim of the study

This research attempts to investigate the evolution of Indian languages in Mauritius with focus on Tamil since the migration of Indians in Mauritius. The study also attempts to explore the various factors that has contributed for the maintenance of Tamil language in some domains and the loss in other domains.

3.0 Methodology

Approaches pertaining mainly to historical and linguistic research methods have been employed to carry out this study. Information of both primary and secondary nature were tapped to obtain relevant data in connection with the study. Population censuses, newspapers, magazine accounts, books, pamphlets, research reports dealing with Asian languages and education in

general, archival documents, published and unpublished research works and articles from national and international journals and oral testimony have all been consulted for this study.

The experience and knowledge of the researcher, who carries huge amount of relevant information have been very useful for this study. Fishman (1989)⁶, observes that ‘observers who share a common ethnic identity with their subjects carry huge amounts of detailed knowledge that cannot be equaled or acquired by others’. The researcher is a not only a very active member of the Tamil ethnic group of Mauritius , but also has more than 25 years of experience in the teaching/learning of Tamil language in Mauritius. He is also the chairman of the Tamil Speaking Union, which is a parastatal organization set up by the government to further retain and develop Tamil language in Mauritius.. Both descriptive and inferential statistic methods have been used to analyse the data. Mostly tables and detailed historical accounts have been used to present the results.

4.0 Results

4.1 Multilingual character of Mauritius

Language issues in Mauritius are probably the most complex and perplex matters in the society. The population Census of 2011 cites the following three categories of languages spoken by residents of Mauritius:

1. Languages usually spoken at home
2. languages of forefathers
3. Languages of forefathers and language usually spoken at home

The above census also cites the following 21 languages spoken by residents of Mauritius: Afrikaans, Arabic, Bengali, Bhojpuri, Cantonese, Chinese, Creole, English, French, Gujrati, Hakka, Malagasy, Mandarin, Marathi, Russian, Sinhala, Swahili, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu and Sinhala. No doubt all the above languages, in alphabetic order, make Mauritius a linguistically rich nation. Among the above 21 languages, Arabic, Bhojpuri, Chinese, creole, English, French, Mandarin, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu are much more present both at written and spoken levels.

In Mauritius, English is mostly used for the official matters and is the medium of instruction for almost all the subjects in the curriculum from primary to tertiary level, although its presence in written, audio and visual media is limited. On the other hand, French is more prominent in the written, audio and visual media. Creole, initially a hybrid of African languages and French is presently the lingua franca of 84 % of the population (Population Census, 2011)⁷. Languages such as Bhojpuri, Chinese, Hindi, Mandarin, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu are often reckoned as ‘ancestral languages’ in sociolinguistic perspectives, ‘Asian /Indian languages’ mainly in educational perspectives and ‘forefathers languages’ mainly in the

population census. The following table 1 shows the evolution of the languages in the Mauritian society after independence:

Table 1

Number of speakers Indian languages at home

S.N	LANGUAGE	1972	1983	1990	2000	2011
1	Bhojpuri	N.A	197,050	201,600	142,381	65,289
2	Creole	428,427	521,950	652,200	826,152	1,069,874
3	English	2,272	2,028	2,240	3,512	5,573
4	French	39,234	36,048	34,455	39,953	51,214
5	Hindi	262,191	111,134	12,800	7,250	8,690
6	Marathi	12,036	12,420	7,500	1,888	490
7	Tamil	29,094	35,646	8,000	3,623	1134
8	Telugu	17,634	15,364	6,400	2,169	1600
9	Urdu	23,470	23,572	6,800	1,789	814

Source: Population Censuses, 1972 -2011

4.2 The Indian languages in the Mauritius curriculum

Bhojpuri, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu are Indian languages that still exist in Mauritius but to different degrees. Bhojpuri besides being still spoken by many Mauritius in their day to day life especially in village areas, is also being taught in the primary school curriculum along with Hindi language. Almost all the primary schools offer Hindi as a subject in the curriculum. It is also being taught in almost all the state secondary schools and most of the private secondary schools and at tertiary level. The presence of Urdu in the form of Hindustani in Mauritius is actually restricted to audio and visual media and almost inexistent in written media. Urdu language is also present in the curriculum. The Muslims of Mauritius are observed to be slowly shifting from Urdu to Arabic as their ethnic language. This is explained by the increasing number of students opting to pursue Arabic as a subject at both primary and secondary levels.

Tamil, Telugu, Marathi are almost non-existent in the written media and very limited in the audio visual media, but they are being taught/learnt in curriculum from primary to tertiary but with a comparatively low number of students at all levels. The number of students pursuing Tamil at all levels is decreasing year by year. Except in a few domains such as Tamil temples, home, festivals, cultural events, it is hardly used in the day-to-day life of the Tamil community of Mauritius. The following table 2 shows the number of students opted for the different Indian languages, English and French languages at the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) at the end of six years of schooling at primary level, at the School Certificate level (SC) after five years of schooling at the secondary school level and at the Higher School certificate level (HSC) after two more years at secondary school level in the year 2015.

Table 2

Number of entries at primary and secondary school levels

Levels	Certificate of Primary Education	School Certificate	Higher School Certificate
Subjects			
English	20,426	19, 726	N.A
French	20,411	19, 664	2,952
Hindi	6,615	564	466
Marathi	197	46	12
Tamil	892	181	34
Telugu	270	67	19
Urdu	1,627	387	87

Source: Mauritius Examinations Syndicate, 2016

4.3 Tamil language in the curriculum

The following table shows the number of students opting for Tamil language at primary and secondary levels for the past seven years.

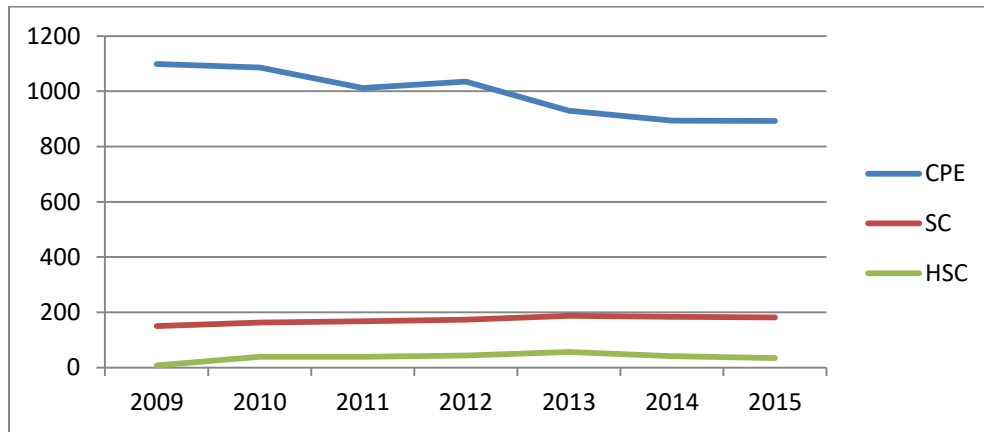
Table 3

Number of entries for Tamil language at primary and secondary level

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
CPE	1099	1086	1012	1035	930	894	892
SC	150	163	168	173	187	184	181
HSC	8	39	39	44	57	41	34

Source: Mauritius Examinations Syndicate (2009-2015)⁸

The following graph shows the how the evolution of the number of students opting for the Tamil language at Certificate of Primary Education, School Certificate and Higher School Certificate Examinations from 2009 to 2011.



Graph 1: Evolution of number of students of Tamil

Today Tamil language is being learnt/taught in the primary, secondary and tertiary curriculum. According to Chemen (2005)⁹, Tamil language is no longer considered as a mother tongue in the teaching/learning process in the curriculum. There is hardly any student who learn the language in schools and speak the language in their day to day life, even at home. Chemen (2005)⁹ shows how the language is even shift from a second language to a foreign language.

4.4 Language shift by Tamils from 1860 till date

The table below showing the language shift of the Tamil community of Mauritius from Tamil to creole is based on the responses from respondents of different generations on their use of language in their day to day life.

Table 3

Number of speakers of Indian languages

Period	At home	Among Tamils	Among Non-Tamils
1860-1880	Tamil	Tamil	Creole/Bhojpuri
1880-1910	Tamil	Tamil	Creole/Bhojpuri/Creole
1910-1940	Tamil	Tamil and Creole	Creole/Creole(Bhojpuri)
1940-1970	Tamil and Creole	Creole (Tamil)	Creole
1970-2000	Creole (Tamil)	Creole	Creole
2000 onwards	Creole	Creole	Creole

4.5 Tamil s a curriculum language in pre- independent Mauritius

The teaching/learning of Tamil language in Mauritius dates back to the 18th century. Teaching/learning of the Tamil along with mathematics by the vaathiyaars – elderly persons who came to Mauritius with a sound knowledge in Tamil and mathematics – was compensating for the absence of the formal education system among the immigrants, a system that was deprived to them. Following recommendations of Higginson, the then Governor of Mauritius during the period 1851 to 1857 , Tamil schools were set up under the supervision of the Reverend Hardy. But, the parents of Hindu faith refused to send their children fearing the attempts to conversion into Christianity. Mauritius had to wait till 1864, to have Tamil being introduced in governments schools in Mahebourg , Pamplémousses and Port-Louis. Within 5 years, that in 1869, Tamil, Hindi and Urdu were introduced in 26 schools of which 15 were government schools and 11 of them were benefitting government grant. The survey carried out in 1872 in connection with the Royal commission of De Plevitz found that there were 30 schools functioning in Mauritius, out of which 26 were meant for people of general population and 4 for the Indians, (Rajaram, 1989)¹⁰. The dedication of the teachers and the teaching/learning of mathematics along with Tamil were noteworthy. The teaching of Tamil language in schools did not last for long.

4.6 Tamil traders and the promotion of Tamil language

The revival of the teaching/learning of Tamil is due to the active participation of the traders who came and settle businesses in Port-Louis. They did not only set up schools for children living in Port-Louis, or made special arrangements to educate Tamil to their own children, but they also encouraged setting up and maintenance of various evening Tamil schools in many sugar plantations across Mauritius so that the children of the Tamil indentured labourers immigrants could have access to the basic education in Tamil and mathematics (Thancanamootoo, 1981)¹¹. They believed that education would uplift the Tamil immigrants, in general, both socially and culturally. These Ethnic Mother Tongue schools were also catering for the maintenance of many cultural elements that were being threatened by the then colonisers.

4.7 Manilall Doctor and the maintenance of Tamil Language

Manilall Doctor came to Mauritius in 1907 and left in 1910 and during his stay in Mauritius he had as his mission to uplift the Indian Immigrants especially in the fields of education and politics (Bissoodoyal, 1965)¹². He and his ideals were well received by the then Tamil traders also among the whole Indian population. Manilall Doctor further emphasized the relevance of education among the Indian Immigrants and this further motivated the Tamil traders to further invest in the education of the people. The ideals of Manilall doctor influenced many people in Mauritius in that period, irrespective of their ethnic appurtenances. Permal Soobrayen, a well

versed Tamil scholar in that period, was one among the persons who were attracted by the ideology of the Doctor. As a result, Permal soobrayen played a crucial in the development of language education in Mauritius

As a result in 1954, lots of changes happened in the teaching/learning of Indian languages, including Tamil in Mauritius. Tamil was again in three schools in Port-Louis, namely Central Boys Government School, Arsenal Church Government Aided School and Young Men's Hindu Aided School. There were around 50 students who were studying Tamil in these schools and the teachers were paid just like any other general purpose teachers. Prior to the independence of the Mauritius, in 1967, some 60 teachers were involved in the teaching/learning of Tamil to some 500 students where Tamil continued to be taught. Permal Soobrayen was considered as the pioneer in the introduction of Tamils, in evening schools in Mauritius (Rajaram, 1989)¹⁰.

4.8 Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam and Tamil Language Development

Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam (SSR) has played a very important role in the introduction and development of Indian languages in Mauritius, including Tamil. In 1940s, when Indian languages were no longer taught in schools across Mauritius, SSR who started to engage himself seriously in the politics of Mauritius during that period drew the attention of the then British government about the relevance of introducing Indian languages in the formal curriculum of country. In 1941, SSR addressed the then governor : “ My community wishes to see that its languages like Hindi, Urdu and Tamil be taught to our children as they are accustomed today, and any new change in the direction or any change that will bring the suppression of one or the other is something undesirable and something that would be detrimental to that section of the community. It will therefore impress upon government to see that these languages are taught and taught in a manner that is more methodical” (Varma, 1975)¹³.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

- a) In spite of the linguistic pressure due to many factors such as globalization, economic growth and social integration from the time of indentureship till now, most of the Indian Languages have survived to some extent in Mauritius. Bhojpuri, Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Telugu and Urdu are the Indian languages that are still present in the linguistic panorama of Mauritius. Their implementation in the formal and informal school curriculum, and their existence, of course at varying degrees, in the audio visual media are noteworthy. However, they could not be maintained as a vibrant day to day language of the respective ethnic groups due to reasons described above. No doubt, the successive Mauritius governments after the independence have played a crucial role in the maintenance of these languages in Mauritius linguistic system.

- b) Almost all the Indian languages registered a continuous fall in their number of speakers after 1983. In the 1990's, while the number of speakers of Indian Languages fell drastically, the number of speakers of Creole language increased considerably. Also, the number of speakers of languages such as Tamil, Telugu and Marathi, the languages of the minority Indian ethnic groups, was equally very. The need for a sudden and efficient inter-ethnic social intergration and interaction among the different ethnic groups of Mauritius pushed them to shift to Creole as their inter-ethnic language of communication. This inter-ethnic linguistic shift gradually, over a few generations, resulted into even an intra-ethnic linguistic shift. Table 3 shows how Tamil ethnic group shifted from Tamil to Creole as their inter-ethnic and intra ethnic language in the fourth and fifth generations. The Tamil ethnic of even the rural areas of the country ultimately shifted from Bhojpuri to creole for their inter-ethnic communication. Tamil Language was a very vibrant language among Tamils both at home and outside the home environment. The major linguistic shift happened almost within 1960 to 1983.
- c) Having realized the unconscious rapid loss of the language in the 80's, the Tamil ethnic group quickly came up with strategies to maintain their Language in the domains where they still exist. To such an extent that they innocently and perhaps ignorantly refer to their religious practices which is mostly based on Tamil language to a 'Tamil' religion to strategically demarcate their practices from other Indian ethnic religious practices with a view to assert a distinct identity based on religion in the absence of a vibrant Tamil Language.
- d) The teaching of Tamil language dates back to the 18th century. The Tamil immigrants even during the French period gave importance to the teaching and learning of Tamil language. The relevance of the Tamil language during the British period both by the indentured labourers and the traders were highly significant. The teaching and learning of the Tamil language were implemented by the successive governments and by private organisations. The role of the Tamil traders during British period was very important. They did not encourage the implementation of the Tamil language in Port-Louis only, but also among the indentured labourers in rural areas. Their financial support was instrumental.
- e) The visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Mauritius and the presence of Manilall doctor in Mauritius had a great impact on the maintenance of Tamil language in Mauritius. The aims of both Gandhi and Manilall doctor under the Arya Samaj Movement were to uplift the Indians, in general by showing a keen interest in the field of politics and education. Coupling both at some point of time there was a pressing need for Indians to show themselves literate to have the right to vote. This ignited the need for an educated Indian Community in Mauritius. Manilall doctor found it convenient to encourage each linguistic groups to learn their respective languages. With this in mind, he encouraged many people with different ethnic groups with linguistic competence in their respective

languages to come forward to teach the Indian Languages across Mauritius. One of them was late Permal Soobrayen, who was really impressed by ideology of Manilall doctor and embarked in the propagation of Tamil language in Mauritius, starting from Port-Louis to various parts of Mauritius. He is the being reckoned as the father of the teaching/learning of Tamil language in Mauritius.

- f) Sir Sewoosagur Ramgoolam (SSR) had a major contribution in the maintenance and development of Tamil in the curriculum of Mauritius. His struggles for the introduction and proper introduction of Asian languages in the curriculum dates back to 1940s prior to the independence. He argued with the then governors that it would be fundamental rights of the Indian majority people to have access to the learning of their languages and also argued that none of the European languages would be affected by the introduction of Indian Languages. As a result, Tamil was introduced in the primary schools in 1954 in the schools and in 1967, just before independence, there were already some 75 schools offering Tamil at primary level.

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Citation in English

Jeevendiren Chemen. (2018). The intangible linguistic heritage of Indian immigrants of Mauritius: the case of Tamil language. *Muallim Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2(4), 327-337.