Trilingual Sri Lanka



President Mahinda Rajapaksa envisages a trilingual Sri Lanka where Sinhala and Tamil speaking people will relate to each other in each other’s languages and English will be a life skill for occupation and employment and an instrument of communication to access knowledge from the external world. Sinhala and Tamil will be further developed to serve as the country’s languages of discourse, discussion and intellectual debate on all aspects of modern knowledge and technology as is the function of national languages in almost all other countries of the world. This will enable the vast majority of our people to participate in national discourse to thereby help grow a vibrant, practicing democracy in the country. Sunimal Fernando, a senior Advisor to the President is spearheading the trilingual initiative of the President and is the driving force to ensure that the ten-year Master Plan becomes a reality. He spoke to Business Today about the concept, strategy and importance of a trilingual Sri Lanka.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe | Photography by Mahesh Bandara & Prabhath Chathuranga

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The Government is preparing a ten-year Master Plan for Sri Lanka to become a trilingual nation. What is the thinking behind this?

During the first quarter of 2009 it was quite clear that the war against terrorism was coming to an end. On February 14, 2009 when we launched the Year of English and IT, His Excellency the President formerly declared that his vision for the country was that of a trilingual Sri Lanka where Sinhala and Tamil people would relate to each other in each other's language and where English would be a life skill, a useful tool for occupation and employment and an instrument to access information and knowledge from the outside world. Seeing the threat of terrorism coming to an end, His Excellency had already started thinking about the next phase of the country's journey, which was a development phase in which we all join hands in harmony as one people to march forward courageously into a prosperous future.

Two important elements necessary for a sustainable development have to do with language. Firstly, for the country to develop and for that development to be sustained and for that development to reflect the wishes and aspirations of the people to whom this country belongs, that is our own people, we have to move towards a lively democracy. And for an active vibrant democracy to function effectively there has to be discussion, discourse, exchange of ideas and intellectual debate among the people. And it is through such a process of national discourse and debate that a democracy decides the style and direction of development desired by the people.

Language is the vehicle of discussion and discourse. According to data available with the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration pertaining to the level of language skills in Sri Lanka in 2010, nearly 90 percent of Sinhala people cannot communicate in Tamil and 70 percent of Tamil people cannot communicate in Sinhala. And as for English as a link language between the two linguistic communities, after 200 years of English in Sri Lanka and a public school system with 23,000 English teachers training students five hours a week for 11 years in the English language, it is estimated that hardly 15 percent of the people are able to

communicate comfortably in English today. With the acute shortage of competent English teachers in the school system, the outdated and conservative teaching methods, curricula and teaching material that are only now being modernised through the President's English as a Life Skill initiative, it will be a very long time indeed before English skills are developed countrywide to a level at which English can be the common language of discourse and discussion across the linguistic divide.

So in such a situation the most effective way of growing a lively democracy in Sri Lanka is to develop and disseminate the two national languages Sinhala and Tamil to all our people as the vehicle through which modern ideas, modern controversies, modern views, modern technologies and modern sciences among a host of other subjects could be discussed, discoursed and debated by our people. A fundamental tenet of the trilingual policy of His Excellency therefore is that Sinhala and Tamil will be developed as the two main languages of discourse and discussion in the country.

The second important element of language in relation to development relates to English. Development and aspects of it such as creativity and self confidence require that while we think in Sinhala and Tamil, we should be able to access knowledge and technology that is developed outside our country and communicate with the outside world for which we need to acquire a necessary competency in functional English – or English as a Life Skill. In the world at large, functional English is emerging today as the common language of communication across the globe and therefore to be interconnected in a shrinking world and to be employed productively and meaningfully in a global economy one would need a knowledge of functional English – or English as a Life Skill: but not the same kind and level of English as of Sinhala and Tamil: not English for intensive national level discussion and discourse on the host of subjects and issues affecting the country and its people: but English as a life skill as is the case throughout Western, Central and Eastern Europe or for that matter India, Russia, China and Japan today. English as a life skill for occupation, employment, accessing outside knowledge and technology and for communicating with the outside world is therefore another fundamental tenet of the trilingual policy of the President.

The President's Initiative 'English as a Life Skill' is also branded as 'Speak English Our Way'. The latter is sometimes seen as an encouragement to not learn the language properly. What are your thoughts on this?

Till His Excellency the President launched his initiative in 2009, English was delivered in Sri Lanka not as a life skill but as an emblem of elitism, upper class status, rejection of one's own roots and culture and as an alternative to Sinhala and Tamil rather than as an addition to our own languages. This style of English was not acceptable to the mass of children from mainstream Sinhala and Tamil speaking homes. The President's English as a life skill initiative was framed to deliver a different kind of English – communicative, functional English, to be used as a culturally neutral skill for occupation, employment and accessing knowledge from the outside world.

In a country where English was seen as an emblem of class, power and status, our rural children were frightened to speak English as English was projected as something not belonging to them but a skill that belonged to another class in society. It was realized by the Presidential Initiative that the dissemination of English language skills across the country required first and foremost an aggressive national campaign to break through this socio-psychological barrier and speak English without fear – and methodologically – making mistakes which you learn to correct as you go along but fearlessly speaking all the same, then making fewer and fewer mistakes and having as your ultimate goal the ability to speak English the Sri Lankan way.

No one learns a language in a day. A language is learnt progressively by first making many mistakes and then making fewer and fewer mistakes. That is how we all learnt our own Sinhala and Tamil. What is needed in language learning is the confidence to make mistakes and learn from them and then to speak correctly. Making mistakes indicates that we are learning. There is no reason for people to laugh when we make mistakes as they do in our country when we make mistakes in English but do not laugh when we make mistakes in Sinhala and Tamil. Swimming against this socio-psychological tide and bringing about a national attitudinal change regarding English is what the Presidential Initiative is all about. Language learning is a gradual process and not a one shot activity and making mistakes as you learn is an integral part of learning a language.

Sinhala And Tamil Will Be Developed As The Two Main Languages Of Discourse And Discussion In The Country… To Communicate With The Outside World We Need To Acquire A Necessary Competency In Functional English – Or English As A Life Skill

We already see the three languages being taught in schools and public servants learning the second national language. What are the mechanisms and programmes put in place to fulfill these aims?

At the moment the two ministries, which have been tasked with the responsibility of doing so, are the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration on the one side and the Ministry of Education on the other. They have specific roles to perform; the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration is tasked with the responsibility of developing a bilingual public service in the country, while the Ministry of Education is mandated to teach Tamil to Sinhala speaking students and Sinhala to Tamil speaking students through the public school system.

I regret to say that while both these ministries and their departments have had programmes to promote language skills in Sinhala, Tamil and English, their success and impact under succeeding administrations has been a story of disappointment. There are many programmes. But there has been no drive, no passion behind them. These programmes have all borne the predictable characteristics of any bureaucratic machinery sans the much required passion and will to transform the learner and eventually the working culture. Let us look at some hard facts.

The Official Languages Department (OLD) conducts courses in Sinhala, Tamil and English languages for public service officers with the avowed intention of facilitating the delivery of services in all three languages; the scale of such programmes can be judged by the fact that annually 6000 public service officers from a cadre of one million (i.e. excluding the cadre of 200,000 school teachers) amounting to a mere 0.6 percent had followed courses in Sinhala, Tamil and English languages conducted by the OLD, which included Level III and Level II language courses. At the present pace it will take over 100 years to establish a public service capable of working in all three languages. This is the true situation.

Look at another set of facts. The National Institute of Language Education and Training (NILET) under the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration was set up in 2007 under an Act of Parliament also to train public servants in all three languages and also to develop a national cadre of language interpreters and translators. NILET trains annually around 9,450 public service officers as passable

bilinguals capable of handling any oral exchange in either Sinhala or Tamil with the ability to fill forms related to customary, everyday work in either language, which would amount to a mere 0.94 percent of the entire public service workforce.

Thus the State Ministry tasked with the important responsibility of creating a bilingual public service trains through its two departments – OLD and NILET – a mere 2.54 percent of the public service each year. Therefore, we cannot fault anyone for questioning the programmes of the Ministry.

Now it is a well known fact that there is a dire need for professional translators in most government offices in the country. NILET has been conducting ten-day residential courses for translators since 2009 and officials maintained that the institution has successfully trained nearly 350 prospective translators, who have been trained to translate English texts to Sinhala/Tamil and vice versa. NILET is in the process of finalising the details related to the Diploma in Translation Studies, which is within its mandate, and which is to be launched in 2011 as a pilot project giving successful diploma holders the license to function as authorized translators. However the diploma too will be limited to producing translators with the skill to translate Sinhala and Tamil language texts to the English language and vice versa. The number will be limited to 50 per year, with 30 students for the Sinhala/English translation programme and 20 students for the Tamil/English translation course. Whereas it has been estimated that the country requires at least 700 more professional translators as a matter of urgency. It will take no less than another 15 years for NILET to produce the required number of translators, when the urgency is to develop this cadre in 1-2 years. Furthermore, while the real requirement in Government offices is for translators proficient in translating from Sinhala to Tamil and Tamil to Sinhala and not from Sinhala and Tamil to English and vice versa, the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration does not train any such translators at all.

Let’s look at the achievements of the Ministry of Education which is tasked with the responsibility of producing a bilingual / trilingual ‘next generation’. Teaching Sinhala and Tamil languages to non native speakers led and supervised by the Ministry of Education was introduced into the public school system several years ago. However the commitment of the ministry to this activity and the importance it places on it can be judged by the fact that officials at the Ministry could not even reveal data

pertaining to the number of teachers trained to teach Sinhala and Tamil languages in the public school system. The best guess by some officials was in the region of 6,000, others have suggested that the numbers may be around 4,000; subsequently 2009 School Census Data revealed that there are 8,745 teachers teaching Sinhala as a first language; 1,562 teachers teaching Tamil as a second language; 2,737 teachers teaching Tamil as a first language and 535 teachers teaching Sinhala as a second language. Whatever the accurate figure may be, the amount emerges as absolutely inadequate when compared with the large pool of 23,000 English language teachers employed to teach English to non-native students in the 9,500 public schools in the country.

The information available with the Data Management and Research Unit of the Ministry of Education reveals that Sinhala and Tamil are taught as second languages only in 2,046 schools out of 9,410 functioning schools in the public school system, which exposes the fact that Tamil and Sinhala are not taught as second languages in over 7,000 schools. This number would prove to be an immense challenge to the trilingual programme, when the people of this country have been made to believe that Sinhala and Tamil are taught as second languages in all schools throughout Sri Lanka.

NILET Trains Annually Around 9450 Public Service Officers As Passable Bilinguals Capable Of Handling Any Oral Exchange In Either Sinhala Or Tamil… This Would Amount To A Mere 0.94 Percent Of The Entire Public Service Workforce

Bilingual and trilingual programmes have by and large been failures in the past. What are your thoughts on this?

We in Sri Lanka have not experienced any remarkable national initiative with strong political clout and authority to teach Sinhala and Tamil to non native speakers of the two languages in the country; even English had been taught unsystematically by various entities confined to very conservative teaching techniques across the country that were nurtured and promoted by an old-school of linguists that were often alien to Sri Lankans learning the language for the first time and hailing from the lower ranks of the social strata, the grassroots and the rural regions, thereby falling short of achieving the desired proficiency in the English language. This trend has almost witnessed an end by reason of a Presidential initiative launched in February 2009 – ‘English as a Life Skill’ – to take the English language to the

farthest corners of the country, resulting in the revamping of teaching strategies and methodologies, with the focus on user-friendly cutting edge tools that relate to the immediate environment of the learner, thereby transforming the learning experience to the local context.

There has been no such national drive spearheaded by the country's leadership under succeeding administrations to propel the learning experiences of Sinhala and Tamil languages by non native speakers, until the need for a National Master Plan for a Trilingual Sri Lanka was conceived by the President. In short, until President Rajapaksa launched his initiative on 'English as a Life Skill' and had it directed from his own office and until he decided to also launch a 'Presidential Initiative for a Trilingual Sri Lanka' which he plans to shortly do once again from his own office, there was no strong political clout behind the smaller language planning initiatives of earlier administrations.
An added factor was the failure of past administrations to focus seriously on an overall language plan for the country and learn from the rich language planning experience of countries similar to ours particularly in the Asian region.

Language teaching is a fast developing discipline in the world and particularly in the South Asian region with new teaching methods, teaching aids, syllabi, curricula, teaching materials and IT teaching aids being constantly tested and introduced into the language teaching field. We found little or no evidence to show that the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration in particular and to a lesser extent the Ministry of Education had procedures and arrangements in place to access what is new in the language teaching field in the Asian region and upgrade the quality of their respective faculties and courses. The results and impact of such a state of stagnancy will necessarily be and in fact are poor and unsatisfactory. And no one seemed interested in taking corrective action. The budget is blamed for the relative inactivity, absence of motivation, lack of creativity and innovation and the unwillingness to effect change. But the fact of the matter is that low budgetary allocation is the result of and not the cause for this state of affairs. A good, innovative, convincing programme will always attract the attention of the national budget.

However all this is fast changing with the two language planning initiatives of President Rajapaksa – 'The Presidential Initiative on English as a Life Skill' launched in 2009 and 'The 'Presidential Initiative for a Trilingual Sri Lanka' to be launched

later this year.

Whatever The Accurate Figure May Be, The Amount Emerges As Absolutely Inadequate When Compared With The Large Pool Of 23,000 English Language Teachers Employed To Teach English To Non-Native Students

Cutting-edge expertise in second language teaching will be crucial to the success of the Trilingual Initiative of the President. How much of such expertise is available in Sri Lanka?

With the exception of the teaching of English as a second language in schools since 2009, in my view almost the totality of second language training programmes in the country could be considered out of date by decades as far as syllabi, curricula, teacher training, teaching methods, tools (including IT tools) and material are concerned. In the case of English, through the Presidential Initiative we brought down cutting edge teaching tools, techniques and material from the English and Foreign Language University (EFLU) of Hyderabad, which is today considered to be the world's leading centre for the teaching of English to non English speaking communities. Our English language master trainers from the Education Ministry adapted and contextualized what they brought from India to respond to the specific problems of English language teaching in Sri Lanka and we have now actually revolutionized English teaching in our schools. Nearly 23,000 English teachers have been trained to use the cutting edge tools and techniques of language teaching. The trainers have thus accumulated an enormous fund of experience as well.

We have in our country today a cadre of 400 English language trainers, 80 of them trained in Hyderabad and 320 trained by them here in Sri Lanka. Such a state-of-the-art fund of second language teaching expertise developed in the past two years is now available in Sri Lanka. The training strategies, teaching techniques, teaching tools and IT tools at their disposal are equally relevant for the teaching of any second language – Sinhala, Tamil or English.

They could be adapted and contextualized for the language of choice in collaboration with teachers of the language concerned. Where necessary this available local expertise could be conveniently supplemented from India whose government has offered to provide all necessary technical assistance for the success of the President's Trilingual Initiative just as they did in support of his

English language initiative from the time it was launched in 2009.

Is this local expertise confined to the Ministry of Education or can it be accessed by other ministries with programmes of second language teaching?

Both the Ministry of Education and the Presidential Task Force on English and IT will be very happy to share this expertise with other ministries having second language training programmes in support of the President's language initiatives. And it is much better to depend on the country's own experts than to seek the expertise of foreigners who hardly understand the context and reality of a rural Asian country like our's. In fact I even went to the extent of lobbying some ministries to modernize their second language training programmes by accessing this local expertise at negligible cost to themselves and the country.

But sad to say we have yet had no takers. Naturally, I was somewhat bewildered till a dear friend explained it is wiser for most people who matter, to close their eyes to the availability of local expertise and even to the availability of relevant skills in nearby countries like India. It is more exciting to go searching for expertise and experience in Europe and America where the per-diems are higher, the shopping more alluring, the sight-seeing more enthralling, the hotels more comfy and the contacts more rewarding, though the experience and expertise of those developed, industrial countries in second language training would most probably be totally inapplicable to a developing, rural, South Asian country such as ours.

We Have In Our Country Today A Cadre Of 400 English Language Trainers, 80 Of Them Trained In Hyderabad And 320 Trained By Them Here In Sri Lanka

The various amendments brought to the Official Languages Policy under the present Constitution have guaranteed parity of status to Sinhala and Tamil as national and official languages, while English is recognized as the link language. How will this initiative produce different results?

I entirely agree with you that the constitutional and legal framework for a trilingual Sri Lanka has been in place since 1987. Therefore no amendment to the

constitution, no new laws are necessary. The question is when the constitutional framework has been in place for 23 years why is the country still so far away from the trilingual target enshrined in the constitution? Well the short answer is that the specific institutions that were given the responsibility of moving the country towards a trilingual society have not performed successfully. Then once again there was no strong political drive to implement the constitutional provisions until President Mahinda Rajapaksa decided to do so.

Shifting the country towards a trilingual society is a landmark decision that could only be taken by a fearless, courageous leader like President Rajapaksa. Somewhere in 2008 he decided to take English language skills across the country – 'nationalize English' so to say – and asked me if I would drive the initiative under the guidance of Presidential Secretary Lalith Weeratunga. When he found that Lalith and I had got our act together and Lalith had defined the President's ideology of English in the phrase 'English as a Life Skill', His Excellency decided to officially launch the initiative in February 2009. And what is most interesting is that by the time he launched his English as a Life Skill initiative on February 14th 2009, he had already decided on the next phase of his language plan when he said that his vision for Sri Lanka is that of a trilingual society in which the Sinhala and Tamil speaking people will engage with one another in each other's language and where English will be a life-skill for employment, occupation and to access information and knowledge from the outside world.

He added that he will be asking his officials in due course to prepare a Ten Year Master Plan for a trilingual Sri Lanka. So in February 2009, even before the country was completely freed of terrorism, his vision was set on a trilingual society. But being the wise and practical man that he is, President Rajapaksa decided to watch how the English initiative proceeds, allow the system to gather experience on language planning and give time for his officials to learn from the mistakes and successes of the English language drive before giving the green light to start preparing a Ten Year Master Plan for a Trilingual Sri Lanka which he did towards the last quarter of 2010.

Then Once Again There Was No Strong Political Drive To Implement The Constitutional Provisions Until President Mahinda Rajapaksa Decided To Do So… Shifting The Country Towards A Trilingual Society Is A Landmark Decision

Do you think that this initiative is practical and achievable during a ten year period?

An important reason for me to think it is achievable comes from the results of a very interesting socio-linguistic survey of Sri Lanka, which was conducted by an independent research institute for the Presidential Secretariat in August 2010. From the time the President articulated his vision of a trilingual Sri Lanka, I quietly started preparing myself to see how we can plan to make it a reality. I looked around for guidance. There was no language planning experience in Sri Lanka that I could access. So I thought I should informally gather some experience on language planning from India.

Now, every Indian state is trilingual. India has a world of experience in language planning. I had informal discussions with several language planners in that country. The first thing that I was told by leading language planning specialists in South India was 'your Constitution is one thing and your President's vision for a trilingual Sri Lanka is really great, but before you actually start language planning, you must find out what your own people really want.' All three elements have to gel – what the people want, what the national leader considers to be desirable for his country and what the country's constitution prescribes. Based on their advice I designed a social linguistic survey of Sri Lanka which was conducted in August 2010.

Language Is The Soul Of A People. Language Cannot Be Imposed On A People. The World Is Replete With Examples Of Failure When Governments Attempted To Impose A Language On A People Against Their Will

Language is the soul of a people. Language cannot be imposed on a people. The world is replete with examples of failure when governments attempted to impose a language on a people against their will. Before any kind of language planning is attempted therefore, it is always necessary to carefully assess the wishes of the people so that the language plan will be a response to and not an imposition on the people's wishes and aspirations. Hence the importance of the very comprehensive Socio-linguistic Survey of Sri Lanka that was conducted last year.

That the inherent desire for learning languages remains very much in the consciousness of Sri Lankans is demonstrated by the findings of the sociolinguistic

survey, which rightly revealed that there has always been a want on the part of the population of native speakers of Sinhala and Tamil to learn each other's languages as well as English. The Socio-linguistic Survey is indicative of a possible new direction for the country with the feedback validating a longing for social cohesion and integration as well as for acquiring trilingual competencies among all communities.

The survey, confirms the fact that Sri Lankans like all South Asians want to learn more and more languages. The percentage of people across the country who consider it a waste of time to learn another language is negligible. There have been questions raised on the benefits for a Sinhala person to learn Tamil and vice versa. In other words they say that unless there is an economic dividend in learning a language, a Sri Lankan will not learn a second national language. This may be true for a certain segment of society but it is not so for the rest of the country which thinks and feels differently. The Socio-linguistic Survey clearly shows that in South Asia people like to learn languages not for any type of economic benefit or commercial value but simply because they like to learn languages.

Ninety two percent of Sinhala people living in majority Sinhala speaking provinces, 98 percent of Sinhala people living in majority Tamil speaking provinces, 92 percent of Tamil people living in Sinhala majority provinces, 94 percent of Tamil people living in majority Tamil speaking provinces, 92 percent of Muslim people living in majority Sinhala speaking provinces and 89 percent of Muslim people living in majority Tamil speaking provinces said that learning the other national language promotes national integration. The survey reveals a very progressive population has emerged in Sri Lanka in the last few decades.

According to the survey an absolute majority of respondents had articulated the need for children also to be proficient in the other national language for various reasons, among which national integration took precedence amongst Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim respondents in the majority Sinhala speaking provinces. 76 percent of Sinhala people, 89 percent of Tamil people and 92 percent of Muslim people living in majority Sinhala speaking provinces and 88 percent of Sinhala people, 94 percent of Tamil people and 96 percent of Muslim people living in majority Tamil speaking provinces had expressed their preference for children also to be proficient in the other national language. As for the reasons for wanting their children to be

proficient in the other national language, 75-93 percent said it was to enable the exchange of ideas across linguistic communities. 92 percent of all respondents said it was to facilitate national integration, 89 percent of Sinhala people, 94 percent of Tamil people, and 96 percent of Muslim people living in majority Tamil speaking provinces had given equal partiality to the improvement of job opportunities through proficiency in another language as much as their choice for national integration.

Hence, since the President's vision for a trilingual Sri Lanka is overwhelmingly confirmed by the findings of the Socio-linguistic Survey of 2010, I feel confident the Presidential Initiative will succeed as the language aspirations of the people across the country gel with His Excellency's vision for the country.

How will a trilingual initiative contribute to businesses, what kind of benefits will they receive, how will the development process benefit?

The trilingual initiative will facilitate the growth of a very inclusive participatory democracy in the country, where issues, options and alternatives would get widely discussed and debated across the country through the facility of Sinhala and Tamil proficiency. Hence whatever investment and development takes place will be based on what the people themselves have discussed, discoursed, debated and decided upon. Development based on such a firm democratic foundation – which will only be possible through a bilingual facility – will be very sustainable and secure. Sustainable development and democracy are closely entwined one with the other.

Next, as we generate functional English skills across the country as a part of the Presidential Initiative that too will provide a tremendous boost for business. We will find a lot of investment coming in here. Foreign investment requires people who can speak and understand functional English for employment. So that is the kind of English we are taking across the country – grammatically correct English shorn of all unnecessary cultural baggage and pronounced with a Sri Lankan accent. In the English speaking world, whether we pronounce English in a Sri Lankan way, in a Scottish, Belgian or Russian way or even in an Australian or American manner, across the English speaking communities of the world, English can be understood. Therefore, the functional English that we are disseminating through the Presidential initiative will attract business to this country and will make existing business also

more efficient and competitive.

Even with the local languages, with Tamils learning Sinhala and Sinhala people learning Tamil, would you say there would be more interaction between districts, communities and markets?

If you take any average business in the country, except for a handful of export businesses, 80 percent to 90 percent of their interaction involves communication within the country. It is only an upper layer of business activity in a smaller percentage of businesses that require communication with other countries. It is communication with other countries that requires English. Perhaps about 80 to 90 percent of interaction in any average Sri Lankan business requires an ability to communicate in Sinhala and Tamil and an ability to relate to the thoughts and emotions of Sinhala and Tamil speaking people. Therefore, for any average Sri Lankan business, – except for that small number of businesses where 90 percent of their work is with other countries and only ten percent of their work is within our own country – to be efficient and productive, the policy of developing Sinhala and Tamil as the main languages of communication and discourse in the country will help.

It is also proposed to develop an institutional structure so there is a national momentum for the trilingual initiative. Can you elaborate on this?

The draft Ten Year Master Plan for a trilingual Sri Lanka is still not ready. My task, with the help of an advisory committee of 23 members, several of whom are professors and former professors of Sinhala, Tamil and English, is to prepare a draft plan for the Secretary to the President. The draft I presume will then go through a further process of modification and refinement in terms of political and national perspective.

To Be Efficient And Productive, The Policy Of Developing Sinhala And Tamil As The Main Languages Of Communication And Discourse In The Country Will Help

In the draft that we are preparing, there will certainly be an elaborate institutional structure at the apex of which we are likely to propose a Language Authority of Sri

Lanka directly under His Excellency the President to steer, drive and monitor the Presidential Initiative. We are also likely to propose a National Authority for Language Research and Training at Peradeniya on the lines of IFS, NIBM or BNMF, and nine Provincial Centres for Language Training with residential facilities which can evolve over the years into language campuses.

We are also thinking of proposing a Special Presidential Trilingual Education Project in the Ministry of Education and similar Special Presidential Trilingual Projects in the Ministries of Higher Education and National Languages and Social Integration. We might also propose the establishment of a National Translation Bureau and a National Cadre of Language Translators with Provincial Sub-Cadres in a revamped Language Translator Service. We would also like to propose a Public-Private Partnership in the form of a National Foundation for the Promotion of a Trilingual Society to mobilize the CSR energies of the private sector for achieving the goals of the Presidential Initiative and to take trilingual skills to the private sector and to the general public.

These ideas are still in the melting pot and nothing is as yet decided. But one thing about institutions is certain. Institutional structures once designed will succeed only if there is institutionalized passion, charisma, innovation and accountability to the people without which the process will reflect the all too familiar lukewarm response of the bureaucratic machinery. There has to be essentially a balance between the inherent bureaucratic nature of State institutions and an element of creativity, innovation and passion coming from outside, without which an institutional structure alone may fail to sustain the drive. Finding committed people with skill and passion combined to man the institutions is therefore all important. It is such people that generate momentum. In my view, this will be the biggest challenge for the Presidential Initiative.

How will the trilingual initiative contribute towards Sri Lanka becoming a Knowledge Hub?

To be a knowledge hub, two or three things have to be in place. First there will have to be knowledge generation within the country. Knowledge generation within our own country has to be in Sinhala or Tamil for one or two important reasons. One is that these are the languages in which, the vast majority of people think. They are

the languages connecting us to our roots, to our soul, to our very being. Next we have to link ourselves to our own identity as a country, as a culture, and as a people, to make our own distinct contribution to the world for which, we must all think in our own languages. And finally, for Sri Lanka to be a knowledge hub, we have to be connected with other centres where knowledge is generated and developed for which we have to use a vehicle of communication which is common to all places where knowledge is generated and exchanged for which we will need functional English. So that is how the trilingual initiative is going to help Sri Lanka become a knowledge hub.

All Language Related Activities Must Therefore Be Designed And Implemented By Sri Lankan Persons And Institutions That Can Be Held Accountable To The Country And The People

The way forward?

One important matter to bear in mind in language planning is that language is something very close to a person's heart. Language is entwined with one's very being and soul. Language has all to do with identity and relationship between people and communities. Language can be used to create dissent or to create harmony, to create integration between two language speaking groups or to generate disintegration of their existing harmony. Language planning is therefore very closely connected with politics and national security. Foreign agencies including INGOs should therefore not be involved in implementing any programme related to language other than providing technical assistance as and when requested by the Government and/or providing financial support directly to the Government to be utilised by the Government without the participation of the foreign donor in designing or implementing any programme or activities supported by such groups. It must be ensured that language and national integration do not become convenient vehicles for foreign interests to subtly subvert the national interests of the country with the conscious or unconscious assistance of local officials who may be knowingly or unknowingly induced by foreign currency and travel. All language related activities must therefore be designed and implemented by Sri Lankan persons and institutions that can be held accountable to the country and the people.





