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**THE DYNAMICS AND DILEMMA OF THE TAMILS' FESTIVAL IN  
MALAYSIA**

**Introduction**

The British administration had transformed Malaya into a 'dollar arsenal' as Malaya was rich in tin and rubber. In their effort to exploit these resources, the British needed manpower for the means of commercializing the agricultural sector, namely the rubber plantations. Thus, this saw an exodus in the Indian migration from South India in the early twentieth century into Malaya who toiled in the rubber and sugarcane plantations, and majority of them belonged to the Tamil ethnic group. Their social lives were greatly scrutinized under the British administration and the estate management, unlike their Chinese counterparts who had the freedom to establish their own organizations and who were not controlled. The lives of these laborers in the plantations and even in the urban areas were in a deplorable condition. According to INSAN (1980), these laborers can be pictured as 'sucked oranges'. Poverty, alcoholism, caste system and the lack of infrastructure has affected the not only the livelihood of the Indian community in the estates but also to other aspects of their lives such as celebration of festivals, which is an important instrument in preserving the culture and arts.

In addition to that, the British policy of "divide and rule" had created a greater impact in the breaking up of the Indian community, which comprised of the Tamils, Malayalees and the Telugus. As a result, the Tamil elites from the upper middle class became very reserved and cut off from the Telugu and Malayalam elites who had the British educational background. The Tamil elites worked through organizations that were based on Tamil language and culture. These organizations aimed at improving the socio-economic- status of the Tamils in the poorer realm and uniting them as one Indian community. Among them were none other than G. Sarangapany, a social reformist who aimed at building, reforming and developing the Indian community.

G. Sarangapany, in his 20s was greatly influenced by the Dravidian movement in India that called itself the Self- Respect Movement that aimed at abolishing caste- system, superstitious beliefs and practices, alcoholism and improving the socio- economic- status of the Indians and strengthening their political status in India. G. Sarangapany was deeply aware that the Indian community in Malaya lacked the identity as a community and at the same time was divided over issues like caste and religion. These elements have proved to be the barrier in molding this much wanted identity. Thus, G. Srangapany, as a social observer adapted the values purported by E. V. Periyar in accordance with the socio-political situation of the Indian community then. Based on his experiences in the Dravidian movement, he established a few cultural and community based organizations. They were the Tamil Reform Association, established in 1930 and the Tamils Representative Council in August 1951. Five months after establishing the TRC, another concrete plan was emulated to bring the Indian community together as one, where they

can congregate and celebrate their roots, the Tamils' Festival or the *Tamilar Thirunaal* in 1952.

### **Historical Background of the *Tamils Festival*.**

The social factors such as caste and religion had hindered the Tamil community from neither establishing a strong identity nor enhancing communal relationships. This had avoided them from working together and act as a dynamic community. As mentioned earlier, the leadership held by persons of Malayalee, Ceylonese Tamil and North Indian descents had been identified as a factor contributing to a weakly - knotted Tamil community. Thus, in order to bring them together, G. Sarangapany had envisioned this festival.

As an early start, G. Sarangapany established the Tamil Reform Association in 1951, which was a substitute of the TRC. G. Sarangapany who was also the chairperson of the TRC formed an exco board comprising of 7 members to underline the course of actions that needed to be undertaken by the TRC. These included programs and activities for children, youths and even the elders.

Deciding on a strategic date proved to be a hassle. Thus, the TRC sought the advice of a Tamil philosopher, Re. Ra. Aiyaru. Finally, 14<sup>th</sup> January was chosen as the auspicious date for the Tamils' Festival, which fell on the first day of the month of *Thai* in the Tamil calendar, which is also the day when the Tamils celebrated their New Year's Day. The month of *Thai* is also significant as denotes a time when the *Ponggal* festival is celebrated to mark the harvesting of the rice fields. Furthermore, it doesn't coincide with any other religious festivals observed by the Indian community. Finally, the Indian community in Malaya had accepted the Tamils' Festival with open hearts and it was usually celebrated together with the *Ponggal* Festival. Thus, the first Tamils' Festival was celebrated simultaneously in Penang, Arau and Singapore on the 13<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup> January 1952 (Interview with Murugu Srineevasan, 8 August 2000, Singapore).

Looking from the success that the 1<sup>st</sup> Tamils' Festival derived, G. Sarangapany was convinced that the Tamils' Festival was clearly significant in playing its role in uniting the Indian community. This could be reflected in the Editorial section of the Indian Daily Mail, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1952 which says,

"The need for such a festival was being felt since a long time. To attain a decent social status for the Tamils, in keeping with their ancient glory of culture and civilization and command the respect of all the other communities in the Federation of Malaya". The only rational approach to the problem lies in a concerted effort of all the Tamils and the occasion and the opportunity are held out in the observance of the Tamils Festival, by all those whose mother tongue was Tamil. Tamil Festival transcends all barriers of creed, class, caste, religion, province and State. All those who cherish Tamil as their mother tongue would celebrate this festival. This festival is not supplanting any of the existing festivals of the Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Tamils festival is secular in motive and practice. The Tamils Festival is not calculated to sow the seed of dissension among

the Indians in Malaya, but aims at fostering a spirit of unity among the different sections of Indian community as a pre-requisite for unity among Malayans" (Indian Daily Mail, 13 January 1952).

The main factor that attributed to the Tamils' Festival is to instill unity by using the Tamil language as the medium of interaction. According to G. Sarangapany, "The Tamils' Festival is not only open to the Indian community, but also to all those who can speak and use the Tamil Language. Thus, the Indian community should use this opportunity to get together and develop their language, culture and themselves as a whole (Tamil Murasu; 14 January 1952).

According to G. Sarangapany, only through language can these noble intentions be achieved. This is because; most of the members from the Indian community come from different religious groups, castes and cultural practices. However, they all speak one common language and that is the Tamil language. The 1950s and the 1960s were known as the golden era of the Tamils' Festival. In 1953, it was celebrated in almost 20 places in Malaya, 26 places in 1954 and 54 places in 1955. G. Sarangapany in one of the Tamils' Festival, during his speech had said that,

"Tamils' Festival provided a good fillip to divert the energies of Tamils to productive and useful channels, which would breathe a new life and new spirit into their betterment in the economic, educational and social fields. Tamils' Festival was not started with any motive of creating a split among the Indian community but with a sincere and honest purpose of promoting unity among the Tamils and thereby contributing to the strength of the Indian community. There need be no misapprehension about the intention of celebrating the Tamils' Festival" (Indian Daily Mail, 17 January 1954, Interview with Ma. Se. Mayadevan, 22 March 2004, Taiping, Perak).

In the effort to popularize and develop the Tamils' Festival, speeches were given in the estates as well as the in the urban areas to promote the Tamils' Festival and at the same time to create awareness of the existence of such a Festival among the Indians. Pamphlets were also given out throughout Malaya especially to the youth group. These pamphlets were written in not only Tamil, but also English, Chinese and the Malay languages, so that everyone understands and made aware the Tamil's Festivals' vision and goals. Furthermore, the dailies have also played an important role in disseminating the information on the developments and activities organized for the Tamil's Festival, which used to be published in the *Tamil Murasu* and the *Indian daily Mail*. Generally, the Tamils' festival saw a steady growth in the 1950s and the 1960s. However, this was short lived.

In 1970, the Tamils' Festival was only celebrated in about 12 places. This figure declined in the following years when in 1974, the Tamils' Festival was only celebrated on a very small scale that it almost not recorded following the death of G. Sarangapany. The absence of other charismatic leaders and the opposition given by the Malayan Dravidian Association to Tamils' Festival were two main factors that had caused the Tamils' Festival a slow death until the early 1990s. The Tamils' Festival was given a new breathe of life in the year 2000, and its been celebrated without fail ever since for the past 4 successive years. The Tamils' Festival, now, has been accepted by the Indian community and this year's theme was geared towards the importance of developing the Tamil

language and culture (Malaysian Nanban, 2000- 2004, Interview with Ma. Se. Mayadevan, 22 March 2004, Taiping, Perak.)

### **Dynamics of the Tamils' Festival**

The Tamils' Festival are considered to be unique as it is the sole festival in Malaysia that aims to create and sustain inter-ethnic harmony among the Tamils, Telugu, Malayali and Indian-Muslims. Indians from other religion and denomination such as Christianity and also Buddhism were also invited to participate in this Festival.

The Tamils' Festival committee was responsible in organizing and executing the plans and the activities that hoped to achieve the unity in the Indian community. Most of these activities aimed at enhancing the use of the Tamil language and culture and improving the socio- cultural aspect of the Indian community. Activities held during the Tamils' Festival can be grouped into:

#### **1. Literary competition**

These are some of the activities that had been organized to encourage the use of Tamil and appreciation of Tamil language as the unity language.

- i. *Thirukural* and poetry recitation
- ii. Debates and Story Telling
- iii. Puzzle-solving
- iv. Essay or Short Stories, Poem competition

#### **2. Stage shows**

Song competitions, music recital (veenai, drum, flute), Indian classical dance and drama presentations were held. Some of the well-known stage shows are "*Yaar Kutravali*" or *Who to Blame* directed by Piravipittan. Most of the drama particularly addressed the social-cultural issues that were affecting Indians. Apart from drama, song

#### **3. Seminars**

The seminars emphasized on languages, culture, civilization, unity and social issues. Local and international speakers were invited as far as from India such as Professor St.Xavier, Professor Abdul Gaffor and Professor Visvunathan from the well-known Universities of South India like Annamalai University.

#### **4. Traditional Games and Sports**

Garland tying, pot-breaking, *kolam* drawing, arts and baby contest, sari beauty pageants, *sadugudu* (Tug of War) and body building.

Through its programs, the Tamils' Festival has reawakened, strengthened and developed the cultural consciousness and able to preserve the cultural heritage of the Indians in Malaysia. The Tamils' Festival programs has achieved to enhance and strengthen the use of Tamil of Tamil language, promoting Tamil literature and art and developing Indian classical music and dance.

### ***I. Enhancing and Strengthening Tamil Language as medium of Instruction in Tamil Schools and as Language of Unity among the Indians***

The Tamils' festival played an important role in increasing the awareness on the importance of the Tamil language to the Indian community. Many speeches given at the Tamils' Festival emphasized on the importance of the Tamil education and preserving the Tamil language. G. Sarangapany who is known as the "Father of the Tamils' Festival" is one of the most important leader who called for this cause. In 1953, during the Tamils' Festival in Kuala Lumpur, Mr. Alagirisamy, Assistant editor of the Tamil Nesan daily, had emphasized on having a resource center to develop the Tamil education. According to him, this was because,

"There is a lack of Tamil books in Malaya. If this continues, there will be ignorance among the young about the lives and achievements of the previous generations. In this situation, reading should be encouraged and the Western society's way of setting up home mini-libraries should be encouraged. Thus, on the larger scale, a library should be established wherever there is an Indian community" (Tamil Maraian; 1998: 24).

Besides the local speakers, many speakers were invited from the other continents to talk on Tamil education and its status. In 1960, Professor Thinnanayagan Adikalar was invited from Sri Lanka who emphasized on the significance of the Tamil language to vernacular education for the Indian community. In his speech,

"Education is the most important aspect in molding unity in the Indian community. Thus, we should pay attention education, so that, one's language is not forgotten along the wave of development. The Tamil language should be protected and nurtured as it is the life-giver to our culture (Ibid: 33).

Drama and writing competitions were organized as part of the Tamils' Festivals activities to promote the Tamil language among the younger generation and to create appreciation and language awareness among the Indian community. According to N. Varatharasan, the drama competitions that were organized during the Tamils' Festival were the height of the Festival as the committee members themselves staged it. In this way, the festival gave birth to many local talents such as Dato' Seri Dr. S. Samy Veloo, M. S. Mayadevan, A. Muthusamy and N. Varatharasan who gained popularity in the 1960s and the 1970s. According to M. Thanggasamy, who had acted in a stage show, held during one of the Tamils Festivals in Malacca in 1967, "the drama presentations had actually helped to instill greater awareness on Tamil language and culture".

### ***II. Developing Tamil Literature and Discovering New Writers.***

Literature and writing were not given any prominence by the Indian community in Malaya in the 1950s. This was due to the hardships faced them in the plantations for basic necessities. According to Mr. N. Varatharasan, the Indian community in the 1950s

was not well exposed to literature and writing which was tied closely to their discouraging socio- economic condition. Efforts to establish writers association was first carried out in on December 1952, when G. Sarangapany established the Writers Association. However, this institution was dissolved in 1954 (M. Ramaiyah; 44). Thus, G. sarangapany continued to encourage writing through the Supplementary for the Stdents' Bell Club (*Manavar Mani Mandra Malar*) which, provided basic training in writing techniques for the young. This had opened doors for those interested in gaining training in writing. The Tamils Festival, furthermore, motivated more young writers to come up with their creations through its various literature competitions. According to Murasu Nedumaran, a literary scholar, "the Tamils Festival has produced a new generation of writers in the 1950s and 1960s". parallel to the development in tamil literature, the Tamils' Festival witnessed the birth and establishment of caliber writers such as C.T Ramasamy (Penang), N. Varatharasan and M.S. Mayadevan (Taiping), S. Anbanathan (Penang), K. Kaliapermal (Ipoh), M. Ramaiah (Johor) and M. Thanggasamy (Malacca).

On the other hand, the committee of the Tamils' Festival had also played an important role in the development of Tamil literature in Malaya. Each committee would produce souvenir books that would include these articles. This not only provided an opportunity for new writers to publish their articles but also enriched the existing literature collection in Malaysia (Interview with Mr. M. Ramaiah, 16 April 2004). In this instance, the Tamils Festival had provided both motivation and training for young writers through its various literature competitions. Essays, short stories and poetry were some of the writing genres that were competed. Most of the themes for writing included poverty, and the backwardness of the Indian community, its socio- economical problems, alcoholism, caste system, unity and preserving the Tamil language and culture.

### **III. Developing the Indian Classical Dance(s) in Malaysia.**

Before the Tamils' Festival was held in 1952, there were very limited institutions in Malaya at that time which specialized in the teaching and training of the Indian classical dances namely the *Baratha natyam*. Thus, it was until the 1981 that a formal organization was established to look into the development of the dances. It was officially known as the "The Temple of Fine Arts" and it has played an important and significant role in presenting, training and preserving the arts of Indian music and arts in Malaysia. During the celebration of the Tamils' Festival, most of these dances were performed to promote them to the audience. Some of the dances presented were none other than the *Barathanatyam*, *kolattam* and the village dances. Beside dance events, classical music were also played such as the *sitar*, *tamboora*, *veenai*, *tabla* and the *mridangam*.

## **Pesta Ponggal and the Pan-Malayan Dravidian Association**

The *Ponggal* Festival is closely associated with the farming community. The celebration of this festival is a symbolism of the harvest thanksgiving festival that is celebrated by most of the farming community. In Malaysia, even though the Indian community is not involved in the agriculture sector, they celebrate the fore fathers past on the *Ponggal* Festival as it and it is celebrated in temples and homes.

The *Ponggal* Festival is celebrated as *Thai Ponggal*, *Makara Sankranti* and *Kanni Ponggal*. Basically, the Ponggal Festival is celebrated to honor the Gods Suria and Indira for bestowing a good harvest. Normally on this day, the womenfolk will draw out kolam, patterns made out from rice flour on the doorsteps. Special rice will be cooked on this day, where rice is boiled in milk and brown sugar in an earthen pot, on a specially made platform at home and in the temples. When the broth thickens and overflows, it signifies continuing blessings and prosperity. Usually this is done before the sun rises. The rice is known as the *Ponggal*, *Pukkai* or *Tincoru*. The *Ponggal* festival is celebrated for over 3 days, on the first day of the month of *Thai*, *Mattu Ponggal* on the second day and *Kanni Ponggal* on the third day.

The *Ponggal* Festival is celebrated as a festival passed that is passed on from one generation to another and as a religious festival. Initially, it was celebrated only by those directly involved in the agricultural sector but later on, it was practiced by most Hindus disregard of their work.

The Ponggal Festival, represented a religious festival, celebrated by the Hindus on the first day of Thai (January) which is the first month in the Tamil calendar. However, according to the PDS, the ponggal festival was not merely a religious festival but a cultural festival aimed at inculcating a sense of unity and celebrates the cultural richness of the Indian community in Malaya. According to Murugu Seenivasan (6<sup>th</sup> August 2000), the ponggal festival was held to celebrate the Tamil New Year as a sign to thank the farming community for the toil and hardship in the planting to the harvesting of the paddy.

Many people were not in favor of this because the PDS had called for the community to celebrate the Ponggal Festival disregard of their religion. This was however was different

from G. Sarangapany's views when he wanted to establish the Tamils Festival as a cultural festival to unite the Indian community through the Tamil language, culture and arts. Mr. K. R. Ramasamy, in his article "The Tamils Festival and Ponggal" (1967) had said that prior to the celebration of the Ponggal Festival, Tamil representative council, had conducted a meeting to set the date for the said festival. In that meeting, everyone agreed that the Tamils Festival should be celebrated on the first day of the month of Thai, which coincidentally occurred with the Ponggal Festival. However, according to him, towards the end of the 1950s, G. Sarangapany had said that the Ponggal Festival had a religious connotation and this had perpetuated dissatisfaction among the PDS members. Thus, the PDS had decided after that to popularize the Ponggal Festival in Malaya by equating the significance of the Ponggal Festival to the Tamils Festival. This had caused confusion amongst the Tamil community in Malaya at that time.

This concept that gave both festivals the equal significance continued to be popularized until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. And according to R. S. Muthaiyah, President of the PDS, the PDS had tried to narrow the gap between the PDS and the Committee Board of the Tamils Festival and today PDS is one of the core supporters of the Tamils Festivals programs. Even though the PDS has its own objectives, it posed no competition or threat to the Tamils Festivals development. Apart from being well-received by the Indian community in Malaysia, one of the biggest victory is the declaration of the Penang State Government to recognize the Tamils Festival as one of the itinerary's of the State's programs.

### **Conclusion**

The Tamils Festival has played an important role in strengthening and preserving the cultural heritage of the Indian community. It also promotes the arts, literature and writings of the Indian community in Malaysia. The activities held had helped to nurture and preserve the Indians tradition and culture in Malaysia. And one of the person who had worked hard at achieving this is none other than G. Sarangapany himself. Indian community through the Tamils Festival has demonstrated to Malaysians the distinctive contribution that the Indians make to the cultural mosaic of Malaysia.

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## **Tamil Murasu**

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