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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT THE CULTURAL SHOW ORGANISED BY THE BENGALI ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE AT THE VICTORIA THEATRE ON MONDAY, 15 MAY 1978 AT 8.00 P.M.

It is a great pleasure for me to join with you in commemorating the birthdays of two celebrated Bengali poets - Rabindar-Nath Tagore and Nazrul Islam. I confess that though I am reasonably familiar with some of Tagore's writings, Nazrul Islam is no more than a name to me and, I think, to most non-Bengalis.

The reason why Tagore is a world poet and Nazrul Islam is a Bengali poet has nothing to do with the merits of each. The reason is that Tagore's works have been translated into many foreign languages, particularly into English and Tagore himself wrote in English and translated his Bengali writings into English.

Now Nazrul Islam may be as great a poet as Tagore but because his writings are largely in Bengali his message is for Bengalis only.

I make this point to highlight a fact of great importance to us in Singapore and for that matter for all developing countries. I refer to the question of language. The question of language is a source of many bitter and even violent conflicts. Nations are being broken up over language. Old societies are being shattered and destroyed in the name of language. The language issue is even making it inevitable that societies once prosperous, stable and boasting great civilisations would slowly sink into poverty, misery and barbarism.

This is particularly so in developing countries.

This is because many people approach language with a great deal of emotion and less thought. Language is valued for itself. It is a sacred thing to be worshipped unquestioningly.

But in fact language is something else altogether. It is really a complex of vocal sounds for communication between human

beings -- communicating ideas, feelings, instructions and many other things. This is what language essentially is. What we call Mandarin, Tamil, English, Malay or Bengali are merely different sounds for the same things and ideas and feelings.

The so-called language problem and the conflicts and violence associated with it arise from the greater importance people place on the sounds of language than on its sense -- that it is basically a means of communication.

In Singapore we have many languages -- that is many sounds to say the same thing. Now having a great variety of mutually incomprehensible sounds is good provided we also have a system of sounds that all Singaporeans can understand and therefore communicate effectively with one another.

This is what our current language policy is trying to do -- to have different sounds and a common sound. We want every community to preserve and develop what I will call its private language -- whether it be Chinese, Tamil, Malay or Bengali. All these private languages have behind them thousands of years of great history and cultural achievements which can certainly enrich the developing culture and history of Singapore.

But you also need a public language or link language through which the wisdom behind these private languages can be communicated to all Singaporeans.

In the case of Singapore we have made English the link language. It need not have been English. It could have been any other language that gives Singaporeans ready and speedy access to modern science and technology. In most countries English has been chosen for this purpose. It could have been French or German or Russian or Japanese but in the case of Singapore, for reasons of history, English is the most convenient.

So language should be valued more as an instrument of communication than a sacred idol to be unthinkingly worshipped and forcibly imposed on others who are equally proud of their own system of vocal sounds.

Unfortunately many people still tend to see language more as a sacred image than a system of vocal sounds for communicating vital

ideas and necessary wisdom. And so they get very confused and unnecessarily emotional about it.

Recently the Prime Minister initiated a campaign to popularise Mandarin among the Singapore Chinese. The reaction of some members of other communities to this campaign was one of unease. Why is the Prime Minister and the Government playing up Mandarin. Why not give as much attention to Tamil or Malay or Bengali. Are these minority languages being down-graded in favour of Mandarin? Is this not playing up to Chinese chauvinism.

If you had followed the Prime Minister's forums and speeches carefully you would have discovered that he was concerned with Mandarin not as a sacred communal idol but as a means of effective communication among the Chinese. All Malays have a common language - Malay. All Tamils communicate effectively among themselves through a common system of sounds - Tamil.

So do the Bengalis and others.

But the Chinese of Singapore do not communicate with one another in Chinese because there is no such thing as a Chinese language. What we have instead are a great variety of dialects - Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, Mandarin and so on. They are different systems of sounds.

So in popularising Mandarin among the Chinese all that is being attempted is to give the Chinese of Singapore a mutually comprehensible language as in fact the Malays and Tamils have. This involves playing down the dialects to which the Chinese are as strongly attached as Malays to Malay, the Tamils to Tamil and the Bengalis to Bengali.

So long as we treat language as a means of effective communication, as a means of acquiring necessary knowledge in an era of a knowledge explosion unequalled in human history then the problem of language is nearer solution and will always be manageable.
