

**SPEECH BY DR TONY TAN KENG YAM, CHAIRMAN OF  
SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS, ON THE OCCASION OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup>  
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UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTRE**

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I would like to thank the Hindi Society for kindly inviting my wife and me to join all of you at this function to celebrate the Hindi Centres Day 2009 and the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Hindi Society.

The celebration this evening highlights one more facet of Singapore's vibrant multi-cultural society, in this case, the colour and culture of our Hindi speaking community.

Singapore's Bilingual Education Policy

I want to start my speech this evening by saying a few words about Singapore's bilingual education policy.

As you all know, all students in Singapore are required to study two languages – English and a second language.

Most students study their Mother Tongue as their second language.

This has been a cornerstone of Singapore's education policy for over four decades.

For practical reasons, Singaporeans have to achieve a high standard in English which is our working language and the language of business and commerce throughout the world.

A knowledge of English equips our students to stretch their wings, work in advanced economies like the United States and in Europe and have the tools to master skills in subjects like Science and Mathematics.

With English as a common language among Singaporeans, communication between Singaporeans of all races is facilitated and this strengthens our social unity.

However, the Singapore Government has always made sure that, in addition to English, Singapore students also learn their Mother Tongue as a second language.

Learning our Mother Tongue enables our children to know who they are and helps them to maintain their identities.

It is the key to their historical roots and their past.

The learning of the Mother Tongue helps our children to be in touch with the history, culture, traditions, learning, music, songs and literature of their respective racial groups.

For these reason, the Ministry of Education provides facilities for students to learn English (one of Singapore's four official languages) as the main language of instruction in schools.

With Mandarin, Malay and Tamil as our other three official languages, the Ministry also provides facilities for students to learn Mandarin, Malay or Tamil, depending on their respective racial groups.

Learning Mandarin, Malay or Tamil has an additional advantage.

It helps to connect our students to three fast developing regions in the world – China, South-East Asia and India.

Singapore's bilingual education policy has made it possible for our students to acquire the skills to be gainfully employed in our modern economy but still remain connected to their historical roots.

Our bilingual education system has generally worked satisfactorily for most Singapore children but from time to time difficulties arise for some minorities, for example, with regard to Indian students who are not Tamil speaking.

#### Problems of Non-Tamil Speaking Indian Pupils in our Schools

In 1989, when I was Minister for Education, Mr S Tiwari, President of the Hindi Society came to see me regarding the difficulties faced by non-Tamil Hindi-speaking children in our schools.

Indian students from Hindi-speaking homes, who chose to study Malay or Tamil from the three second language choices available in our schools at that time,

were finding difficulty in keeping up with the language and this had weakened their overall performance in their primary school examinations.

In addition, the parents of these children were worried about the decline in the study and the use of Hindi among the younger generation of Hindi-speaking students.

They felt that this could cause an erosion of cultural values in the children from Hindi-speaking homes.

The matter was of serious concern to the Hindi-speaking community and Mr Tiwari, in his capacity as Chairman of the Protem Hindi Committee, came to see me to explain the problems faced by students in the Hindi speaking community.

At our meeting, he submitted a memorandum putting forward the case to allow Indian students, whose Mother Tongue was Hindi, to be allowed to take Hindi as a second language in our schools.

In his memorandum, Mr Tiwari made an important point, explaining why it would benefit Singapore to enable non-Tamil speaking Indian students to learn Hindi in our schools.

I quote from the paper which he submitted:

“The learning of Hindi will be beneficial to Singapore especially in relation to the international trade with India and many parts of the world where it is understood.

Hindi is the third most widely spoken language in the world after Mandarin and English.

In Singapore, it is understood by those who speak other North Indian languages for example Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi, Sindhi and Marathi.

It is spoken and understood by those in the Indian subcontinent and is also widely spoken in Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, etc”

Instead of requiring students from the Hindi-speaking community to study Tamil, Mr Tiwari proposed that the study of Hindi be allowed as a second language in our schools to be taken by non-Tamil speaking Indian students.

In my discussion with Mr Tiwari, I indicated to him that the Ministry of Education understood the difficulties of students from non-Tamil speaking homes having to study Malay or Tamil.

While MOE made provision for the study of Singapore's four official languages as part of the school curriculum, MOE had some difficulties in allowing the study of Hindi in our schools as a second language, for example, how to maintain standards, how to obtain the services of qualified teachers and who would pay for the teachers if non-Tamil Indian languages were allowed to be taken as second languages.

I asked Mr. Tiwari that if MOE could agree to his request and provided the facilities for Hindi classes in our schools, would the Hindi speaking community agree to manage the teaching and pay for the employment of the teachers as Hindi was not one of Singapore's four official languages.

In other words, would the Hindi-speaking community mount a self-help effort to make available the teaching of Hindi in our schools.

Mr Tiwari's answer was that if Hindi was allowed as a second language in our schools, the Hindi speaking community was prepared to organize and manage the teaching of Hindi and look after the employment of the Hindi teachers.

MOE considered Mr Tiwari's submission carefully and concluded that his arguments made a case for MOE to change the Ministry's policy with regard to the learning of the second language by non-Tamil speaking Indian students.

On 6 October 1989, in reply to a question for an oral answer, I made the following statement in Parliament:

“Our bilingual policy requires all pupils in schools to study a second language in addition to English.

The Ministry of Education provides instruction and examinations in the three official languages – Chinese, Malay and Tamil and non-Tamil Indian pupils are presently required to choose one of these languages as their second language.

The question of allowing non-Tamil Indian students to study their own Mother Tongue (Gujarati, Punjabi and so on), in place of Tamil is not a new one.

It was considered as long ago as 1956.

But owing to the difficulty of providing instruction in the languages and maintaining standards in examination, the Ministry decided that non-Tamil Indian pupils should confine the choice of their second language to one of the three official languages ie Chinese, Malay or Tamil.

At present, a small number of Indian pupils in our secondary schools study a minority Indian language other than Tamil as a third language and offer it as an 'O' level subject.

The following minority Indian languages are available as 'O' level subjects – Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi ad Urdu.

Since examinations in the above five minority Indian languages are available in the 'O' level examinations and the standards are maintained by the Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate, the Ministry of Education has reviewed the matter and decided to allow from 1990 ie next year non-Tamil Indian pupils to offer one of the above five minority Indian languages as a second language in secondary school.

As the Ministry will not be able to provide instruction in these languages, the non-Tamil Indian pupils will have to arrange for their own teachers but, where possible, the schools will make available their premises for lessons.”

#### Progress of the Teaching of Hindi in our Schools

Following my Statement in Parliament in 1989, the Protem Hindi Committee of the Hindi Society took on the challenge of organizing and managing the Hindi teaching programme in our schools.

The first group of non-Tamil Indian students comprising 100 students commenced learning in Hindi classes at the Beng Wan Primary School on the 21 January 1990.

The student population studying Hindi has grown steadily every year and now stands at about 2,100 – a twenty-fold increase since the 1990s.

In the 1990s, there was only one Hindi Centre at the Beng Wan Primary School in Serangoon Road.

The number of Centres has now expanded to 7.

They are sited in the North, South, East and West of Singapore so that children all over the island can get the benefit of attending Hindi classes on Saturdays at Centres nearer their homes.

The Hindi Society has also launched a Parallel Hindi Programme (PHP) in schools.

Under the PHP, Hindi teachers are present at schools to teach Hindi during the Mother Tongue period when the other students are taking Mandarin, Malay or Tamil.

A key advantage of this initiative is that the students taking Hindi are able to study the language in their own school, thus saving them the inconvenience of attending Hindi classes at one of the Hindi Centres on a Saturday.

The first Parallel Hindi Programme was organized in 1998 in the Swiss Cottage Primary School.

Since the launching of the PHP ten years ago, the number of schools offering the PHP has increased and the PHP is now available in 50 Primary and Secondary Schools in Singapore.

Progress in Hindi education has also been made in other areas.

The marks of the common examinations taken by students learning Hindi in our schools are now included in the mid-year and final examinations and common localised teaching materials have also been developed with the efforts of the teachers working under the umbrella of the Board for the Teaching and Testing of South Asian Languages.

The training of Hindi teachers has not been neglected.

Special training sessions have been organized for them to increase their level of expertise and professionalism.

This has been supplemented with awards intended to motivate the teachers to improve themselves.

With the expansion in the number of students and Centres, the Hindi Society needs more classrooms and a proper office.

The Society's move to the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial premises in Race Course Lane will make available more facilities.

I commend the Hindi Society and particularly Mr Tiwari and his Committee for making such an effort to promote the study of Hindi in Singapore.

#### The Hindi Society's Initiative as an example of Responsible Advocacy

Let me end my speech with some thoughts on what lesson the initiative by the Hindi Society holds for us with regard to other social issues which are important for minority groups in Singapore.

Singapore is a small country.

Our population is multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious.

Singapore is also open to the world and we have a large non-Singaporean population who are affected by developments in their home country.

This means that we have to continue to face and manage sensitive issues of race, language and religion.

From time to time, problems have arisen and they have to be managed in a way so that the problems can be resolved, recognizing the legitimate interests of the minority groups but without causing disturbances or unhappiness in the wider Singapore society.

As a globalised city state, Singapore also faces additional challenges as a result of life style trends which are in fashion in other countries and cities around the world. Issues of personal choice, lifestyles, human rights and other sensitive issues have to be managed.

In 1989, the Hindi-speaking population in Singapore, as a minority, faced an issue that affected them, ie the study of Hindi by Hindi-speaking children in our schools.

Through Mr Tiwari, the Hindi Society raised the issue in a calm and non-confrontational way.

The Society put forward a reasoned case for a change in government policy and a practical plan for the teaching of Hindi in our schools.

After discussion with the Government, the issue was resolved.

The plan was implemented by the Hindi speaking community with help and guidance from the Government.

The result speaks for themselves.

The result of this advocacy by the Hindi Society has been beneficial not only for the Hindi-speaking population but also for the wider Singapore society in contributing to our society's diversity while not harming the unity and stability of our country.

This form of responsible advocacy, exhibited by the Hindi Society in resolving the issue of Hindi education in Singapore, could, in my view, be usefully studied by other minority groups in Singapore, who are seeking to advance their legitimate interests.

The Hindi Society's initiative is a responsible way to resolve sensitive issues with common sense and with due regard to the impact on Singapore's society.

Responsible advocacy can help to resolve difficult and sensitive issues of race, language or religion for the benefit of the minority groups as well as contribute to the stability and diversity of the wider Singapore society.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to again commend the Hindi Society for their dedication and hardwork to enable students in Singapore to study Hindi.

I wish the Society all success in its efforts in the coming years.

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