

The Role of Women in Maintenance of Language and Identity With Reference to Tamils in Mauritius

Dr. Kistnamah Mooneegadoo
Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Moka, Mauritius

Introduction

Mauritius has a relatively short history. Tamils' presence in Mauritius could be felt as early as 1734 when the French took possession of the island. Among the Early Tamil migrants, a very low rate of women population could be noticed. But, with the lapse of time, with the increase in the number of female migrants, the latter started having their place in the Mauritian society. Today due to globalization, women are being empowered and hence have to meet different challenges which occur as a result of it. In Mauritius women consist of 35 percent of the labour force. Nevertheless, it is a fact that women have been working hard to keep their language alive and maintain their identity. Women are responsible for passing on the culture, traditions and values from one generation to another.

Keywords: Mauritius, Tamils, Role of Women, Maintenance of Language and Identity

Culture and Women's Role

Culture distinguishes man from other species. A culture becomes a flowing stream only when there is continuity of collective life in a people. (i.e. passing it from one generation to another). However, the vitality of a culture lasts only so long as the best man in the dominant minority of each generation finds self-fulfillment by living up to its fundamental values afresh. However, these values cannot be handed down from father to son as a legacy. Rather each generation must recapture it afresh by trying to live up to it. And women in the society, in maintaining that culture and language greatly help the new generation to recapture it.

Empowerment is the process of enabling or authorizing an individual to think, behave, take action and control work and decision making in autonomous ways. In Mauritius in many spheres, women are being empowered to act individually, to interact in society and to take very important decisions.

If we trace back history it, is clear from evidences received that women were of no small importance. In the riverine plains, women have been helping the men in the harvest of crops, and in the littoral regions where fishing was the main source of living, they helped in guarding the fish that were put to dry on sandy beaches. So, this role of women as active helpers in the occupational activities proves that Tamil women were indeed contributing to the functioning of both the households and the society at large.

Women's Involvement in Mauritius

Tamils are an important component of the Indo-Mauritian community. Tamil language has been taught as early as 1839. At that time the propagation of language was mainly done by male figures, namely, Soopaya Mudaliar, Perumal Soobrayen, Sangeelee brothers and so on.

In 1925 the teaching of oriental languages was officially recognized, and since 1934 the Mauritian government gives due importance to the teaching of oriental languages. It was then that women started playing an active role, taking up the challenges and fighting for their social, academic and spiritual upliftment.

In Mauritius the success of Tamil language maintenance depends on the degree of interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic parameters. The non-linguistic parameters include socio political organizations, religion, values, history, among others. It is an undeniable fact that values, religion, culture are safeguarded to this day by women. Women, due to their keen interest and active involvement, have been contributing in one way or the other in fulfilling the goals of culture maintenance and identity retention. Charity and hospitality are considered very important in the life of Tamil people and women are more adept to it.

Female Population in Educational Institutions

In 2011, Mauritius had an overall population of about 1.2 million. Male population consisted of 633 thousand and female 652 thousand as per last census. Viewing the overall primary schools, out of an enrolment of 116068 students, male students were 58935 while female students were 57133, including women of Indian origin.

In the teaching profession, in the primary sector, male teaching staff consisted of 1655 whereas female 4046. In the secondary schools, out of an enrolment of 115289, 55188 consisted of males and females comprised 60101. Even at Mauritius College of the Air Distance Education courses, out of 890 students, 289 are males and 601 are females. Not to forget the courses in Tamil language run by the MGI, except for one or two males, most of the students are females. So, it is obvious that among the Tamil population the females, through the process of

acquiring knowledge and enhancing further professional development, are the pivot for keeping the language alive.

Challenges Faced by Women

In Mauritius, about 3 or 4 decades ago, very few women enjoyed freedom to seek education or any kind of training. Women were viewed as the inferior class and men were considered as the sole breadwinners, thus taking all the decisions, which showed lack of freedom for women.

But with the growth of industrialization, female labour was absorbed by the industrial zones. Thus, by early 1970's more than 70 % of women became involved in the labour market. Hence the approach vis-à-vis women changed and they are no longer regarded as the inferior gender. Due to economic independence, there is a shift from extended to nuclear families. So, the traditional role of women changed drastically. With the rise of feminist movements demand for equal rights has gone up.

One element which has culminated in the boosting up of the status of Mauritian women is free education that has been granted in 1976. More and more women began to have access to education. Girls after completing their tertiary education now occupy higher posts. Jobs which were once considered to be male-oriented such as police force, management posts, driving vehicles, are now being performed by women. Hence the concept of equality is gaining ground.

Women are not remaining indifferent to changes. Rather they are playing a positive role. Empowerment programmes for unemployed women such as providing them skills and training in different fields enable these women to take up jobs and integrate in society.

With the process of modernization, the role of Mauritian women keeps on changing from that of the householder, very submissive and docile, to that of working-class women, very active and full of enthusiasm.

Tamil Woman in Mauritius

The Tamil woman, apart from doing the house chores would help bind the relations between members of the family through the way she entertains her husband, the children & her interest in their education. The woman within the family would shoulder the responsibilities without any revolt. She would always try her best to achieve and welcome every difficulty at each step with a smile.

Nowadays after striving to preserve the language and being made aware of its importance, women manage to send their children to learn Tamil in evening schools run under the aegis of different socio-cultural organizations.

Women's Role in Propagation of Culture

In Mauritius it is indeed the women who help their families in the celebration of religious festivals. They would attend religious prayers regularly. With their initiative and endeavour, they encourage men also to keep up to their tradition. Credit goes to the women for the lighting of lamps daily, the daily chanting of hymns and devotional songs, prayers to Gods, fasting and so on. So, it is no doubt the women have been throughout the years passing on the customs and habits to new generations.

No need to mention the greatest contribution of Tamil women in helping to retain their identity. Although the heavy influence of varied cultures on them, Tamil women still wear flowers, traditional Tamil jewelry such as the *taali*, *koondoo*, *minji*, *mukkuti*, *konday seepoo*, *tordu* and *podavai* during weddings, funerals and while attending prayers in temples. Even the traditional Tamil dishes such as the *arusuvai*, *payasam*, *appalam vadai*, *pullisorru*, and *pongal* prepared by Tamil women show the identity of Tamil culture.

Constraints in Maintaining Identity

While the women are acting as the agent for cultural transmission, they are being at the same time confronted with quite a number of constraints, namely:

- The impact of other cultures, more precisely the western culture, on the way of life of Tamil women.
- Family constraints resulting from family members' poor knowledge about Tamil culture, customs and religion.
- The influence of environmental factors.
- Media influences on the behavior of youth.
- Labour force – In order to meet both ends, women are compelled to join the labour force, hence cannot devote time to language and culture.

In spite of these constraints, Tamil women through their involvement in cultural and religious activities, are keeping up to their culture, thus shedding light on their identity.

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Contribution of Tamil Women in the Past to Maintenance of Cultural Identity

When the Tamils landed in Mauritius in 1825, they brought with them their rich heritage and strictly adhered to their customs, language and culture. Today Mauritius has a total population of 115,000 and more than 50% constitute of females. Mauritius, being a multiracial society and when certain elements of our rich culture, language and norms were seen on the verge of extinction, only then the Tamil women came in the forefront and with their ceaseless efforts strove to retrieve those elements from extinction. In an endeavour to revive the language and culture, the efforts of a few Tamil women are to be applauded.

At the outset, we can't underestimate the role played by late Mrs. Radhamanee Poonoosamy. Being a native of South Africa, she came to reside in Mauritius in 1952 and her engagement in social work is very remarkable. Apart from launching the Indo Mauritian Association, she also participated in the creation of numerous associations for women. She herself joined the Labour Party and, though not elected, was made a member of National Assembly through the best loser system. In 1975, to mark the International Year of Women, she became the Minister of Women's Affairs, Prices and Consumer Protection. Indeed, she was the first female Minister of Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam's cabinet. A full-fledged ministry was created to give incremental boost to women's emancipation. She introduced many bills at the National Assembly in favour of marriageable age for women, and legislation to prevent marriage to men already married.

Soodrum Pavattan, also known as Anjalay Coopen, another historical figure, born in 1911, worked as labourer at Belle Vue Harel Sugar Estate. She participated in the labourers' protest against meagre wages and inhuman living conditions, which resulted in her being shot down by the police during the labourer's strike on Monday 27 September 1943. Following that a Commission of Enquiry was appointed to look into the disturbances. A series of recommendations concerning wages, housing, sanitation and water supply, medical treatment and so on were put forth. So, Anjalay had contributed to the upliftment of the labourers' living conditions, promoting their self-respect, self-confidence and a feeling of belonging to the society. By so doing, she has opened new avenues for the Indians seeking their rights.

In Mauritius, quite a few Tamil women occupy high positions.

In the educational field, Amma Salatchi was a pioneer in running evening classes.

Amma Rengasamy, a primary school Tamil teacher, was very active in promoting Tamil language.

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In the field of health, Mrs. Veerapen acted as Permanent Secretary for many years in the Ministry of Health.

Mrs. Ramasamy was the permanent secretary in many ministries.

In the domain of Arts, quite a few Tamil women are teaching fine arts and dance.

Even at the level of politics, a few Tamil women have reached great heights.

Here, we must applaud the initiative of one great lady in the name of Mrs. Nagen Husnoo, an industrialist, who has been working towards the promotion of Tamil language for quite a long time.

Women's Role in Sociocultural Organizations

Nowadays Tamil women have a greater role to play and they have been given greater opportunity to serve the various Tamil organizations in Mauritius, numbering more than 10 to this day.

Here we must highlight the ladies' wings of the Tamil League, the Union Tamoule de Maurice, the Taamarai Kazhagam, Avvaiyar Kazhagam, The Amaury Tamil Ladies Association, which have as presidents and members, Tamil ladies. These associations have been founded with the aim of promoting language and culture and helping the women to make use of all the traits related to language and culture.

At Tamil League, for instance, the ladies from the ladies' wing are very active in organizing and participating in the activities of the Association. Thus, they not only contribute to the advancement of the league but work towards their self-advancement.

Apart from activities such as the Women's International Day, the Family Day, their involvement in artistic and cultural activities, namely, the Tamil Drama Festival, other organised leisure activities such as trips to the beach, hotel, valley and parks, visit to temple help them to further deepen the link among all lady members. Tamil speaking classes are also conducted to further help developing and maintaining the language.

As for the Union Tamoule de Maurice, one of its main functions is the 'Aadi Padinettam Perukku'. The female members in order to keep pace with cultural entity organizes this activity and this is another indication that women are keeping their identity.

Another thing that needs mention here is that earlier the officiating priests at the temples were males only. Most of the time the women help in preparing worship rituals. Now a few of them are very dedicated to get trained as Tamil Atchagars.

The main task of maintaining language and identity rests in the hands of Tamil women, since they assume the responsibility as the head of the family. There is a proverb that goes thus:

‘The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.’

Hence, we have lot of hope that the women folk will keep the torch burning and they will preserve language and identity to a certain extent and hand it over to future generations as a legacy. Though not in the field, some women do contribute in developing language and culture.

Conclusion

So, it is apt to say that women are no longer the traditional women of ancient times. Rather they stand as warriors, ready to protect their language and culture. In this paper an attempt has been made to give you an overview of the importance of the role played by Tamil women in maintaining language and identity.

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Dr. Kistnamah Mooneegadoo
Lecturer, Department of Tamil Studies
Mahatma Gandhi Institute
Moka, Mauritius
kistnamah@gmail.com