

REFERENCE: LETTERS IN THE TAMIL LANGUAGE

Darani Rajasingham-Senanayake states (Volume 5, No. 2, p.15) that the Tamil language lacks the 'ba' sound, in explaining asking Tamils to pronounce the Sinhalese word for bucket (*baldiya*) to identify them.

This is a common misconception. Although Tamil has no explicit letter 'ba', it exists. The letter 'u', usually 'pa', if in the middle of a word and depending on context, can be sounded 'ba'. For example, in the word for picture, it is a 'pa', but in the word for happiness it is a 'ba'. But the letter is called 'pa'. Hence the confusion. Non-native speakers and many Colombo Tamils, would, under the same misconception, pronounce the word as 'inpam' rather than 'inbam'. In fact the letter 'a', pronounced 'ka', has these sounds. It stands for 'ka' and 'ha' (as in the word for crow-pronounced *kaham* with the first as 'ka' and the second as 'ha') and the letter 'ga' as in the word for association (*Sangam*).

Mobs asking for the pronunciation of bucket, I submit, is because the word in Tamil-*vali*, is very close to the Sinhalese word, and Tamils tend to use the Tamil pronunciation when the word exists in both languages.

Ratnajeevan Hoole

THE ABSOLUTISM OF THE PURE: A RESPONSE TO RATNAJEEVAN HOOLE

I am concerned at Mr. Ratnajeevan Hoole's implication that there is only one correct way to pronounce words and things in the Tamil language. For Mr Hoole suggests that "non-native language speakers" and "Colombo Tamils" who say "ipam" rather than "ibam" are "confused" and harbour "misconceptions". By implication there is only one proper Tamil usage and that I presume is his regional variety.

Nevertheless I thank Mr Hoole for pointing out that the "ba" sound exists in the Tamil vernacular. However, as he states it exists in a very limited context. It is indeed correct that the "pa" sound in the Tamil language might sometimes transmute into a soft "ba" sound usually in the middle of a word as in *ipam/ibam*. But this sound is in between the soft "pa" and hard "ba" sound. The fact is that the hard first syllable sound of the Sinhala *baldiya* is not one that is natural to Tamil. My point then remains that many first language Tamil speakers, whether or not they be the fallen Colombo mixtures when asked to say the word *Baldiya* might do so with the "pa" sound.

Phonetics, semantics and semiotics considered, I do not think that there is a pure and singular way of speaking Tamil, anymore than there are pure Tamils (or for that matter pure Sinhalese). In Sri Lanka I see only a multiplicity of more or less hybrid Tamil identities and speakers - Colombo Tamils, Batticaloa Tamils, Jaffna Tamils, hill-country Tamils, island Tamils and Tamil-Muslims and Tamil-Sinhalese and Tamil-Burgers and their sub-castes, and of course the diaspora Euro-American-Tamils. The regional qualification like the hyphenation mark the presence of mixture and hybridity while also connoting the island's long history of cultural mixing and colonization. Unfortunately many people like Mr Hoole consider cultural mixing, borrowing and hybridity to be impurity. This misconception which rests on what Rushdie terms the "absolutism of the pure" is a root of our present ethnic misery.

In this respect one cannot do much better than quote Salman Rushdie who wrote in *Imaginary Homelands*: that his work "celebrates mixture, hybridity bastardization. It is the great gift. This is how newness enters the world.

Darani Rajasingham-Senanayake