

## Why language is a source of pride for Singaporean Indian millennials

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This year's Singapore Writers Festival, organised annually by the National Arts Council, chose as its theme, *aram*, the Tamil word for goodness.

The line-up included Tamil millennial poets such as Harini, and the screening of a short Tamil film, *Between Pudukottai and Singapore: Poems* by N. Rengarajan.

They touched on the social issues of our time, and drew in many of my young Indian friends, and non-Indian ones.

An Indian Singaporean millennial —what comes to mind? Would they be donning high-waist denims and crop-tops, or traditional, intricately embroidered sarees? Would they prefer ravishing bowls of flaming hot curry and crisp sheets of prata, or eggs benedict at fancy cafés?

Would they converse more in their ethnic language, English or some amalgamation of both?

And how does Singapore embrace and nurture a citizenry of diverse identities, which in turn enrich and strengthen our nation?

Indians form 9.1 per cent of our resident population.

Of these, Tamils make up 54.17 per cent and Malayalees 6.71 per cent, with smaller groups like the Punjabis, Telugus, Sindhis and Gujaratis making up the rest.

Indian millennials between the ages of 18 and 35 might just be defining “Indianness” a little differently from their elders.

It is a more fluid concept for them, not restricted to cultural markers like food, art, or ethnic wear.

Yet, language remains a great source of pride for them. In fact, the biggest misperception of Indian millennials involves language.

There is a looming fear amongst older Indians, of a gradual decline in ethnic language capabilities within the Indian community, which in turn suggests an erosion of an ethnic identity amongst its youths. This fear is overhyped.

A recent Channel News Asia-Institute of Policy Studies survey on ethnic identity found that 81.3 per cent of Indians aged 21 to 25 regard speaking, writing and reading in Tamil and other Indian languages such as Hindi and Malayalam to be important Indian identity markers.

Even more, at 84.4 per cent, find it important to transmit skills of writing and reading in their ethnic language to their children.

Language is important to the young, as it is to older Indians (94.6 per cent). While Singapore's bilingual policy might be a key driver of this attitude, another substantial reason for this love of language amongst youths might be the sense of belonging that speaking a common ethnic language offers.

The percentages are much lower for giving their child an Indian name (59.4 per cent), donning ethnic wear (65.6 per cent) or enjoying ethnic cuisine (45.2 per cent) as ethnic identity markers.

In contrast, older Indians register 93.4 per cent, 81.3 per cent and 81.4 per cent for the respective markers. Older Indians also feel that avoiding beef (79.7 per cent) and wearing pottus (77.3 per cent) - a dot worn by women on the centre of their foreheads, often to signify marital status or to ward off evil - are important Indian identity markers.

Indian millennials do not agree, registering 43.7 per cent and 46.9 per cent for the respective markers.

At the same time, the extent of our ethnic pride is evident in the aforementioned CNA-IPS survey: 81.3 per cent of Indians aged 21 to 25 find it important to take pride in being considered Indian.

## **LANGUAGE AS A SOURCE OF ETHNIC PRIDE**

As an Indian, I see countless reasons to be proud of my heritage: from the visual prowess of Indian art forms such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak, to the achievements of many prominent Indian figures such as Thamizhavel G. Sarangapani (a Tamil writer and publisher who had a huge part to play in the inception of the Tamil language in the Singapore parliament), to the flavourful richness of Indian cuisine.

However, the most influential of these, for me, is language.

Given Tamil's status as one of the oldest, richest and most unmodified languages of all time, it offers me a sense of solidarity with other Tamil-speaking Indians, across space and time.

The knowledge of speaking, writing and reading this language (albeit at a mediocre level for me), anchors my ethnic pride.

Tamil unites the young and old in my community; it serves as a medium through which the young communicate with our predominantly Tamil-speaking elders.

We most definitely care about preserving it.

Similar sentiments are held by other groups towards their language. A common language offers a sense of belonging for ethnic groups, particularly among the minorities, a point of unique differentiation from dominant cultures. It carves, sustains and reinforces a confident sense of identity.

While the majority of Indian youths care about their ethnic language, Singapore must guard against the possibility that such an attitude will change in the future.

For example, the growing number of interracial marriages and marriages between locals and foreigners in Singapore may lead to greater complacency amongst Indian youths to preserve their ethnic language.

How do we sustain this love for our language?

First, Indian youths must remain cautious of cultural erosion and in a pre-emptive move, must channel greater effort into participating in Indian culture.

This has to be a national effort. Ethnic languages are more likely to survive and flourish in Singapore if they have the ardent support of their respective ethnic groups, and the respect and understanding of the broader society.

For the Indian community, there are traditional events organised by and for us. There are also national events like the Singapore Writers Festival, which offer a space for the major groups in Singapore to enjoy and share the beauty of their respective mother tongues.

They are opportunities for Indians and non-Indians to learn about the languages through art, and in the process, help to preserve them in the Singapore space.

In sum, while young Indians such as myself, may be Westernised in some aspects, such as in the clothing we don or the media we consume, our ethnic pride stands as ardent as ever.

As may be expected in Singapore, I can have my prata, and my friend her prata with eggs benedict, at a prata place off Upper Thomson Road.

I remain Singaporean, Indian, young and proud

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