

A pragmatic move by the Govt

The Star - 6/6/2007

MALAY is one of the Malayic languages spoken in the Malay Archipelago. It belongs to the Malayo Polynesian group of the Austrasian language family and the Malay language and its variants are spoken by more than 28 million people in this region.

It has been influenced by many other languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, English, Dutch and Portuguese. It was in 1928 that the Malay language separated and later became known as Bahasa Melayu for Malaysia, and Bahasa Indonesia for Indonesia.

Bahasa Melayu as the *lingua franca* of the country was at one time called Bahasa Malaysia, but then it was reverted to Bahasa Melayu. By naming the national language Bahasa Melayu, the non-Malays to a certain extent must have perceived it as a language belonging to the Malays only.

In reality, it is now a pragmatic move by the Government to once again use the term Bahasa Malaysia to refer to the national language of the country. This bodes well for our multi-racial society. By doing so, hopefully the perception that it is a language which belongs only to a single ethnic race is gradually obliterated from the minds of all Malaysians. This judicious move would then make Malaysians feel that they all have a stake in the language.

Traditionally, Bahasa Malaysia has become a *lingua franca* for people of all ethnic groups in the country. The term Bahasa Malaysia is in fact seen to be more generic in the sense that it refers to a language that is now being used not only by the indigenous people of the Malay Archipelago but also by those whose roots are from outside this region.

Bahasa Melayu, no doubt, has been a

major literary language among the indigenous people of many successive kingdoms of the past. In the literature sphere of influence, the term Bahasa Melayu should therefore be retained. The term Kesusasteraan Melayu (Malay Literature), for instance, is apt. But, it is not a theme to be looked into solely from the literary point of view.

To refer to the *lingua franca* of the country as Bahasa Malaysia is no doubt a socio-political necessity and it should not be seen as a step to debase the traditional stature of the language. It is a political and social reality that in a multi-racial society like ours the *lingua franca* should be perceived as belonging to all and shared by all. This would help foster harmony among its people.

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