



The Tamil Press in Singapore: The Transformation of ‘Tamil Murasu’ into a Pan-Indian Instrument of the People

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of *Tamil Murasu*—originally established in 1935 as *Dravida Murasu*, the organ of Singapore’s Tamil working class—into a pan-Indian newspaper under the control of Singapore Press Holdings. While founded by K. Sarangapanni as a voice for Tamil Dravidian identity and grassroots socio-cultural upliftment, the newspaper’s subsequent institutional incorporation required a radical shift in its mandate. Once integrated into the People’s Action Party’s media framework, *Tamil Murasu* was redefined to reflect the interests of the Indian community as a whole, subordinating Tamil ethnic concerns to a state-directed ideology of pan-Indian unity. Drawing on ethnographic interviews with journalists, analysis of policy frameworks, and archival material, the study highlights the contradictions faced by *Tamil Murasu* as a minority press organ under a quasi-democratic order. On the one hand, the recognition of Tamil as an official language created symbolic pride; on the other, the silencing of intra-community grievances—ranging from employment discrimination and caste/linguistic divisions to the marginalization of Tamil expatriate workers—produced a form of “pseudo-ethnic unity.” The paper argues that this transformation illustrates how state power can reshape ethnic media into instruments of social control, while simultaneously neutralizing their advocacy role. By comparing the divergent trajectories of Tamil journalism in Singapore and Sri Lanka, the article demonstrates how minority media are compelled to negotiate between preserving cultural identity, accommodating state ideology, and projecting an image of consensus within heterogeneous communities.

Key Words: Pan-Indian identity, Ethnic journalism, Media and social control, political consciousness,

Introduction

A politically noteworthy feature of Tamil journalism in post-independent Singapore is the way it has evolved as an institutional tool of Tamils as an ethnic minority community to be a representative organ of Pan-Indian interests. This is specifically a grievance entertained by those with a higher political consciousness, more in private, possibly due to restrictions imposed by Singapore's quasi-democratic political order on ethno-political discourses. According to them, such a subordination of interests has occurred in spite of Tamil being a distinct ethno-linguistic entity with its people possessing fundamental differences in socio-cultural spheres and with regard to their basic disposition towards life.

Literature Survey

The study of the Tamil press in Singapore cannot be disentangled from wider debates on ethnic media, minority representation, and the state's use of communication as an instrument of social control. The history of *Tamil Murasu* has attracted attention in relation to Singapore's nation-building project, where questions of language, identity, and community representation have been central.

Scholars such as Rappa (2000) and Kuo & Singh (1988) have emphasized how Singapore's language policies have been mobilized to sustain national cohesion, while simultaneously subordinating ethno-linguistic specificities. In this regard, the Tamil language occupies an ambivalent position: it is constitutionally recognized as one of Singapore's four official languages, yet its utility as a medium of ethnic expression is constrained by state ideological frameworks that privilege "multiracial harmony" and "meritocracy."

Within the field of ethnic and minority media, Riggins (1992) provides an influential framework for analyzing how states adopt contradictory policies of support and repression. His "Divisive Model" and "Proselytism Model" are particularly relevant for explaining how *Tamil Murasu* was transformed from a Tamil Dravidian organ into a vehicle for pan-Indian unity. Similarly, Husband (2005) highlights the paradox that minority media often carry both the promise of cultural empowerment and the burden of assimilation, since they operate within political orders that prioritize stability over pluralism.

Histories of the Tamil press underscore the pioneering role of K. Sarangapanni, whose *Dravida Murasu* (1935) was rooted in working-class Tamil concerns (Ravindran, 2012). Scholars note that Sarangapanni envisioned Tamil journalism not merely as cultural preservation, but as an emancipatory force, advocating educational opportunities, citizenship rights, and organizational representation for Tamils (Mani, 1993). This aligns with Anderson's (1983) notion of "imagined communities," whereby print media serve as vehicles of ethnic identity and solidarity.

Comparative studies of Indian diasporic media provide additional context. In Malaysia, for example, scholars such as Karthigesu (1991) and Corjitham (1979) have shown how Tamil newspapers had to negotiate between advocating Tamil interests and accommodating state demands for pan-Indian or pan-Malaysian unity. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, Tamil journalism has historically been bound to broader pan-Tamil movements, often becoming an arena of ethno-political contestation (Mendis, 2014). In contrast, Singapore's Tamil press is

compelled to dilute such particularisms, positioning itself as representative of heterogeneous Indian communities despite their historical, linguistic, and cultural differences.

The literature on state–media relations in Singapore (Rodan, 2004; George, 2012) further illuminates how newspapers function less as watchdogs than as partners in governance. Under Singapore Press Holdings, *Tamil Murasu*'s incorporation mirrored the PAP government's broader strategy of controlling narrative spaces while providing symbolic recognition to minority groups. Scholars such as Pang (1971) and Rahim (1998) have argued that this model of “calibrated pluralism” ensures that minority identities are acknowledged but tightly managed.

From a sociological perspective, the treatment of Indians in Singapore reflects Furnivall's (1948) classic description of plural societies, where groups coexist but remain culturally and socially distinct. Shibutani and Kwan's (1965) definition of ethnic groups as communities bound by real or fictive ancestry further clarifies why Tamil and non-Tamil Indians in Singapore never fully coalesced into a homogeneous entity. Instead, the state and its media policies orchestrated a “pseudo-unity” that masked intra-community fault lines.

Overall, the literature suggests that ethnic minority media in Singapore cannot be viewed solely as organs of expression but must be situated within a broader political economy of control, integration, and survival. While *Tamil Murasu* symbolizes the official recognition of Tamil, its transformation into a pan-Indian organ underscores the tension between ethnic authenticity and the imperatives of state ideology.

Ethnically Tamils are a community of Dravidian origins, while the Northern Indians are described as an Aryan community with Hindi as their common language. The two communities have a long history of preserving their social and cultural character as a people, thus using their own distinct languages to represent their identities. Of the entire Indian population of Singapore, approximately 75% of the community is Tamils and Malayalese from South India. The bulk of them have over the years held occupationally humble positions in spite of a few success stories in the socio-economic frontier. As stated by Sudhamani (1982: 89) Tamils and Malayalese were largely represented in Singapore's labour force, namely in the harbour, transport and conservation work force apart from their work in British military and naval bases. Diverse North Indian communities were represented in commercial pursuits. On top of them there was an English educated middle class that was active in mainstream politico-administrative affairs. It is the popular view that those who succeeded within the prevailing order in Singapore are those who have distanced themselves from the traditional Tamilian social character by embracing more of the Western Model.

With this background the first Tamil newspaper Dravida Murasu came into existence in 1935 as an initiative of a benevolent and reformist personality called K. Sarangapanni. Its clientele was exclusively the Tamil speaking lower middle class and working class groups. It was they who were specifically concerned about their status within the overall Indian community polarized by different socio-economic, political and cultural interests. His far-sighted vision for the Tamil community paved the way for a number of landmark achievements for Tamils in the pre-independent era with Dravida Murasu as the chief spokesman.

Sarangapanni was greatly concerned with the plight of the marginalised majority within the Tamil community since many among them were too humble to concentrate on efforts aimed at individual and collective development. Dravida is a particularistic reference to the race of Southern Indian Tamils and the name Dravida Murasu can be considered as one that gives enormous status to Tamil ethnic interests within the Dravidian race. It clearly excludes non-Tamilian Indians of Aryan origins.

Dravida Murasu as a Tamil ethnic organ continued to highlight what Tamils lacked as a community. It considered it an obligation to educate its members on the need to establish them within the emerging order. Towards this end it actively pioneered the movement to win better educational facilities for the Tamil community, to form a Tamil Representative Council (1951) that could steer Tamil community interests, introduction of Tamil in primary, secondary and tertiary level institutions through the formation of the Tamil Education Society (1948), and in enlightening the community to obtain Singapore citizenship so that they could obtain a permanent status in the affairs of the island. A Tamil whose ancestors were of Sri Lankan origins.

It is held among the older generation of Tamils that they could never establish consensus politics with North Indian businessman who dominated Pan Indian groupings like Singapore Regional Indian Congress.

At this time Dravida Murasu was responding to a move by the Singapore government to prevent families of Tamils from re-entering Singapore if they had been away from the island for a considerable period of time (Immigration Order of 1951). Due to critical press reports the government was compelled to state that there was no intention to discriminate against a specific community and that the Act applied to all Singaporeans.

Political implications of Dravida Murasu's Shift in Policy as Tamil Murasu

Once *Murasu* was taken over by the Singapore Press Holdings, the paper was forced to undergo a radical shift in policy. The new institutional objective was to confer status to PAP government's ideological considerations and to shape public opinion among Tamils that the government was committed to serve their interests. As stated by Singapore's first Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam (quoted in Pang, 1971: 21) the PAP government has come to realise that the workers (the main clientele of Murasu) are a class with a vested interest and that PAP as a political party must work to represent all interests within the State.

Looking at it from a media perspective, one could say that that this policy when applied to an organ that looked after specific interests of a community would only become journalistically and politically impotent the moment it cannot serve its original clientele with the same vigor. With the application of PAP policies, it was bound to carry the vested interests of political masters, quite unrepresentative of the intended readership, the ordinary Tamilians. The paper also took the position that Tamils as a community had no justification any more to engage in 'advocacy journalism' on behalf of the Tamils since it was not any more an exclusive organ to propagate Tamil aspirations.

Accordingly, we see that the Tamil press in Sri Lanka and Singapore has fundamentally different missions to pursue. In Sri Lanka they are expected to specifically fulfill Pan-Tamilian interests while it is compelled to negotiate its mandate in Singapore in harmony with the agenda of the State. One could say that the demand arising from the political system to unify heterogeneous Indian interests under the Tamil banner has been accepted by Singaporean Tamils more by compulsion. What was at stake was the future of the Indian community within the larger system politically dominated by the Chinese and the Malays.

(F) Viability of the New Institutional Commitment

Through what is defined as a 'Divisive Model' Riggins (1992: 10) argues that the State can use ethnicity to further its own objectives of social control while giving half-hearted support to ethnic newspapers to sustain themselves organizationally.

In addressing this issue respondents hardly ever disagreed that the PAP governments initiative to incorporate Indian interests within the Tamil umbrella has had far reaching consequences for both Tamils as well as other Indian communities from a media policy/communication perspective. They held that within the emerging order, both Tamils as well as Indians knew very well that their status would have got jeopardised if they put forward individual community interests of Punjabis, Bengalis, Buharis, Gujaratis, Uttar Pradeshis and Sindhis on top of Indian interests. This was in spite of personal reservations on the part of non-Tamilian Indians to accept Tamil as the common language for themselves. While Tamils in South India have not accepted Hindi as a common language in India, the inherent pride on the part of non-Tamil Indians in having reservations to accept Tamil as the common language in Singapore is understandable. Referring to the situation of Malaysia where Tamils are 80% of the Indian community. Corjitham (1979) argues that though Indians in this country tend to be regarded as one racial group, it would be misleading to treat all Indians as belonging to one homogeneous group. Hence it was clearly a tactical move on the part of Indians to unite under the Tamil banner, suppressing natural resentments within their own ranks. As pointed out by a Murasu journalist,

“Although Indians are predominantly Tamil it is wrong to assume that non Tamilians wished to be identified with the Tamil language. With politically barren minds some would tell you that Indians were jubilant to see Tamil as the common language. They wish to be blind on this issue to be pleasing to authorities. But it was clearly for the sake of unity which was a political need they closed ranks. Northerners of course had no other alternative. This is while knowing very well that they have very little in common. Even what they have in common by way of religion is observed as a divided people in Singapore with Temples for 'Northerners' and 'Southerners'. They would insist that priests use the language that they speak. That reflects the reality that Indians are not a homogeneous people in real life”

Responding to the question as to what impact such a policy had on Murasu's own media agenda, respondents highlighted that Tamil through this policy only became a neutral agent committed to apolitical causes. This was so since the use of Tamil within Singapore's new political order was not meant to highlight specifically Tamil interests. This was in spite of the fact that Tamils as 75% of the Indians had more problems to be solved than all the issues of non-Tamilian communities put together. As argued by a veteran journalist,

“This was a delicate issue. On one side the willingness on the part of the government to recognize Tamil as an official language was a moment of great pride for us. Also since the take over, Dravida Murasu which was the voice of Tamil Dravidian interests became Tamil Murasu, equating the voice of Tamils with the Indian community. On one side it was not any more representative of Tamil interests or those of other Indian groups, but just a neutral voice of Indians as a community. Members of the community knew that this would mean that Tamil would not any longer be a vehicle to communicate Tamil interests. The system compelled them to be magnanimous in treating all Indians as equals. This certainly happened at a time when Murasu was campaigning together with community leaders to strengthen Tamil as a language. This struggle was abandoned with the new demands. This had many negative repercussions later”.

Also as stated by another,

“Since the takeover Tamil Murasu had to earn the respect of the Indian community, by calling itself the ‘voice of the Indian community’. The real question was what community? This did not make sense to a majority of ordinary Tamils especially at the grass roots level. Of course, well to do people within any community won't consider such developments as fatal. Their class interests are different. Our Tamil leaders in government in any case speak very little Tamil since they feel better with English due to their class interests. They even feel more at ease with English educated Chinese and even Europeans more than Tamil commoners. It is the man in the street who is worried about their culture and language”.

According to Shibutani and Kwan (1965) an ethnic group consists of those who conceive themselves as being alike by virtue of their common ancestry, real or fictitious, and are so regarded by others. But in the case of the Indians it was not to be since the different communities within them had no reason to believe that they were a homogeneous people due to historical realities. If at all it was a major concern for Indians with vested political interests who worked together with the PAP's ideological outfit to project such a homogeneous character for the Indian people. As held by respondents it was they who wanted to promote Tamil as a common rallying point for Indians to secure for “themselves” a place within the emerging order. Many Tamils thought that these leaders wouldn't have achieved any privileges if they failed to create this superficial consensus on Tamil as the common language. Hence critics of this policy could reason that what the government did either with bona/mala fide intentions, only established a pseudo ethnic unity. A thought that would not probably make pro-establishment Indians comfortable.

Also what Furnivall (1948) stated with regard to Burma and Java as plural societies in the Asian region in the 1940's hold true of Indians as well as others in Singapore. According to him, although what strikes the visitor is the medley of peoples- Chinese, Malay, Indian and European, it was only in the strictest sense a medley since they only met in the market place in buying and selling. In reality each group professed its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. This is clearly the case of the Indians in Singapore at present, since the Northern and the Southern Indians do not in reality interact freely though they call

themselves Indians. They remain segregated by distinct mannerisms unlike in the case of Chinese and Malays that are separate linguistic groups. As claimed by a respondent,

“We at Murasu cannot publish these grievances not because there is ethnic peace, but because there is no way to release these sentiments. On the other hand what bothers the common man would not bother those Indian community leaders. Most of them opted to have white women as their life partners. If you ask them, they will tell you how united the community is due to enlightened government policies. But, that is not the ground reality”.

Murasu’s Coverage of Public Sentiments on Pro-establishment Indian

Agencies

Another related grievance highlighted by Murasu journalists related to their coverage of Indian community interests as represented by the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA). It was pointed out that this organization is mandated as much as Murasu to represent the grievances of the Indian community without any partiality to sub-groups within. There were those who observed that its influential leaders have the means to solve their own grievances within or outside the system. They in their opinion use SINDA for their own political benefit to appease the establishment and its supporters. Its representatives are those who occupy top most positions in the State and organizations affiliated to the State. Journalists pointed out that this body functions on the taken for granted assumption that Indians are a truly integrated community, and they are not burdened by forms of unrest at the intra community level. As commented by a young woman journalist,

“We see through the way SINDA works that what exists is an illusory unity of Indian interests. The members jolly well know what burdens different sections of the community, but they ensure that their ‘show’ continues with government blessings. The government is also pleased since nothing painful is said by these opportunistic and backboneless leaders representing the Indians. I have the highest respect for SINDA as a concept. But what we do at present with blessings of the state is to repeat the song of the government that everything is fine with the Indians. In the way every thing is fine with all Singaporeans”.

She argued that these policies that govern SINDA help the government to maintain a firm hold on the Indians with blessings from Westernized and pro-establishment Indian leaders who are anxious about their own status within the PAP dominated political establishment. He said that there have been instances when members of the public wanted to convey dissatisfaction about issues that concerned the Tamil community, but SINDA filtered the issues by reiterating what the authorities said. According to him,

“The Ministry of Education sent a Circular to schools that there is no justification to hire teachers to teach a language if there aren’t at least 40 students in a class to offer it. Many wanted these Indian Associations to pursue the issue with the government. But that never happened since these leaders by then had used their influence with the government to allow non Tamilian Indians to prepare for their own language paper privately for public exams. Parents wrote letters criticizing this policy since the Tamil Teachers could be used easily to teach other subjects in addition to teaching Tamil. After all

cost effectiveness should not be a consideration if the PAP government is committed to ethnic equality”.

It was stated that there is no scope within the agenda setting function of Murasu to put these issues in right perspective since that would lead to a conflict with the Ministry and resentments within the community.

Organisational Constraints to Ethnic News Production in Singapore

In the context of the State monopoly over national newspapers one could easily assume that all newspapers managed by the Singapore Press Holdings would have the same organisational culture. This assumption proved to be erroneous since journalists at Murasu operated differently from those at Straits Times (discussed in Chapters Three and Four) in spite of the common management. Murasu as compared with Straits Times has a smaller staff of professionals who are multi-skilled and experienced in the work performed. One could say that they are in their own way veterans in the field of media with a fine sense of ideological expectations in Singapore.

At the allocative level of operations, one could argue that the external structural support provided by the State to Tamil Murasu through SPH should not be construed as a true gesture of good will towards Tamil interests. Journalists revealed that the government remained alert about the possibility of minority journalism becoming a threat to its own interests. It is argued by Riggins (1992: 08) that the State towards this end pursues inconsistent policies to promote minority media; simultaneously following policies of containment and repression.

In this section attention is focused on how *Tamil Murasu* organizationally deals with socio-political issues of contemporary relevance in the midst of restrictions imposed on freedom of expression at the operational level. As a closely-knit group of fifteen editorial members employed by Singapore Press holdings *Murasu* journalists were expected to abide by a number of tacit understandings for the benefit of the institution, namely, (01) non-exposure of grievances relating to State policies, (02) the need for Indian perspectives to overlap with Tamil interests, (03) proactive projection of the image of Indian political leaders, and (04) positive portrayal of state policies and non-Indian government leaders.

While such expectations helped to form the core organisational values of *Tamil Murasu* they also provided a justification for an ethnic minority newspaper within Singapore's socio-political order. A justification most specifically for a newspaper representing an ethnic group that is heterogeneous in character.

Non-Exposure of Grievances concerning State Policies

A major system related need that Tamil Murasu is called upon to fulfill is to prevent the dissemination of grievances that could embarrass the system at large. These grievances in the context of ethnic minorities could be different in character from what others in society could face. What is ironical is that members of the community air their grievances to gain social justice from the system in the absence of alternative channels

for this purpose. In practice they see that a limited channel is created by the government to publicize that the Tamils heartily approves what is taking place within the system.

As for other grievances that Tamil *Murasu* is unable to represent within the system, it was held that Tamils often write that they feel discriminated when it comes to employment in the private sector. This is in spite of the government's stated commitment to 'equality' and 'meritocracy'. As stated by a respondent protest letters are received concerning national newspaper advertisements that openly advocate the need for Chinese and Malay speaking personnel, leading to discrimination on linguistic grounds. Adding more to this complexity she said that the opportunistic shift in language policy for Indians encouraged non-Tamil Indians to offer Malay, while Tamils who could not to do this were at a severe disadvantage in the employment sector. As stated by this journalist, "We receive letters that learning Tamil is of no earthly use in Singapore due to such discriminatory practices".

Furthermore, reference was also made to grievances that readers entertained concerning discrimination based on skin color. He said that such letters are often put aside since they embarrass both the government as well as *Tamil Murasu* as an ideological instrument of the State. It was his position that unlike Chinese and Malay people Indians have a variety of skin colors with many Tamils being dark in complexion. Here the point expressed was that fair skinned North Indians were often preferred over the dark skinned Southern Indian Tamils. As stated by him many Tamil females who apply for jobs feel cheated by the system's preference for Northerners. According to him,

"The Northerners are preferred according to these complaints due to two major factors. Firstly they are most likely to be conversant in a non-Indian language, and then they are similar to the majority Chinese in skin color. But we dare not write about these issues. That would make them say that Tamils are a petty minded people, full of malice and old women's tales. So we censor Tamil community views as well as our own selves to make the government happy and establish that we are all a happy family in Singapore".

These utterances of *Murasu* journalists also indicate beyond doubt that they are often tried and tested within the ideological parameters drawn by the PAP regime. Being a government monopolized organ it was stated that what they as journalists do is to offer patronistic advice to the community to stand above such differences. In other words to re-enact the role played by the government in national rallies by appealing to the people to be enlightened and be more committed to the task of nation building. We remind the readership that specific community grievances are detrimental to this cause. Hence we rededicate ourselves to suppress unpleasant realities at what ever cost.

A note worthy feature among ordinary Tamils is their desire to jealously safeguard their culture and their mannerisms by resisting what they consider as alien cultural influences on their lives. Hence at the level of ordinary people it is easy to observe men and women conducting themselves as traditional Tamils in routine lives, i.e., dress patterns, religious worship, food and general behaviour; resisting demands placed on them

with regard to structural and cultural assimilation. Such notions of exclusiveness are displayed by Tamils as done by them in other lands. This also explains why Tamil Hindus refrain from worshipping Hindu Gods in temples that are managed by North Indians. This was defended by respondents as an acute sense of community consciousness which is essential in preserving their collective identity. He also stated that Tamils have their own Gods and Goddesses.

As stated by a Correspondent, the fact that poor Tamils through their socializing patterns wish to be seen as an exclusive group goes against the principles of *Murasu* as an Indian newspaper. For instance it is not in the interest of the paper to proclaim that ordinary Tamils have their own world-view, contrary to what the establishment promotes. He said that the need on their part is to project a socially and culturally integrated Indian community in Singapore that is supportive of the rapid processes of change.

Portrayal of the Status of down trodden Tamil Expatriate Workers

Another issue concerning which *Murasu* has remained extra-cautious is the plight of the poor expatriate workers from the sub-continent. Among these workers a very large number of them are Tamils from South Asia who are conversant only in their mother tongue. It was held that their day to day conditions of life remain far from satisfactory due to many different reasons. As stated by respondents *Murasu* needed to exercise care in its disseminations since these people are identified more as Indians by the political system. As held by a senior journalist,

“I should say that these workers are considered as scavengers by many people. There are those who do not see any justification to treat them with human dignity. Sympathetic readers have pointed out that these unfortunate men and women are culturally incompatible with Singapore’s sophisticated life style and are given step motherly treatment. Readers also make reference to those who have landed in Singapore without proper documentation, purely due to their desire to earn a better living. Such illegal workers only need to be arrested and deported. But they are often inhumanely treated by the system by inflicting bodily pain through methods like caning. But the authorities with their OB markers won’t permit us to address these issues since that would be tantamount to being critical of the government”.

The question that arises in this case relates to the level of subordination that *Murasu* journalists should display by being indifferent towards contemporary social problems faced by ordinary Tamils

These issues make it clear that journalists working for an ethnic minority newspaper within a State monopoly feel more burdened than those working for mainstream newspapers like Straits Times at SPH. This is due to the effectiveness of surveillance exercised over journalists.

G.2 The need for Indian Perspectives to Overlap with Tamil Interests

One could hold that in the context of modernization of Singapore society, attitudinal changes of a more global orientation have equally affected the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities in spite of their own conservative tendencies. Respondents stated that there was a time when extreme ‘conservativeness’ among Tamils prevented them from conferring status to liberal perspectives on issues like women’s participation in the economy, divorce, pre-marital sex, Western life styles and practices, gender equality etc. This was due to fears of upsetting the status quo within a society that is regarded as more “closed” than “open”. According to Subrahmanian (1997: 322), “Subjecting women to the will and pleasure of men was not peculiar to the Tamils. While the Dravidian culture also had scant regard for women, the influence of Brahmanical culture further added to the lowering of status of women in the Tamil country. He further states that the husband had almost unlimited rights over his wife’s movements. Her primary duty was to wait on the husband, fetching and carrying for him, rubbing his feet when he was weary, rising before him and eating and sleeping after him. The Dharma Sastra made her a perpetual dependent on man, first on her father, then on her husband and finally on her son.

These issues that have been influenced by traditional Tamil thinking have been challenged by emerging forces. The changes have had ripple effects with *Murasu* being compelled to accommodate them. According to a young journalist,

“Some time back *Murasu* defended the notion that married Indian men should take charge of their families and that household decisions should be taken according to their wishes, while women and children were duty bound to show obedience to their husbands. Hindu women were expected to become good house makers, looking after the general interests of husbands and children. It was not important for women to pursue higher education since the husbands needed encouragement and moral support from their wives to gain the maximum from their careers. Divorce was not permitted since virtuous wives had to revere their husbands as Gods. Those divorcing were to be projected as widows. But in recent times *Murasu* had to re-consider these positions since many women were dissatisfied with orthodox Tamil ways of looking at life. Many thought that *Tamil Murasu* was outdated at a time when women were becoming equals with men in work places and at home. Many Tamil and non Tamil women were becoming opinion leaders in recent times like Dr. Nalla Tan who was a vocal advocate of women’s’ and children’s’ rights, Ms. Che Cha Davis, a church activist and a founder member of the Inner Wheel Club, Ms. Shirin Fozdir who defended monogamous marriages, Ms. Constance Singham who argued a case against restricting Home Economics to girls, and Dr. Kanwaljit Soin who was outspoken about ill treatment of women in general. So *Murasu* had to accommodate these new trends of thought since the ideas coming from Indian community leaders influenced Tamils in general”.

Journalists argue that irrespective of the issues concerned, dominant ideas needed to be negotiated in line with the position held by other prominent elites. This needed to be done since the ultimate priority of *Tamil Murasu* was to project a Pan-Indian image.

As explained by Riggins (1992: 11) with reference to his 'Proselytism Model' this can be cited as a fine example of how the Singaporean State has used the minority media to influence a heterogeneous community of Indians with their own life orientations. Within this objective of the State the ethnic minority media should be conceptualized as a part of the larger framework of social movements sponsored by the State. As argued by Gusfield (1970: 02) a social movement is defined as shared activities and beliefs directed towards the demand for change in some aspect of the social order.

Pro-Active Projection of the Image of Indian Political Leaders

Commenting specifically on difficulties faced within the news production process, respondents claimed that the Tamil community in recent times have not been quite pleased with their Parliamentarians who have been pre-occupied with specifically PAP matters. They held that these issues that concern their own survival have no real bearing on the ordinary lives of the people. While these grievances are often projected through opinions sent to the Forum Page, *Murasu* journalists lamented that such issues are put *aside* since the paper needs to appease both the Indian MPs as well as the newspaper management simultaneously. As explained by him,

“The Tamil Parliamentarians assume and even take for granted that they are the saviors of the community. Also being well established in politics they believe that the people are duty bound to respect them and should continue to vote for them. But the letters sent to us by the readers hold that their contribution is negligible when compared with the interest taken by others who are not at the same level. Similar ideas have been expressed by the Workers Party leader J.B Jeyaretnam when he said that Tamil PAP MPs only pay lip service to Tamil causes through isolated events like the Tamil Week. The point is that a section of the community is grieved about their effectiveness while we are duty bound to uplift their image”.

It was stated that at present the *Murasu* hierarchy is pressurized by the PAP Indian lobby to boost the image of Indian MPs by carrying features dedicated to them. Such requests are seriously pursued by the management specially when elections come near. At this stage the paper is compelled to project its voice as one that is truly representative of the Indian community. This is in spite of the fact that non-Tamilian Indian MPs have not been particularly helpful in redressing Tamil grievances faced by common people.

Positive Portrayal of State Policies and Non-Indian Government Leaders

It was stated that a key role that *Murasu* has played since the paper was taken over by SPH was in granting 'positive status' to the PAP political regime, its policies and the leaders. As stated by a senior journalist,

“Over the years we were expected to study the pulse of the government by what was talked about in inner circles of power, and by associating key government leaders with political virtues like stability, honesty, and integrity that all in Singapore should emulate. These days we tell the Tamil readers the benefits of respecting the will of the PAP government especially in these days of difficulties arising from the recession and global security problems. Of the main issues addressed in recent years was the peaceful transfer of power from one generation of leaders to another generation. The message was that as a community we have much to gain by being inspired by the actions of the government”.

As highlighted by another,

“The major speeches made by key non-Indian leaders have been given great prominence as reflections of Indian aspirations. For instance the Teachers Day Rally speech in August 2001 made by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong is a good example. It was acclaimed by the newspaper as a portrayal of the current thinking of Indians on national education policies at primary, secondary and tertiary levels”.

This could be viewed from a critical angle as a form of strategic political communication aimed at convincing the community to positively appraise the contribution made by their political regime. This is even when real benefits of certain policies have not trickled down to the minorities and the least privileged. The system compels Murasu journalists to ensure that they do the maximum to make the Indians perceive the current administration as the best that they could have as minorities. Hence the senior political correspondents functioned within the inner circle of power since it was from them that they could gain support for their institutional mission.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic minority journalists in transitional societies like Singapore and Sri Lanka are constrained from adhering to norms of professional journalism due to politically motivated expectations of influential social groups. In Singapore, Tamil Murasu need to reiterate that Indians in general consider the prevailing system as in their best interest and therefore see no justification to entertain any system related grievances. Murasu journalists nevertheless are mindful of the deficiencies of a system that praises itself while expecting them to be watchdogs over those who could embarrass the regime.

Conclusion

The trajectory of *Tamil Murasu* from *Dravida Murasu* to its present form as a pan-Indian organ under Singapore Press Holdings demonstrates how ethnic journalism in small states is compelled to reinvent itself under the shadow of state ideology. What began as a vehicle for Tamil working-class empowerment and Dravidian identity was re-engineered into a symbolic representation of “Indian unity” that serves the broader political objectives of the PAP-led state. This shift represents not only an institutional reorientation but also a profound redefinition of journalistic purpose: from advocacy and emancipation to compliance and reproduction of state-sanctioned narratives.

From a critical standpoint, the story of *Tamil Murasu* underscores the fragility of ethnic minority journalism in quasi-democratic environments. The recognition of Tamil as an official language created symbolic pride, but the language’s journalistic use was reconstituted into an instrument of containment. The paradox is striking: the Tamil language is granted state recognition while the Tamil press is denied the freedom to represent Tamil grievances. This demonstrates how recognition without autonomy can become a subtle mechanism of control, creating what respondents aptly describe as “pseudo-ethnic unity.”

The implications extend beyond Singapore's Indian community. The case illuminates how minority media can be mobilized as technologies of governance, shaping the imagination of ethnic groups while suppressing dissenting voices. By orchestrating pan-Indian solidarity under the Tamil banner, the state succeeded in masking intra-community tensions, yet it also hollowed out the press's capacity to function as a genuine watchdog. Instead, *Tamil Murasu* evolved into a symbolic "showcase" of multiculturalism, more committed to projecting harmony than to interrogating inequality.

Comparisons with Sri Lanka sharpen this contrast. While Tamil journalism in Sri Lanka remains deeply entangled with ethno-political struggles and the pursuit of collective rights, *Tamil Murasu* has been domesticated into the architecture of Singapore's nation-building project. This divergence illustrates two distinct paradigms of minority journalism: one that resists state power and pays the price of repression, and another that accommodates state ideology and survives at the cost of its original constituency.

Looking forward, the central challenge for *Tamil Murasu* lies in whether it can reclaim any measure of authenticity in representing its readers, especially in a globalizing media environment where diasporic Tamils consume alternative news through digital platforms. If the newspaper continues to privilege symbolic recognition over substantive advocacy, it risks further alienation from its grassroots readership. Yet, the very fact that Tamil culture, language, and identity persist strongly in Singapore despite structural constraints suggests that ordinary Tamils continue to sustain spaces of cultural autonomy outside official narratives.

Ultimately, the transformation of *Tamil Murasu* forces us to confront a deeper theoretical question: can ethnic minority journalism in tightly managed democracies ever remain both institutionally viable and politically authentic? Or must it always oscillate between being an instrument of the state and a muted echo of the community's voice? The case demonstrates that while ethnic journalism may survive as a cultural artifact, its emancipatory power is eroded when it is made to serve as a "pan-ethnic instrument of the people" rather than the genuine mouthpiece of a community.

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