

Malays of the East and Malays of the West: more alike than different? Discussing the vitality of the Sri Lanka Malay language in two provinces

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The Sri Lanka Malays have been called the most multilingual community in Sri Lanka, with most members being trilingual and some quadrilingual. As a minority which forms less than 1% of the total population of the country, the community is now facing the challenge of maintaining its own language, Sri Lanka Malay (SLM).

It has been stated that language loss is most apparent in the case of the urban Sri Lanka Malay community, found mostly in the Western Province. However, using data from a Language Vitality Test (LVT) conducted as part of my doctoral thesis, I wish to point out a similar trend in the case of the Malays of the Eastern Province, particularly in Trincomalee, a community which is steeped in poverty and unemployment and until recently faced threats to their lives due to clashes between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. This paper is an inquiry into the social, economic, and religious ideologies of the Malays of these two provinces and how they affect language maintenance in these two sub-communities which lie on two ends of the socioeconomic spectrum.