

Preserving Language Heritage for Socio-Economic Survival: A Case Study of the Indigenous Vedda Community in Sri Lanka

Abstract

Indigenous Vedda language in Sri Lanka is recognized as critically endangered and many argued that it is on the verge of disappearance. After decades of debates, the Veddas are still alive luckily and their language is still been spoken at least partially. The paper examined the factors that drive existence/disappearance of Vedda language. The study was conducted in Dambana Vedda village and Pollebadda Vedda village. Field surveys took place in July 2024, utilizing a specially designed questionnaire to gather information on the use of the Vedda language. The questionnaire included items rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, covering various aspects of the language. A total of 25 interviews were conducted, with 15 in Dambana and 10 in Pollebadda. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure access to the most reliable sources of information. The sample consisted of 80% male and 20% female respondents. Regarding age distribution, 10% were below 25 years, 60% were between 25 and 50 years, and 30% were over 50 years old. The study reveals that Veddas today speak Sinhalese better than their native language. Compared to Dambana, more Veddas in Pollebadda, where modernization is apparent, demonstrate weak fluency in their native language. The Vedda children, compared to their parents, have poor knowledge in Vedda language, though they have acquired fluency in all domains of Sinhalese. The poor Vedda language knowledge is highly prevalent among Pollebadda children. Majority of the Veddas accept that younger generation is not interested in learning the language, the absence of elders to teach it, their language is disappearing and it should be preserved. Though it does not help them to find jobs, as Veddas believe, the Vedda language carries economic benefits and they remain vital for learning it. The Pollebadda Veddas are more interested in economic benefits of the language. The Veddas, again with more support from Pollebadda, reckon that their language helps them earning from tourism. The Veddas strongly agree that their language is essential for the protection of their priceless intangible cultural heritage. Thus, this paper recommends an ideological shift and resulting policies to look at the Veddas, and their language too, as an inherent asset than something to be modernized and assimilated.

Keywords: Endangered languages, Indigenous Vedda language, Socio-economic survival, Cultural heritage, Veddas in Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

As Nettle and Romaine (2000) state, over the last 500 years, minority languages nearly everywhere have come under intense threat. The last speakers of probably half of the world's languages are alive today. Many languages have only few speakers and children of many minority community groups do not speak their native language as the first language at home. The extinction of languages is evident in different parts of the world (see Nettle and Romaine, 2000; Romaine, 2007; UNESCO, 2010; Romaine, 2017). The Ethnologue (2024) published by the Summer Institute of Languages (SIL) estimates around 7,164 languages spoken by 7.668 billion

people all over the world (also see World Economic Forum, 2022). According to Romaine (2007), about 6% of the world population speak 95% of world languages. As per the SIL's language vitality count, there are 492 institutional languages, 3593 languages which are identified as stable languages and 3072 languages identified as endangered languages. The SIL has identified 451 languages as extinct languages.¹

This tells us that a very few number of languages has been spoken by a large number of people and a large number of languages (about 95%) is spoken by a smaller fraction of the population. About 80% of the world population speaks a total of 75 languages (that is about 1% of total languages).² More than 6500 languages are spoken by only 5% of the world population (Romaine, 2007). According to Ethnologue (2024), there are 204 languages with fewer than 10 speakers each, 344 languages with 10-99 speakers. The number of languages with less than 100 speakers amounts to 548 languages. The bottom line here is that there are many languages with very few speakers and thus they become endangered.

The traditional language of the Vedda community in Sri Lanka, known as the Vedda language, is also recognized as an endangered language because of its limited number of speakers and disappearing nature in use. The traditional Vedda community in Sri Lanka faces serious threat in their survival under present socio, economic political conditions of the country (Weerasekara, 2020). The fact has been long debated in the literature and many researchers, even in a period of more than hundred years, predicted that the Veddas are on the verge of disappearance. As Seligmann and Seligmann (1911) write, "The Veddas were a numerically small people verging on extinction," To quote Spittle (1924), "Let us leave the last of the Veddas alone, and not try to fashion them to our way, for, that will kill them sooner. Let them die out, scattered in their lonely jungles, ... A few decades hence and the Veddas will be just a name" (p. 187). Dharmadasa (1990a) writes "The Veddas of Sri Lanka are a near extinct aboriginal community... ." As Nawrathna-Menike recently describes, "the Veddas were a primitive tribal community lived in jungle caves

¹ UNESCO (2022) declared 2022-32 as the decade of indigenous language with an aim to protect and preserve fast disappearing endangered languages.

² This includes 8 languages which have more than 100 million first language speakers; namely Mandarin Chinese (873 million), Spanish (322 million), English (309 million), Hindi (181 million), Portuguese (177 million), Bengali (171 million), Russian (145 million) and Arabic (136 million).

with hunter gathering as the means of living. Later they started living in villages and were given the responsibility of protecting the relatives of the King and treasures and fighting the war. This indicates the gradual transformation of primitive pure-blooded forest Veddas to modern day village dwellers, the disappearance of the Veddas” (Nawartha Menike, 2016: p. 28). Some researchers had concluded that real Veddas have already vanished (Wijesekara, 1982). However, we are in 2024 for today and the Veddas in Sri Lanka are still alive, though in different pockets of the country in small numbers, with different levels of characteristics of original Veddas. The reality is that the Veddas have not been extinct as anticipated, though their way of living and culture have been changed to some extent. We recognize two important factors that determine the complete disappearance of the Veddas: the destruction of their ecological habitat and their language. If these two factors completely destroyed in a day, it is highly likely that Veddas will be no more.

Leaving the loss of ecological habitat of the Veddas to be taken later, we in this paper focus on analyzing changing status of the indigenous Vedda language by discussing and assessing Veddas’ own perceptions. Since there are so many studies of anthropological nature in analyzing dynamics of the Vedda language and since socio-economic factors seem to play a pivotal role in shaping Veddas behaviour, we look at the Vedda language in socio, economic and cultural perspective. The aim of this paper is to examine the Vedda language use and factors that drive preservation or sacrifice of the Vedda language for their socio-economic survival. The analysis of the paper is based on qualitative information collected from a sample survey conducted among Veddas. Section 2 of the paper provides a discussion on language loss in socio, economic and cultural perspective. Section 3 discusses basics of the Vedda language and its historical transformation and Section 4 provides the analysis of this paper based on a sample survey conducted in two Vedda villages, Dambana and Pollebadda. And Section 5 concludes the paper and provides policy implications.

2. Language loss in socio-economic cultural perspective

The loss of languages is a serious socio-economic cultural and political issue. The language of a specific community or cult plays an important role in passing vital information regarding various

aspects of their society, environment, humanity, discoveries, technologies, education, health aspects, etc (see Harrison, 2007). To quote Irvina Bokowa, “language loss entails an impoverishment of humanity in countless ways” (Bokowa, 2010). The loss of languages results in the losses of potential discoveries about human cognition and the mind. The loss in terms of money, quantity or any qualitative aspect cannot be imagined. Further, “the death of a language inevitably leads to the disappearance of various forms of intangible cultural heritage such as performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, traditional crafts and the priceless legacy of the community’s oral traditions and expressions such as poetry and jokes, proverbs and legends” (Bokowa, 2010). This indicates that the demise of any single language has its own loss and the vacuum it created in society and the culture can hardly be filled (see Romaine, 2015; Sallabank and Austin, 2022).

Further, linguistic and cultural diversity is regarded as one of the fundamental aspects of a society in the present world context. The differences in language(s) in use may create substantial differences in socio-economic, political, cultural aspects among different communities (Almurashi, 2017; Chilblow and Meighan, 2021). At the same time, it is evident that the education system, the justice system, cultural and religious behaviours and the economic decisions play an important role in maintaining the linguistic and cultural diversity. As Cenoz and Gorter (2006) and Sperlich and Uriarte (2015) correctly refer, the key agent in keeping and protecting cultural diversity is minority language speaker. In Sociolinguistic approach, language is considered as an ethnic identity which creates differences in socio-economic cultural behaviours and habits (see Zhang and Grenier, 2013; Jayawickrama and Nawarathna, 2024 for references). Therefore, sociolinguists advocate the protection of endangered³ languages based on their cultural heritage value. Nettle and Romaine (2000) provide a global overview of some of the causes of the loss of linguistic diversity. These causes in general include industrial inventions, agricultural revolution, colonialism, renaissance, industrial revolution, globalization, electronic technology, etc.

³ A language become endangered when its users begin to teach and speak a more dominant language to their children. Based on the degree of language endangerment, languages are classified into: safe languages, non-safe languages, definitively endangered languages, severely endangered languages, and extinct languages (See Abeyratne, Laksiri and Baskaran, 2024 for literature).

The economic approach of language analysis complements sociolinguistic analysis of language dynamics. The analysis involves three main areas of research: (i) the effects of language on economic variables such as income, employment, human capital development, investment, etc.; (ii) the effects of economic variables on the changes of language, like preserving or discarding of languages, language shifts or death, etc.; and (iii) interrelated impacts of economic and language variables like language policy and planning and economic status (See Jayawickrama and Nawarathna, 2024 for recent references). In economic analysis of language, as Marschalk (1965) explains, language is viewed as an object of choice. In that perspective, language has a price (as value for use), a production cost (as cost of generation of language tools), a transaction cost (as cost transferring language knowledge and skills), a discarding cost (loss due to disappearing/death of languages) and an ability to generate income (as service charge), derive utility (as subjective gain for the use) and store for future use (language preservation).⁴ His analysis provides a basis for the answers to the questions for why some languages survive in society while some other languages face the threat of disappearing.⁵

The economics approach of language dynamics starts to gather momentum as the approach provides rationale and analytical tools and information. Studies have recognized language skills as an important determinant of human capital development and therefore economic wellbeing. This language effect of output growth worked through human capital accumulation led to many researches to verify the effects of language skills, language policies and planning on income generation and social wellbeing. Many studies produced evidence to establish language as a human capital and its positive role in income generation (see Ginsburgh and Weber, 2011; Grin, Sfreddo and Vaillancourt, 2011; Zhang and Grenier, 2013; Jayawickrama and Nawarathna, 2024 for references). High benefits and better payment schemes available for better language skills work as driving forces of language learning and acquisition of language skills. The effects of

⁴ It is however problematic to describe language as purely a choice because one's choice of language may be due to social, political, cultural or economic push factors that the person encounters (Jayawickrama and Nawarathna, 2024).

⁵ Rubinstein (2000) shows that if a language does not serve the need of the people, the evolutionary forces work to improve its functions until a desirable new equilibrium emerges. This evolutionary process may bring a language defunct or dead if that language does not serve the community.

language skills on income earning in human capital approach was nonetheless challenged with an alternative idea known as the theory of discrimination. In this context, the issue of marginalization of the minority language speakers in the labour market and in other socio economic cultural opportunities has been analyzed (see Lang, 1986; Pendakur and Pendakur, 2002 for example).

Due to various socio economic cultural and political reasons some minority languages disappear through the process of language convergence/assimilation. Purely in efficiency sense, economic factors drive a society with many languages to choose one common language allowing minority languages to die (see Jayawickrama and Nawarathna, 2024 for references). Among many economic, political and social factors, diminishing attachment to a native language and potential loss of language heritage and associated language-cultural values to be assessed and evaluated. Many studies reckon that the majority of the smaller languages of the present world may be at risk. Romaine (2007) recognizes that as many as 60% to 90% of about 6900 languages in the world are at the risk of extinction within next 100 years. Many language related studies have predicted and revealed that minority languages all over the world report an alarming rate of decline and disappearance. As the World Economic Forum (2022) reveals the present world experiences the loss of one language within every three months period. If nothing is done to prevent it, this rate could be tripled making the loss of one language per month in the next 40 years and around 1500 known languages to be extinct by the close of this century.

It should be noted here that not all minority cultures and languages are endangered. Though language is considered as minority language it will not disappear if the community find no desire to shift or abandon their language and thus the language be used often in their functions and the process of passing the language to the younger generation is happening in home. However, all most all indigenous languages have been considered as endangered languages. According to the United Nations, the world indigenous languages are under great risk of disappearance with one language dying every two weeks (United Nations, 2016). Indigenous languages face this serious threat of disappearing since indigenous people are a distinct minority in terms of their number and socio economic or institutional status (Romaine, 2007; 2015). As Bokowa (2010) states the loss of indigenous language is detrimental to biodiversity as traditional knowledge of nature and

the universe, spiritual beliefs, and cultural values expressed in indigenous language provide time-tested mechanisms for the sustainable use of natural resources. To add fuel to the issue, the research on these marginalized and endangered indigenous languages are very rare (Romaine, 2007).

As Nettle and Romaine (2000) note language shift⁶ of an indigenous language can be a result of pressures of social, cultural, economic and military factors which may akin to the globalization. Language shift may be thought of as loss of speakers, and domains of use (churches, schools, the work place, etc.) which are critical to the survival of a language. In Sri Lankan context, Jayawickrama and Ekanayake (2024) show, in a framework of dominant and minority languages existence, the language shift to the dominant language (Sinhalese) had been achieved by a sizable number of persons of minority language groups making many minority languages endangered. The preservation of the endangered languages is a must and seems as a right of the people who speak that language. Saving indigenous languages is crucial not only for the indigenous people who speak them but for the world at large as it ensures the protection of the cultural identity and dignity of indigenous people and safeguard their traditional heritage (Myhill, 1999; Toh, 2022; Mitchells, 2024). Greathouse-Amador (2005) studies the sociolinguistic environment in Cuetzalan, Puebla, Mexico and how the evolution of tourism influenced in positive way the preservation and maintenance of Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Nahuatl Indians. The paper especially analyzes how the proactive solution of indigenous women to economic hardship led to language preservation. These women engaged in a cooperative framework and undertake many economic activities including tourism which appeared to be a very important factor that motivates them to revive and maintain their language, culture and traditions.⁷ Jayawickrama and Dissanayake (2024) look at the link between language spoken at home and economic wellbeing of individuals in Sri Lanka. The study reveals that individuals from dominant language

⁶ Language shift occurs when a language which once used throughout the community becomes restricted in use as the community gradually use another language in communication.

⁷ Heller, Pujolar and Duchêne (2014), based on fieldwork in Switzerland, Catalonia and different zones of francophone Canada, argue that tourism through the political economy of globalization results in language especially traditional language become commodification of capitalism. Thus language becomes a tourism product and which shares characteristics of public and market goods.

backgrounds tend to give more importance to the language spoken at home in deciding their economic activity than that of minority language users. But, users of two minority languages, Malayalam and Telugu, tend to give prominence to their native languages in their trade and business activities, may be they use their language as a mark of their identity.

3. The Vedda language and its historical transformation

The Ethnologue (2024) reports the Vedda language in Sri Lanka as an endangered indigenous language which belongs to the Indo-European language family. According to Dharmadasa (1990b), the knowledge of the Vedda language is limited to a very small number of people. As per 1953 Census, the number of persons speak the Vedda language was about 803 persons. Only few adults of them have a comprehensive knowledge of the Vedda language (Blundell, 2013). According to de Silva (1972), only the older generation of the Veddhas had a working knowledge in Vedda language. At present there are about 2000 Veddhas in a cluster of villages in Dambana itself.⁸ However, these all Veddhas are not fluent in speaking their indigenous language.

The lack of data on the original Vedda language restrict research to link the Vedda language to other languages. As a result, the ethnic or cultural affinities of the Vedda with other communities still remain unknown (Dharmadasa, 1990b). Researchers find the Vedda language as a creole which has arisen through many years of language contact between the original Vedda language and Sinhalese (de Silva, 1972; Dharmadasa, 1974). As Nivile (1885) and Geiger (1965) report, the Vedda speech has been identified as a dialect of Sinhalese, though researches have still not established the fact. Instead, the Vedda language is identified as a distinct language from the Sinhalese due to its peculiarities in use (Dharmadasa, 1990b). It appears that the Vedda speech differs substantially from the colloquial Sinhalese, including its various regional dialects.

According to Parker (1909), the Vedda language seems to be similar to Sinhalese in colloquial but it is different from Sinhalese by structure, grammar rules and other language features. As Geiger (1965) notes, the Vedda language includes remnants of features of historic and ancient languages

⁸ According to 2023 Voter Registration List, the number of Veddhas who are entitled to vote (above 18 years of age) is 1406 in Dambana 7-A Grama Niladhari division and of that about 60 Veddhas are in the age of above 75 years. The children of age below 20 years is about 596. This GN division includes about 11 villages. These villages include: Dambana, Gurukubura, Wathuyaya, Nawinna yaya, Nidikumma Mulla yaya, Ul Katangoda, Kotabakiniya, Nidaangala, Innala Mulla, Wilpallawela, and Galkada.

such as *Pali* and *Sanskrit*. According to Seligmann and Seligmann (1911), some words used in Vedda language may have derived from *Hindi* and *Marathi* languages. There is evidence to prove that some Vedda words are derived from words added to Sinhalese from Tamil language. Though some Vedda language words have been derived from Sinhalese and Tamil or other Aryan languages, the Vedda language has a large number of its own genuine words. Thus, Vedda language is different from Sinhalese. Some writers like Neville (1885) reckons the Vedda language as a secret language developed by Veddas for inside communication even before or among other language groups. There is also evidence on that they have used different versions of the same words in different occasions to make it difficult to grasp the meaning by others, *e.g.* Seligmann and Seligmann (1911) observe the use of two types of dialects of the Vedda language by Veddas in Sithala Wanniya. Recent studies such as Gunawardena (2003) and Nawarathna Menike (2016) find that the words used in Vedda language have been changed significantly over time. The alterations of words and their forms have been done by direct use of Sinhalese words and the use of Sinhalese words with Vedda language words such as *pojja*, *gajja*, *atto*, etc.

As Nawarathna Manike explains, there seems to be no structure, grammar rules and no alphabet in Vedda language. The Vedda language is an abstract language used only for speech and to perform traditional rituals and events to transmit their ideas and feelings to others, especially to dead relatives. Since there is no alphabet, the language lacks the functions of reading and writing. Since the language is used only in speech, it is likely that the Vedda language is subject to frequent changes and moderations (Nawaratna Menike, 2016). This tendency of the transformation of the Vedda language has been apparent since the 1950s when the provision of increased social services led to devote schooling opportunities for Veddas which in turn led to the involvement of the younger generation in the larger Sri Lankan society, requiring the adoption of Sinhalese and Tamil languages as their main languages.

With economic modernization and development and expansion of society, the Vedda language seems to be modernized and expanded by mixing Sinhalese words with Vedda words to form peculiar words and sounds to mean the same object or thing in Sinhalese. As Dharmadasa (1990b) and Meegaskubura (1990) note, the word *pojja* in Vedda language is probably derived from the Sinhalese word *poDDa*, to indicate little. The word *barapojja* in Vedda language

indicates weight (of a something) is equivalent to *bara* in Sinhalese. The word *galpojja* in Vedda language means stone (a specific) is equivalent to *gala* in Sinhalese. The origin of the word *gejja* appears to be from the Sinhalese word *geDiya*. The word *ajjgejja* in Vedda language means eye which is equivalent to *asgeDiya* in Sinhalese. The word *ijjejja* in Vedda language means the head (of a person) which is equivalent to *olugeDiya* in Sinhalese. Among many others, these words show that the original Sinhalese words have been used with additions (which may be also created from Sinhalese words) of Vedda words to create a peculiar language.

Given this close link between the Vedda language and Sinhalese, the assimilation to the Sinhala language is easier for the Veddas. In a recent study, Abeyratne, Laksiri and Baskaran (2024) show that many of the Veddas in their sample had shifted to either Sinhala or Tamil as their home language. Baskaran and de Silva (2024) find that out of 15 activities they listed the Veddas choose only 4 activities for which the knowledge of their own language is required. These four activities are: trade, money making, practicing their religion and rituals, and inculcating cultural values among their community. For all other day to day activities and affairs, they do not rely heavily on the Vedda language.⁹

4. Analysis of the Vedda language at present

According to de Silva (1972), the best information about the Vedda language can be found among the Dambana Vedda folks.¹⁰ Seligmann and Seligmann (1911) also observe that Veddas of Dambana displayed a distinct desire to retain the Vedda language. Thus, any study on Vedda language should be based on the information of the Dambana Veddas. For this reason, we have selected Dambana Vedda village as one location of the study. Seligmann and Seligmann (1911) label Dambana Veddas as 'show' Veddas since they demonstrate the behavior of traditional forest Veddas. Also, the Dambana Veddas vehemently rejected the resettlement plan to shift Dambana Vedda village to agricultural settlements under the Mahaweli development project.

⁹ Both studies by Abeyratne, Laksiri and Baskaran (2024) and Baskaran and de Silva (2024) above were based on a sample survey done in 2023 in Vedda villages located in Welikanda and Bibila divisional secretariat divisions, where Veddas have largely been assimilated to major languages, Sinhalese and Tamil.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that fifty years earlier, Seligmann and Seligmann (1911) did not count the Dambana folk among the most genuine and true Veddas of the day.

The Veddas so settled under the Mahaweli development project have been reported as experiencing significant degeneration of Vedda characteristics and mostly assimilated into the Sinhalese culture and society. Thus, remaining Veddas in Dambana seem to be the best form of Veddas in Sri Lanka at present. They still live in huts which are made of clay and sheltered by traditional material such as *lluk* (cogon grass). No modern houses can be seen in Dambana Vedda village. However, in the face of social changes and difficulties to access their traditional hunter gathering lands, they face serious changes in their way of life and living too. According to Nawarathna Menike (2016; p. 186), “the Dambana Vedda leader had to relax some habitual customs and rules of the tribe to make his men and women able to find new living and sources of income”. The social and economic changes occurring around them have been influenced them to make some changes in their culture and the use of language.

In addition to the Dambana Village, we selected the Pollebadda Vedda village also as a location of the study. The Pollebadda Vedda village houses Veddas retreated from Bingoda and Sithala Wanniya due to health hazards in 1950s. For this reason, the Pollebadda Veddas are recognized as decedents from the original forest Veddas of Danigala and Henebadda. Pollebadda is also close to Sithala Wanniya where original Vedda families were last seen (Spittle, 1961). At present, the Pollebadda Vedda village has been transformed lot by mixing more with Sinhalese community. They have been adopted to wet-land agriculture (paddy) and animal husbandry and other means of living. The education attainment of the Pollebadda Vedda community is high and youth engage in outside the village public and private sector employment. Vedda houses are similar to nearby Sinhalese houses which have been made of bricks and sheltered by tile or asbestos. As Nawarathna Menike (2016; p. 187) notes, “Pollebadda Vedda families have been transformed lot to the modern way of life and living conditions and thus they are mostly not practicing Vedda traditions”. Many of the Veddas in Pollebadda do not recognize them as Veddas and do not use or are not able to speak the Vedda language. In Pollebadda, inter-community marriages are common and thus their culture has been fast changing and disappearing.

The field survey of this study was conducted in July 2024 by administering a questionnaire especially designed to obtain information on the use of Vedda language. The questionnaire

includes questions with Likert scale of 1-5 on various aspects of the Vedda language. The number of interviews conducted was 25 which is divided as 15 in Dambana and 10 in Pollebadda. The Veddas were selected to the interviews in a purposive sampling framework in order to reach the best source of information. The male representation of the sample is 80% and female representation is 20%. The age distribution of the sample is 10% is below 25 years of age, 60% is in between 25 and less than 50 years of age and 30% is more than 50 years of age. Of this sample only 10% represent unmarried Vedda population. About 25% of the sample has the education above the primary level. Some 20% of Veddas did not attend school and about another 30% has attended school only for few days or months. Therefore, the education level of the Veddas in the sample remains low.

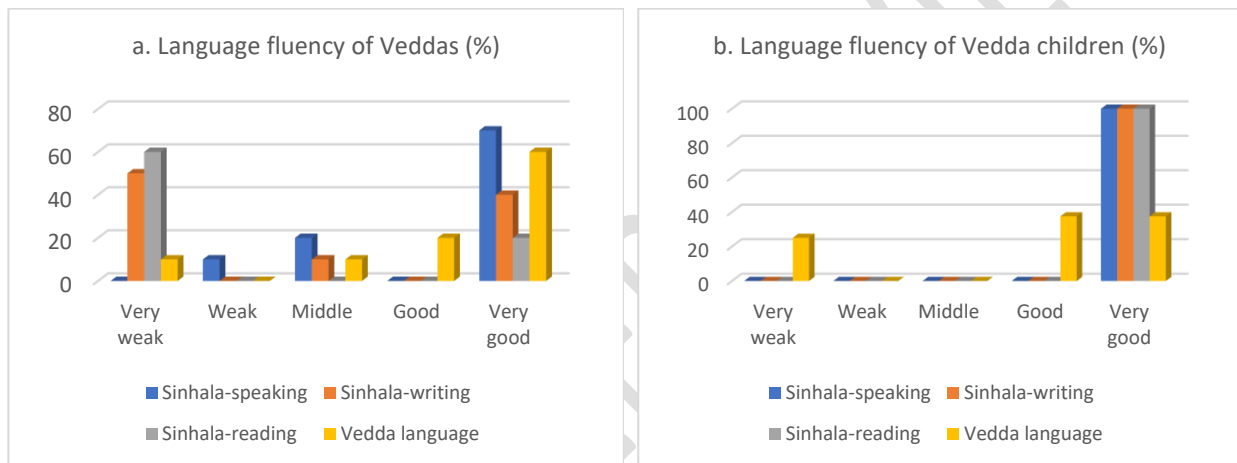
Language fluency

First, we examine the language ability of the Veddas in terms of Sinhala language and the Vedda language. In Sinhala language, we collect information about their speaking, writing and reading abilities. Further, an attempt has been made to find the language ability of their (Veddas) children. The interviewed Veddas were asked to rate the language ability of their children, if they have. The language ability of Veddas and their children is assessed in 1-5 Likert scale where answers are ranked as 'very weak', 'weak', 'neither weak nor fluent', 'fluent' and 'very fluent'. The percent of responses on language fluency of Veddas and their children have been presented in Figure 1.

According to Figure 1.a, 70% of Veddas interviewed identify their Sinhala language speaking ability as very fluent, 20% identify as neither weak nor fluent and 10% identify as weak. This indicates that all Veddas are able to communicate with Sinhalese people. However, the writing and reading abilities are not good as of speaking: only 40% and 20% of Veddas recognized their writing and reading abilities in Sinhala at least as fluent (good). It is also seen that 50% and 60% of Vedda who participated the survey are very weak in writing and reading in Sinhala language respectively. Interestingly, only about 60% of the Veddas recognized that their fluency in Vedda language as highly fluent (very good). This is 10 percentage points (ppts) less than their Sinhala

language speaking fluency. Thus, Veddas have recognized themselves that there are more Veddas who can speak Sinhalese better than the number of Veddas who can speak Vedda language better. Another 20% of Veddas recognize their Vedda language fluency as good, but not as very good. Accordingly, the percent of Veddas who has Vedda language fluency at least as good is 80%. About 10% of Veddas view that their Vedda language fluency as neither good nor bad and another 10% recognize their Vedda language ability as very weak. This result indicates that a sizable number of Veddas are without the ability of the Vedda language.

Figure 1 Language fluency of Vedda and their children (%)



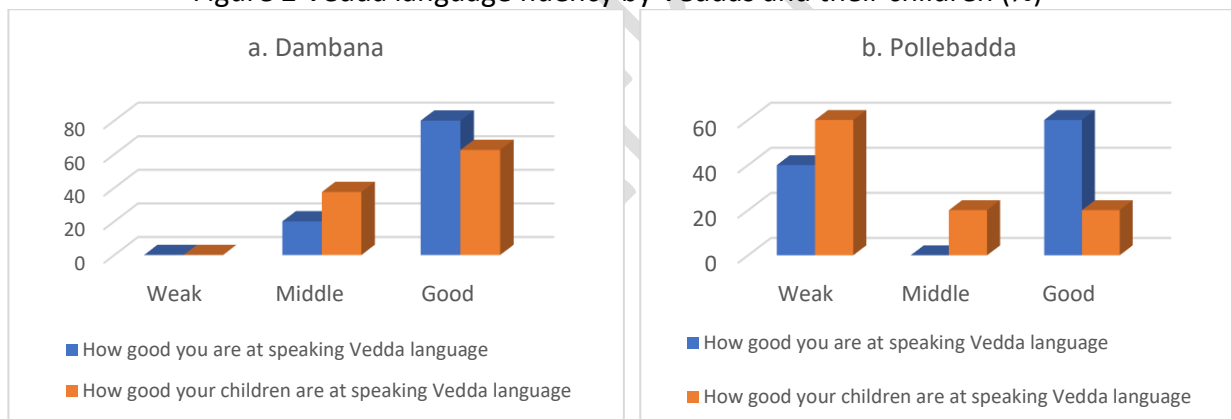
Source: Field survey of the present study, 2024.

Figure 1.b reveals a startling difference between the language ability of the Veddas and their children. The Veddas accepted that Sinhala language ability of their children in all domains, speaking, writing and reading, as very good. That is different from their parents Sinhala language skills. It indicates that the Vedda children have acquired higher level of fluency in Sinhalese due to their educational engagement. What is pathetic in terms of the future of the Vedda community and their culture is their children's low (weak) ability in the Vedda language. Only 40% of Veddas recognize their children's Vedda language ability as very good which is 20 percentage points low compared to their parent's Vedda language fluency. Another 40% of Vedda children are having a secondary level fluency (good) of the Vedda language. Figure 1.b indicates that about 20% of Vedda children are very weak in the Vedda language fluency. With their high ability in the

Sinhalese, the Vedda children whose ability in the Vedda language is weak or very weak may not or will not be able to contribute to the progress of the Vedda community and its culture.

Figure 2 reveals another interesting reality in the Vedda community. In this analysis, we sum up the fluency of good and very good as good and weak and very weak as weak for analytical simplicity. According to Figure 2.a, 80% of the Vedda folks in Dambana have a good status of the Vedda language fluency while that of their children is about 60%. The proportion of children with language fluency rated as good is less by 20 ppts than their parents. The percent of Veddas in Dambana whose Vedda language fluency is recognized as neither good nor weak is 20% while the percent of Vedda children whose language fluency is recognized as neither good nor weak is twice higher, 40%. There is a significant difference between Vedda language knowledge of the Veddas and their kids as kids are less fluent in the language.

Figure 2 Vedda language fluency by Veddas and their children (%)



Source: Field survey of the present study, 2024.

Figure 2.b indicates a significant difference in the Vedda language fluency in Pollebadda Vedda village compared to Dambana. In Pollebadda, only 60% of respondents recognize their Vedda language fluency as good, which is 20 ppts less than their Dambana folks. Only 20% of Pollebadda Vedda children are recognized as having good level of Vedda language fluency while that of Dambana children is higher by 40 ppts. It seems that the proportion of children with good Vedda language knowledge is remarkably low in Pollebadda. Another 20% of Vedda children in Pollebadda village are having Vedda language fluency rated as neither good nor weak. Compared to the none in Dambana, 40% of the Pollebadda Veddas recognized themselves having weak

fluency in the Vedda language. Making the Pollebadda Veddas future much bleaker, about 60% of Vedda children have been recognized as having weak fluency in the Vedda language. This discussion confirms that the Pollebadda Vedda folks and their children entail lower level of Vedda language fluency compared to their counterparts in Dambana. The Pollebadda Veddas are facing a serious threat of disappearing their language quickly. Though Dambana Vedda folks are also facing the same threat, their situation is not worse as the case of Pollebadda.

Socio economic and cultural aspects

In Table 1, we present the perception of Vedda on their language. About 33% of Veddas strongly agree with the statement 'Vedda youth and children are not interested in learning the language' and another 22% of Veddas agree with the statement. This means that more than 55% of the Veddas who attended the interviews state that their youth and children are not interested in learning the language. While 22% of Veddas are neither agree nor disagree, about another 23% strongly disagree with the statement. Generally, Veddas think and observe that their young and small children are not interested in learning the language. There is no clear rejection or the acceptance of the statement 'no use of learning the Vedda language' as they almost equally agree and disagree with the statement. The non-rejection or non-acceptance of the statement indicates that there are equally assessed positives and negatives of learning or not learning the language.

The answers given to the statement that 'there are no elders who can teach Vedda language' is also interesting as 56% of the respondents accept it with strong agreement and another 11% accept it with agreement. This means that about 67% of Veddas think that there are no elders in their community to teach the Vedda language and 33% of Veddas strongly reject the statement. The younger generation of the Veddas may think that the elders in their families are not able to teach the language. About 75% of Veddas strongly accept the statement that 'the Vedda language is gradually disappearing' and another 12.5% accept it leaving more than 87% of the respondents are approving the statement. Only 13% of Veddas believe that their language is not disappearing. Related to this, the statement 'Vedda language should be preserved' was supported by 78% of the Veddas by strongly endorsing it while 22% of Veddas are in strong

disagreement with the statement. Thus, the overwhelming majority of the Veddas accept that the Vedda language is disappearing and it should be protected and preserved.

Table 1 Veddas perception on the Vedda language (%)

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Middle	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Youth and children are not interested in learning it	22.0	0.0	22.0	22.7	33.3	100.0
No use of learning it	44.4	0.0	11.1	22.0	22.5	100.0
No elders who can teach Vedda language	33.3	0.0	0.0	11.1	55.6	100.0
Vedda language is gradually disappearing	12.5	0.0	0.0	12.5	75.0	100.0
Vedda language should be preserved	22.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	77.8	100.0

Source: Field survey of the present study, 2024.

Table 2 Why you should learn Vedda language (%)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Middle	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Due to pressure from parents	88.9	11.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	100
To communicate with others	25.0	0.0	12.5	25.0	37.5	100
For economic benefits	28.6	0.0	0.0	14.3	57.1	100
To protect Vedda heritage	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	90.0	100
Because it is a cultural heritage of Vedda	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	90.0	100

Source: Field survey of the present study, 2024.

Table 2 presents the views of Veddas on the reasons for learning the Vedda language. The Veddas rejected the statement that the language is learnt because of parent's compulsion and push. About 62% of Veddas think that learning Vedda language is important for communication with their community members while 25% of Veddas do not accept it strongly as a viable reason to learn the Vedda language. About 57% of Vedda persons strongly believe that they should learn Vedda language for economic benefits while another 14% of Veddas are, in agreement, with the reason. About 71% of Veddas recognize (agree and strongly agree) economic benefits or gains as a reason to learn the Vedda language. About 29% of the Vedda people reject economic benefits as a reason to learn the Vedda language. It seems that economic benefits that can be garnered by learning the Vedda language remain as a vital reason for many Veddas to learn their indigenous language.

In the age structure analysis, all young Veddas, below age 25 years, agree that economic benefits should be a major reason to learn the Vedda language. Sixty percent (60%) of Veddas among the age group between 25-49 years recognize economic gains as a major reason to learn the Vedda language. Among the Veddas of age 50 years and above, 33% strongly disagree to accept economics gain as a reason for the learning of Vedda language but 66% strongly agree to accept economic gains as major reason to learn the language. Overall, 2/3 of the Veddas accept economic benefits as a major reason to learn the Vedda language.

There is no issue on the Veddas views on 'to protect Vedda heritage' as a reason to learn the language: it was supported by 90% in strong agreement while the rest 10% endorse it in agreement. The same reason, asked differently in another place of the questionnaire, has received same perception. All Veddas recognized 'the protection of the Vedda heritage' as a good reason to learn the Vedda language. Vedda community recognize both protection of the cultural heritage and economic opportunities it created as good reasons to learn Vedda language. Veddas in all age groups believe that the Vedda language should be learned in order to protect their cultural heritage and teach their culture and heritage to the younger generation. Among the Veddas of all age groups, 90% strongly approve the statement that the Vedda language should be learned in order to teach cultural heritage to their younger generations and the rest 10% also endorse the statement by agreeing to it.

Table 3 presents response rates to a question 'what are the benefits you have or enjoy if you know the Vedda language?', in which some benefits may be as of reasons given in Table 2. About 56% strongly said that the knowledge of the Vedda language makes it easy to communicate with other members of the community and 33% strongly reject it. This high rejection rate of easy communication with members may be due to poor Vedda language knowledge among other members of the community. About 78% of the Veddas state strongly that they will be able to teach Vedda language to children and youth had they know the language while another 11% endorse the statement with agreement. Nearly 89% of the Veddas think that they can teach Vedda language to youth and children if they know the language. Only 11% of Veddas think that their knowledge of Vedda language help them to find a job and majority of Veddas (79%) do not

think so. This is also realistic as the job market does not generally list Vedda language skills or ability as a qualification.

Table 3 If you know the Vedda language, what are the benefits you have (%)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Middle	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Easy to communicate with the community	33.3	0.0	11.1	0.0	55.6	100.0
Able to teach Vedda language to children and youth	11.1	0.0	0.0	11.1	77.8	100.0
Easy to find job or employment	66.7	11.1	11.1	0.0	11.1	100.0
Able to earn money by speaking to tourists	22.2	11.0	11.0	11.1	44.6	100.0
Make others aware of Vedda culture and inculcate it	0.0	0.0	0.0	22.0	78.0	100.0

Source: Field survey of the present study, 2024.

Seligmann and Seligmann (1911) accuse village Veddas, especially Dambana Veddas, as show or professional Veddas as they demonstrate rituals, actions of forest Veddas way of living such as hunting, crawling, climbing rope ladders, honey gathering, folk dance, etc. to visitors. Answering to the question ‘would you be able to make/earn money by speaking to tourists if you know the Vedda language’, little more than 44% of Veddas accept the claim strongly. Another 11% endorse the claim with agreement leaving the total percentage of Veddas who accept the statement equals to 55%. About 33% of the Veddas disagree with the statement that they can earn money by speaking to tourists if they know the language. More Veddas, however, reckon that the knowledge of Vedda language will help them to earn money for survival by being able to attract visitors with their language skills.

The last benefit listed in Table 3 again indicates the Veddas attachment to the protection and preservation of their culture through the Vedda language. Asked about ‘would you be able to make others aware of Vedda culture and inculcate it, if you know the Vedda language’, 100 percent of Veddas endorse the statement, 22% with agreement and 78% with strong agreement. It seems that the Veddas are highly enthusiastic about promoting, protecting and preserving their cultural heritage through the Vedda language.

Table 4 Perceptions of Veddas (%)

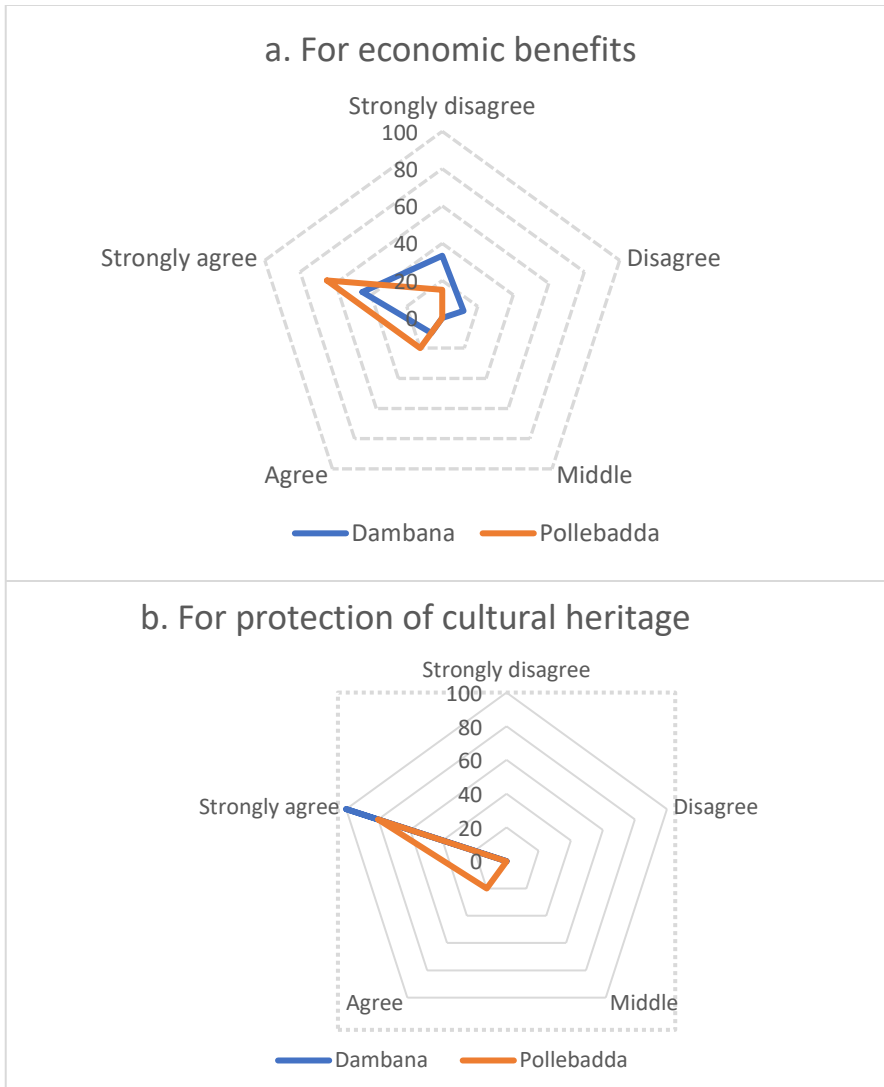
Statement	Dambana	Pollebadda
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	Disagree	Middle	Agree	Total	Disagree	Middle	Agree	Total
Children and youth are not interested in learning it	25	50	25	100	20	0	80	100
No elders to teach Vedda language	75	0	25	100	20	0	80	100

Source: Field survey of the present study, 2024.

Table 4 produces contrasting perceptions of Veddas on two aspects of the Vedda language. On the claim that ‘children and youth are not interested in learning Vedda language’, only 25% of the Dambana Vedda folks accept the statement as true, while 25% disagree with it and 50% neither agree nor disagree. But 80% of the Pollebadda Veddas agree that children and youth are not interested in learning the Vedda language while 20% disagree with it. May be the practice in Dambana is such that elders try to pass at least some knowledge of their language to their youth and children. But as the society in Pollebadda is more assimilated towards Sinhalese language and culture, children and youth there do not generally learn or are not generally taught the Vedda language. Only 25% of the Dambana Vedda folks accept that there are no elders to teach Vedda language while 75% of them reject the statement. This indicates that Veddas in Dambana think that their elders are capable of teaching the Vedda language. This is completely different in Pollebadda, where 80% of Pollebadda Veddas think that there are no elders to teach Vedda language while only 20% reject the claim. The presence of elders to teach Vedda language to their youth and children has helped Dambana Veddas to entertain relatively better knowledge and skills in Vedda language. Nonetheless, this is not the case in the Pollebadda Vedda village. The poor confidence on having elders with better knowledge and skills in the Vedda language makes the Pollebadda Vedda community deviates much from the Vedda language and the culture.

Figure 3 Learning Vedda language



Source: Field survey of the present study, 2024.

Figure 3 provides differences in learning the Vedda language for economic benefits and for protection of culture heritage of the Vedda community in Dambana and Pollebadda villages. Figure 3.a demonstrates how Veddas support the learning the Vedda language for economic benefits or gains. In Dambana, 45% of the Veddas strongly believe that economic benefits would be important for them to learn the Vedda language and another 10% accept it with agreement. Thirty three percent (33%) of Veddas strongly disagree and 12% disagree to consider economic benefits as a reason for learning Vedda language. The share in disagreement amount to 45% of Dambana Veddas. About 65% of the Pollebadda Vedda folks strongly consider economic benefits as a reason to learn Vedda language and another 20% consider economic benefits as a reason to

learn the language. Altogether, 85% of Pollebadda Vedda folks support learning Vedda language for economic benefits. This can be seen as the perceptions of Dambana and Pollebadda Veddas differ significantly.

The differences in considering protection of cultural heritage as a reason for learning Vedda language in the two Vedda villages are not much obvious. Hundred percent of Veddas in Dambana participated in the survey strongly reckon protection of Vedda cultural heritage as a reason for the Vedda language learning while 80% of the Pollebadda Vedda folks strongly consider and the other 20% consider protecting Vedda culture as a reason for the learning of the Vedda language. As given in Figure 3.b deviations of the two lines are minimum. This indicates that both Dambana and Pollebadda Vedda folks agree that the learning of the Vedda language would be essential for the protection of the Vedda culture and heritage.

5. Conclusions and Policy Implications

The traditional Vedda community in Sri Lanka faces serious threat in their survival under present socio, economic political conditions of the country. The fact has been long debated in the literature and many researchers, even in a period of more than hundred years, predicted that the Veddas are on the verge of disappearance. The truth is that the Veddas have not been extinct as anticipated, though their way of living and culture have been altered lot. One of the important factors that helps the Veddas retaining their identity is their language. Despite, the Vedda language is recognized as an endangered language because of its limited users and disappearing nature in various domains of use. This paper examined the Vedda language use and factors that drive preserving or sacrificing nature of the Vedda language for their socio-economic and cultural survival. The analysis of the paper was based on surveyed qualitative information collected from Veddas in Dambana and Pollebadda Vedda villages. The sample that collected information included 25 Veddas in different age categories including males and females from Dambana (15) and Pollebadda (10).

The paper examined the Sinhala language ability of the Veddas and found that many of them (70%) have better fluency in speaking Sinhalese, though majority of them are not good in writing and reading it. In contrast, only about 60% of the Veddas said that they have good knowledge of

their own language. There are more Veddas who can speak Sinhalese better than the Vedda language. The Vedda language fluency is remarkably low among the Veddas in Pollebadda, which seems to be more modernized, acculturated and assimilated, compared to Dambana. A startling difference is found between the language ability of the Veddas and their children. The Sinhala language ability of Vedda children has been exceptional in all domains. But many Vedda children are not fluent in Vedda language. This weak knowledge of Vedda language found frequently among Pollebadda children than Dambana children.

Majority of Veddas agree that their youth and children are not interested in learning the language. On this claim, Veddas of Dambana and Pollebadda provide two contrasting views. Only 25% of the Dambana Veddas accept the statement as true. But 80% of the Pollebadda Vedda folks accept it. The statement that 'there are no elders who can teach Vedda language' is accepted by 67% of the respondents while 56% of them strongly accept it. The younger generation of the Veddas may think that the elders in their community are not able to teach the language. This absence of elders to teach Vedda language is supported by only 25% of Dambana Veddas but in Pollebadda it received 80% of Veddas support. Thus, Pollebadda Veddas face serious challenges in protecting their language, as their younger generation are not interested in learning it and there are no adults to teach it. No clear rejection or acceptance of the statement 'there is no use of learning the Vedda language' indicates that there are equally assessed positives and negatives of learning or not learning the Vedda language. About 87% of the respondents agree that the Vedda language is gradually disappearing. All Veddas accept that the Vedda language should be preserved. The Veddas generally accept that the Vedda language is disappearing and it should be protected and preserved. The Veddas think that learning Vedda language is important for communication with their community members. The majority of Veddas agree that they can teach Vedda language to younger generation if they know it. About 79% of the Veddas said that their knowledge of Vedda language does not help them to find jobs.

About 71% of Veddas are of the view that they should learn Vedda language because of economic benefits attached to it. Economic benefits that can be garnered through the Vedda language remain as a vital reason for many Veddas to learn the language. The Veddas who are below 50

years of age are more enthusiastic about the economic gains that they can receive through the language. Compared to Dambana Veddas, many Pollebadda Veddas consider economic benefits as important to learn the Vedda language. More than 55% of Veddas think that they would be able to make/earn money by speaking to tourists if they know the Vedda language. Veddas accept that their Vedda language ability will help them to earn money by being able to interact with visitors. All Veddas accept the protection of Vedda heritage as a reason to learn Vedda language. It seems that the Veddas genuinely stand for the protection and preservation of their cultural heritage through the Vedda language. This claim is almost equally accepted by Veddas in Pollebadda and Dambana.

The Vedda community recognizes both protection of the cultural heritage and economic opportunities as good reasons for the learning and the protection of the Vedda language. This warrants an ideological shift and dedicated policy mediation to look at the Vedda community and their language as an inherent asset of the Sri Lankan society rather than pushing Veddas for forceful modernization and assimilation. Different types of policy mix are needed in different Vedda settlements such as Dambana and Pollebadda where different levels of language degeneration and assimilation have been evident. The Veddas, though they have been using Sinhalese extensively at present, will support policies and actions aiming to protect and preserve the Vedda language which provides many socio economic and cultural returns to them. It is also important to note that the protection of the Vedda language, the pride of the Veddas, and thus the Vedda community would be a priceless intangible cultural heritage.

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- 3.

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