



Four research scholars from the Netherlands learning Malayalam. They are (from L to R): Peter Van Der Weiff, Toon Schampers, Mrs. Olga Nieuwenhuys and Mrs. Marion Den Vyl. Dr. A. P. Andrews Kutty, the teacher is standing in the middle.

Malayalam Made Easy for Foreigners

The Dravidian Linguistics Association at Trivandrum, constituted in 1971 has blossomed into a centre of learning. Dr. V. I. Subramoniam, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Kerala and Correspondent of the Association, has many things to say about the teaching of languages in our country. We spend Rs. 2500 crores a year on education and 50 per cent of it is for teaching languages. We spend about Rs. 600 crores for a campaign to eradicate illiteracy. We spend huge amounts to make Hindi as popular as possible. What's the result? That is a question, Dr. Subramoniam says which should make everyone, linguists, administrators, academicians and educationists sit back and ponder.

The association, despite its name, has no chauvinistic outlook. Any language is worth learning. But to begin with, why not the languages of our neighbours, so that they could be better understood. A Keraliteuent in Tamil or Telugu or Kannada will find it a lot more easy to live in the neighbouring States. Not only that, every State has its own share of linguistic minorities. It is good for the administrator to know their languages. Recently a group of salesmen from a fertilizer factory in Kerala underwent a course in Telugu at the association which helped them to give a better performance. Some non-Keralite employees of the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre at Thumba began to

learn Malayalam at the association and they were very happy about it.

Last month four research scholars from the Netherlands arrived in Trivandrum to learn Malayalam. Deputed by the Netherlands University, the four scholars, Mr. Toon Schomppers, Mrs. Olga Nieuwenhuys, Mr. Peter Van Der Werff and Mrs. Marion Den Vyl, are in Kerala to do research on the patterns of income generation and labour-relations of poor households in the State. They intend to spend two years in Kerala and will be staying in Alleppey district. The farm and coir workers in the district, their life-style their society and their social set-up are the subjects the researchers will probe. For this, the first pre-requisite is a knowledge of Malayalam.

According to Dr. Subramoniam, the four foreigners have made tremendous progress in learning Malayalam. Coming from a different environment and speaking a language which is so very different in all its aspects, it was not an easy task. They have mastered the alphabets during one month and can take dictation now but when it comes to talking they are understandably halting. A language with considerable regional variations and intonations totally alien to the learners, who are all in their thirties, Malayalam also holds a fascination for them. The teaching is by modern methods. Pronunciation is recorded on tape-recorders and played back

for the learners' benefit. The students are taken to one Malayalam cinema a week. The teachers accompany them to the market where they are told to speak in Malayalam.

The experience of the students is varied. First of all, the local people do not expect these foreigners to speak in Malayalam. So they are not prepared. Even if they speak correctly, it takes some time for the local people to decipher it. When finds that the language spoken is Malayalam, the listener, is overjoyed but treats it as some kind of a wonder. He laughs—an embarrassing situation. But the foreigners carry on manfully and they have no complaints.

According to Dr. Subramoniam, language teaching, to be effective has to be done through short-term courses. The natural tendency is to drop out of a course which is of long duration. The association's experts—they do the teaching as a labour of love—can equip a learner with adequate knowledge of a language within three months. There is an intensive course of four weeks but that is too strenuous. The idea should be to prepare the learner to read, speak and write. The accent is on everyday usage rather than on literature. Once a student acquires a rudimentary knowledge he will pick up the language fast. The DLA has its own building and is now expanding its activities. Researchers and linguists from within and outside the country look to it for language teaching programmes.—From our Trivandrum Staff Reporter,