



English and Medium of Instruction: Dalit Discourse in Indian Education

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Abstract

There are two types of school system India in the issue of medium of instruction i.e the regional language system and the English language system. There is a clear cut division between the uppers castes elite children and Dalit children in getting of English medium education in Indian society. The Dalits children are given education in regional language schools while English language school education is meant for the upper castes children. This division has always been reflecting between government and private English medium schools. In the name of mother tongue the state and the upper caste elite always compel the regional medium of instruction in the policy making. This was one of the current problems in Indian Educational system. This paper can be divided into four parts. The first part will highlight the language policy after Indian Independence. The second part discusses the concept of mother tongue and its importance in the contextualizing of educational discourse in India. In the third part I would highlight the current debate on language policy and its importance in the Indian educational system. This is very important in the understanding of politics of medium of language in the present educational discourse. The last part deals with the response of the Dalits towards the English education and how they attack the upper caste nature towards regional medium education. In an attempt to locate the importance of educational policy in the wider socio-historical and political context, I will address an ideological deconstruction of politics of mother tongue in the present Indian educational system.

Keywords: English education, language, mother tongue, globalization.

Introduction

The question as to which language should be used as a medium of instruction in country like India is a debatable subject. The question is often posed in binary terms: Should the medium of instruction be a regional language or English? Language is a vehicle for learning as well as expression of ideas. An advanced language (English) helps in mentally provide people to communicate each other across the world. On the other hand, an underdeveloped language has its limitations. It keeps people underdeveloped, more so those in deprived sections. The school system is divided into two types in the context of medium of instruction i.e the regional language system and the English language system. There is a clear cut division between the uppers castes elite children and Dalit children in getting of English medium education in Indian society. The dalits cholderns are given education in regional language schools while English language school education is meant for the upper castes children. This division has always been reflecting between government and private English medium schools. In the name of mother tongue the state and the upper caste elite always compel the regional medium of instruction in the policy making. This was one of the current problems in Indian Educational system.

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Historical View of the Language Policy in Indian Education

The historical view of the evolution of the language policy in India let know us how the importance of English and its role in Indian Education. India is multilingual country. It has been reflecting in the formulation of the language policy. The Indian constitution has provided that the primary education must be taught through the mother tongue or regional language. However, a status survey of language instruction in the country exposed that of the 1652 mother tongues listed by the 1961 Census, there are 51 languages which are spoken by more than 100,000 people each. Of these 51 languages, 16 have no script of their own, and only the remaining 35 languages are accepted as media of instruction at the school level¹. English is a common

language and it is an obligatory language in the higher education for the progress of the life.

The Indian government has been following three-language formula in Education as the National Commission on Education 1964-1966 recommended. Subsequently three-language formula in Education was reflected in the National Education Policies of 1968 and 1986. The Commission said that the three-language system is an appropriate formula for the Indian school education and it can be good approach to accommodate different language people but it has been criticized by the different sections in the society on the implementation. The Dravidian movement in Tamilnadu is the preeminent instance as they vehemently opposed the imposition of Hindi language on south India.

There is no proper planning for formulating language policy in India. It can be seen as a question of status planning rather than achievement planning. Finally, the three- language formula has been emerged as a policy after elaborate debates and discussions among political and academic peoples with interest of national multilingual languages.

The colonial government appointed the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE)² which has been initiated the discussions and negotiations with different sections in the society to frame the language policy in school education for India in the 1940s and submitted its report in 1960. The Board advised the three-language formula with a vision to eradicate discrimination among the multilingual people of India. The Board recommended that three-languages should be taught in the Hindi as well as non-Hindi-speaking areas of the country at the middle and high school stages. The three-language formula was finally approved by the Government of India as follows: i. The regional language or the mother tongue, ii. Hindi Language, iii. English Language

The Central Advisory Board on Education also discussed on the issue of English language and recommended that English must be compulsory subject in the schools from 6th class onwards and students must acquire enough knowledge of English so as to be able to receive education through this English in the higher education. There is another development took place in the development of language policy in India. The first National Education Commission had studied the recommendations given by the Central Advisory Board on Education. Finally they came up with conclusion that three-language formula must be included in the context of multilingual Indian educational system. I argue that once upon a time the English language was important part of a mechanism of exclusion language due to upper caste nationalists' creation as they differentiated native language and alien language but now it can be seen as a tool of inclusion. In the post modern India the English language is important factor to include all the sections of Indian society. The main reason is an increasing demand for the language which is an important tool for the progress and development of the country.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training also documented the demand and importance of English language in the position paper in connection with the National Curriculum Framework (2005) as they stated: *“English in India today is a symbol of people’s aspirations for quality in education and fuller participation in national and international life... The level of introduction of English has now become a matter of political response to people’s aspirations, rendering almost irrelevant an academic debate on the merits of a very early introduction”*. The Commission also mentioned that *“English will continue to enjoy a high status so long as it remains the principal medium of education at the university stage, and the language of administration at the Central Government and in many of the states. Even after the regional languages become media of higher education in the universities, a working knowledge of English will be a valuable asset for all students and a reasonable proficiency in the language will be necessary for those who proceed to the university”*.

However, there is controversial about the English as a medium of instruction in Indian educational system. The contradiction of demand and notion is reflected through the paradox of access which was depicted by the report of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC)³ as it stated: *“There is an irony in the situation. English has been part of our education system for more than a century. Yet English is beyond the reach of most of our young people, which make for highly unequal access. Indeed, even now, barely more than one percent of our people use it as a second language, let alone a first language ... But NKC believes that the time has come for us to teach our people, ordinary people, English as a language in schools. Early action in this sphere would help us build an inclusive society and transform India into a knowledge society”*.

The National Focus Group on Teaching of English has taken a strong position in connection with 'English language question': *“English is in India today a symbol of people’s aspiration for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life. Its colonial origins now forgotten or irrelevant, its initial role in independence India, tailored to high education now felt to be insufficiently inclusive socially and linguistically, the current state of English stems from its overwhelming presence on the world stage and the reflection of this in the national arena”*⁴.

There is an astonishing faith among all sections of the society in both rural and urban areas that English has the transformative power language. English is seen not just as a skill language, but as a means of a better life, a pathway out of exclusion and suppression from the unequal society. The English language has emerged as a powerful agent for social change in India.

Mother Tongue as the Medium of Instruction

There is a popular perspective that advocates the use of mother tongue as media of instruction in early education as well as to

encourage linguistic diversity in schools. This perspective argue that mother tongues are not merely speech varieties but are languages that provide social and emotional identity to individuals, express the essence of their cultures, and give them a sense of rootedness. Schooling in the language of the child reflects respect for her and an appreciation of her culture. The exclusion of the mother tongues from school hence is seen as 'harmful to the child's self esteem'.

According to Pattanaik⁵ children are thereby "reduced to minorities in their own homes". Extending the realm of pedagogy, the argument links the acknowledgement and acceptance by the school of the language and culture of the child to a positive identity of self and thereby to effective educational achievement. As Edward says, "the rejection of a child's language is unlikely to enhance feelings of self worth which are important for educational success"⁶. Further, this perspective argues that "the right to education in a language that the child understands is a basic human right and an essential ingredient of equality in education". Pattanaik forcefully observes that to "control and dictate the language of access" to knowledge is a "positive suppression of human talent. It deprives individual and society of free choices, curbs creativity and innovativeness and restricts participation or potential participation in multiple spheres of human interaction, thus imposing limits on freedom".

The Chennai Declaration (2012) has emphasized the importance of mother tongue in the multi-lingual country like India as "One of the significant commonalities of the Common School System will be the plurality of mother tongues in dynamic interface with multilingualism of child's neighborhood. This would duly include Braille and other sign languages as well. According to this radical and dynamic conception of language education, mother tongue with a multi-lingual interface is acknowledged as the most potent medium of education to enable the child to i. think, analyze and act; ii. acquire, internalize and transform modern language knowledge critically; iii. Learn other languages, including English, proficiently; iv. catalyze cultural and literary renaissance; v. Negotiate with the dominant process of alienation with advantage, thereby avoiding being pushed-out; and vi. Question and resist oppression and explore the path of liberation"⁷.

This approach believes in quality education. The quality education begins with mother tongue. Mother tongue is very important that gives high levels of ability in learning many languages in India. Indian constitution also acknowledged the importance of mother tongue language as the National Curricular Framework, 2005 and the Right of Children to free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 provided the mother tongue as tool for development critical thinking. However, for most children, particularly for the tribal and minority language children, there is no provision for education in the mother tongue. Education of such children imposes an unfamiliar school language on them, which often leads to large scale dropouts. Mother tongue based multilingual education for at least 6 to 8

years is education of quality for all children. This position was vehemently criticised by Dalit discourse in Indian Education. The present paper argues in favour of English as the medium of teaching in school education in India.

Current Debate on Medium of Instruction

Current language politics in India is an exemplary case of the issues and controversies surrounding linguistic globalization. A primary characteristic of linguistic globalization is the increasing spread and domination of the English language, which we can capture by the term 'global English'⁸. As a post-colonial democracy, India provides a context for examining linguistic globalization that is generalizable to other cases. Furthermore, in juxtaposition to the homogenizing tendency of global English, India embraces multilingualism; its federal system is based on its linguistic diversity.

India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, a modern socialist at heart and one of the premier leaders at the 1955 Bandung conference, was utterly convinced of this linkage between the English language and technology and modernity⁹. Yet he also "discovered India" through its rich and enduring diversity. He valued the adivasi, or tribal, cultures of India as much as, if not more than, for example, the Bengali *bhadralok*, an early middle-class intelligentsia that emerged under colonial rule.

As well documented by Robert King¹⁰ (1998), Nehru, as well as many others feared that the major regional languages of independent India, such as local languages, could be divisive by fomenting narrow identities, leading to "fissiparous tendencies" that could tear India apart. The narrative of English as the language of modernity and regional languages such as regional as pre-modern, parochial and even reactionary was well established in Nehruvian India. Today, given the nostalgia for the caliber of Nehru's leadership¹¹, such Nehruvian narratives still resonate. Indeed, many of India's political and economic leaders today espouse the Nehruvian language ideology.

Nandan Nilekani, the co-founder of Infosys Company has put it; in India today English is a symbol of an economy comes of age¹². It is the language of international business, science and research. In contrast, Nilekani depicts supporters of Kannada in the English-versus-Kannada controversy as "chauvinistic" and ideologically and politically motivated. As part of Nilekani's accusation of the ideological nature of pro-Kannada forces is the claim that they are denying access to English to those who have historically been the have-nots in Indian society, in particular the lower-castes and the lowest-of-the low, the Dalits or Untouchables.

This language ideology of English as a skill, a 'key' or 'passport' critical for "upward mobility" fits in with a larger narrative on globalization. This globalization narrative depicts globalization as inevitable, a force on its own with no one or no

entity directing or controlling it. Globalization, in this narrative, is an autonomous, “invisible hand” process. The linguistic dimension of this process is one where English is seen as neutral and inevitably spreading globally.

In this context, one of the most prominent public intellectuals in India today, Ramachandra Guha differs with Nandan Nilekani and claim that support for Kannada is not chauvinistic, except when the private sector is obligated, or forced, to use it. It is legitimate and indeed preferable for the government to endorse and approve of changing the official name of Bangalore to the more Kannadiga “Bengaluru,” according to Guha; it is not legitimate for regional language enthusiasts to economically disenfranchise migrants from other parts of India, as for example pro-Marathi fanatics in Bombay have attempted. A similar, “soft” liberalism reasoning seems to have been the basis for the Karnatak High Court decision in the summer of 2008 against the state government mandating Kannada as the medium of instruction in private schools¹³. The court’s decision repeatedly referred to the freedom of parents to make choices for their children, i.e., the freedom of the individual and, by extension, the market based on individual choices.

More recently, Kannada activists have been seeking classical language status for Kannada-a further central governmental categorization. This is the political space opened up for investing Kannada speakers with the “moral content of a community.” In other words, to act politically, i.e., to make political claims, regional language activists need to build community, and invest that community with moral content. There is indeed Kannada chauvinists who preach an exclusive Kannadiga identity¹⁴, giving a “divisive and dangerous”¹⁵ or “particularist protectionist” content to their politics. But we need not condemn all pro-local language politics as such. Language politics in India is contested because of the moral content with which many local language activists have been able to imbue the community, i.e., with a political transformation that is empowering and moral.

Dalit Discourse on Medium of Instruction

There are two types of school systems in India in the context of medium of instruction i.e the regional language system and the English language system. This division can be seen in government and private convent English medium school education. In fact; some of the most vociferous proponents of English-medium schools have been Dalit activists¹⁶. As one Dalit-Bahujan social scientist and activist, Prof.Kancha Ilaiah from Andhra Pradesh, has summarized the pro- English narrative among Dalits:

“Over time, English has become the common language of the global science and technology market and the overall economy. As Government schools do not teach in English medium, those who study in them are denied the opportunities given to their richer counterparts in English medium schools. Students in

regional language schools cannot therefore think of achieving anything in the globalised economy”.

Accordingly, “the divide between the English medium schools and the regional language schools is a caste-class divide”, which can be overcome by the marginalized “hijacking” the tool of exclusion, English¹⁷. As the leaders of a Dalit Association in Hyderabad Central University, put it: “The middle class and the rich can afford to send their children to private schools. For the poor and Dalit, the only option is government schools. Then why these people were denied an opportunity to learn English”¹⁸. For these Dalit leaders, those opposing English in state schools are “regressive and biased” English, and the pro-English linguistic globalization narrative, are seen as empowering the powerless and a necessary tool for upward mobility.

In the central schools the medium of instruction is where the upper castes and other central government employee children get the education. Even though the children of a few reserved category employees’ children benefit from these schools, the divide between the English medium schools and the regional language schools is a caste or class divide based on social and economic category. The divide itself was created by upper caste intellectuals for their own vested interest. Since the days of Indian national movement the upper caste intelligentsia argued that the colonial rule particularly Lord Thomas Macaulay had introduced English education that convert local people into clerks to serve in colonial government. The real character of the English education was emphasized by Lord Machulay often quoted ‘flourish India in blood and the colour but European in task and manner’, the educational enterprise of the Government at all levels of education remained within the confines of colonial needs and did not break the limits of colonial interest. With this concept, colonial education elevated western knowledge and culture that represented the colonizer. For instance, Grants, the East India Company officer stated that ‘for the continuation of British rule it was necessary to create a class of Indians’ that people brought about only from the western knowledge. This perhaps, was a natural consequence of the ideas and values which this new education sought to install which had not grown in the native soil belt and were deliberately forced on the receiver by forces external to the social system. Hegemony, Gramsci¹⁹ suggests constructed through the medium of ideology which in turn the consent of the subordinated class to the ruled by dominant political force.

The traditional intelligentsia like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Vivekananda and others began to revive the indigenous educational system based on tradition in order to counter the western education which would give a threat to their social status. They believed in the authority of the classic text which emphasis on tradition. It was only attempt by a traditional interest group to legitimize it and achieve recognition and status in the colonial India. They only sought to resurrect the past as an alternative to the present. Their attempt was only to rectify tradition while disseminating the ideology of the indigenous

educational system that would legitimize their hegemony in rejecting western ideology as an immoral force. However, their revival of the national education system was traditional and within fold of elitism and aimed at modernization. In this way they were highly stimulated by the English education. Their efforts had been instigated other upper caste elites in getting education in English medium.

However, after Indian independence the upper caste elites has been changed their perspective on English education and stressed their importance towards regional medium in school education. But their children's and families have been engaged in English medium. They have been arguing in favour of regional language in schools in which the Dalits and poor section are meant for the regional schools. They have been excluding to get English medium education. According to Dalit discourse in education the English education is an emancipator the Dalits from social evils in Indian society. I feel that the English language is a self respect language which creates equal space for everyone in the competitive world. Prof.Kancha Ilaih also opines that the providing English education is more important than reservations to the marginal sections.

Even after 60 years of Indian Independence, this dual mode of school education is sought to be sustained. At the same time, higher educational institutions of both the Centre and the States have been created to suit the English medium student community. As of now, all the Central Government run higher educational institutions employ English as priority language. The Indian Central universities, Indian Institute of Technology, Indian Institute of Medical Sciences teach in English medium only. The Dalit students have been finding it difficult to cope with higher education imparted in the English language because they study their education in regional mediums. When they fail in those courses the upper caste intelligentsia starts the discussion about their performance by bringing the concept of merit in higher education.

When the issue of language comes into discussion hegemony of Hindi language has been paying an important role in India. The central government compelled the states follow Hindi as the national language and imposed it compulsory as one of the subject under three language formulas from 3rd class onwards even on the South Indian states. But Tamil Nadu vehemently resisted the teaching of Hindi and adopted a system of bilingual school education in Tamil and English. But it has not been implemented in other south Indian states. The three language formula was unnecessary burden for them as Hindi has no role in their society. In comparison, the teaching of English starts only from Class VI in these states. The upper caste argues that those who have had their school education in regional languages would come up with English medium students in the higher education. But it has been proved wrong in reality. This is the politics of upper caste towards Dalits in Indian education.

Importance of English Medium Education

In the present days, English has become the common language of the global science and technology market and the overall economy. As Government schools do not teach in English medium, those who study in them are denied the opportunities given to their richer counterparts in English medium schools. Students in regional language schools cannot therefore think of achieving anything in the globalised economy.

The Dalit society are very keen to let their children study English medium because Dalits thinks feels that who have been educated in English they get the good opportunities in the globalization. They consider English as the important factor for their social mobility in the world.

There is another reason why Dalits prefer English. English is an unbiased language in India in terms of multi lingual perspective, whereas many Indian languages in India are inherited from Sanskrit, the language, dominated by Brahmins for thousands of years and Dalits were not allowed to learn Sanskrit language. It has become dominant and ruling class language in the ancient India.

As Dalit Freedom Network²⁰ (DFN) has strongly believed in the concept of English medium education. DFN argues that English education combined with learning of the local vernacular language or mother tongue is the way forward to promote socio-economic equality. According to DFN's report, the upper cast residents of the village noticed the excellent academic standard shortly after the DEC opened. They saw the Dalit children's behavior improve, and the Dalit parents have been taking an active responsibility in their children's education. DFN's report also reveals that the upper caste leaders of the village invited the Dalit residents to dinner in an upper caste home. Since time immemorial, Dalits are usually denied to sit together with upper caste community in such occasion like dining or temples. Therefore, never in the history of the village had the upper caste and lower caste eaten together, let alone in the home of an upper caste member. This example indicates the impact of English education on such relationship. Here attention must be paid to the fact that Dalits' effort in the quest for social justice and equality was recognized by upper cast community, and brought about the change in the attitude of upper caste toward Dalits. Therefore the English has become an egalitarian language in the country like multilingual.

In the age of globalization, people must use English language along with their mother tongue to settle in good positions. In India, English is the global language and it plays an important role in higher education. Parents and children perceive English as a 'language of opportunity'.

English medium education is the key factor for espouse the modernization which is important in the present context of globalization in India. The upper castes have been handling the

contradiction between English and mother tongue language quite carefully. But when it comes to teaching English to the Dalits they have been arguing that English is the responsible for the obliterate the mother tongue. It has not been proved in reality. But their children study in the foreign universities and occupy the good positions in India.

The first generation Dalits in higher education have been struggling in the universities because of English language. They have not been able to cope up with the knowledge system where the upper caste elites dominate over the Dalits in the class room. It has been proved with my experience in the Hyderabad Central University when I was studying there. Dr Ambedkar is the best example in this context. He studied in English medium and became a world's most popular figure in the intellectual community He has extensive studied western ideas and suited them for Indian context. Without command over English language it would not have been possible.

Conclusion

Currently English education has actively been participating in the making of new social, economic and political structure in India. In Indian society, it plays a kind of a liberating force in breaking down the traditional norms and values, which were in consonance with the native language (Aryan languages) caste system. Most of the Indian languages were originated from the Aryan languages. In this context, the Dalit academicians and activists stresses the need of English language for a multilingual country like India from the beginning of schooling. However, they also question about the danger of introducing English without ensuring the basic infrastructure facilities like trained teachers for implementation of English as the medium of instruction. The Dalit political discourse has strongly deconstructed the politics of mother tongue by taking Ambedkar's philosophy in the Indian education in various platforms. As a result the government has been taking keen initiatives in the formulation of policies related to English medium by opening of model schools/ concept schools in rural areas.

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