

Political Sociology of Teaching English in India

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Abstract: Language has been considered to be the tool of human communication from very beginning everywhere and all the times. It is because of its importance that language is looked at as great phenomena in field of human science. As a modern International Language, English language has to be given enough space in modern study as phenomenon that is connected to socio-political -cultural contexts. It needs to be studied from different angles. In India, English language is considered to be a second language as many other countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka etc. In a country like India that has a multi culture, multiple languages and religion, it has always been necessary to have a second language to function as lingua-franca or linking language. As Sanskrit was more than a language. It was assigned the political function of achieving cohesion among the upper-caste élites. Now English can have the same significance to do in the present. It is a must that Indians use English as a mean of exclusion and an instrument of cultural hegemony. It is to be taught for all people under equal condition and with the most modern and up-to-date methods.

Keywords: English language, political Sociology, education, colonial, ideology

DISCUSSION

If they cannot enchain us on this pretext, they will think up another one.

- **Ernesto Che Guevara**

Language has always been a subject of great consideration and concern for the human beings. The scholars of language have been incessantly trying to interpret this phenomenon since the time immemorial. There is no dearth of studies which are devoted to language in general. However, most of these studies are made in the descriptive, technical and mechanical modes.

The study of language has to be made keeping in view the fact that language is essentially and predominantly a social phenomenon. Language is not merely an abstract system of signs: it also fulfils some social functions. The development of sociolinguistics has shifted the emphasis from an abstract study of the rules of language to concrete use of language use.

The linguistic issues in India have always been a problem for many reasons. The linguistic problems of India have been studied, analysed discussed and commented upon to excess. However, all these studies have failed to provide an amicable solution to these problems which sometimes turned very violent and disastrous in India. Two significant reasons can be cited for this to happen:

- 1) These studies were made without assuming the inevitable socio-political-cultural contexts in which the linguistic issues are deeply rooted. Many of the scholars who undertook such studies failed to understand that the linguistic problems in a given society are not the problems of the language alone; instead they are the manifestations of the socio-economic-cultural problems of the society. For ex-while studying the linguistic issues in a multilingual and highly stratified country like India, the intricate mechanism and dynamics of caste remained unnoticed.
- 2) Such studies were/are not based on the sound theory having explanatory adequacy. The conceptual frameworks in which such studies were undertaken were not suitable to resolve the issues in an amicable manner. Language has very often been defined as a mean of communication. Such a definition focuses only the communicative function of language. However, the discourse on the language policy today is primarily a political discourse. Politically speaking, a language and linguistic policies may be used as means of achieving dominance of one class over the other. Language provides additional power to the socially advantageous class in the society. Therefore, there is need of writing a political

history of language in India in which the threads of language, culture, history and politics are woven together. This paper aims at situating the language debate in India in the appropriate socio-political context.

Assuming the importance of appropriate and relevant theoretical framework, the issue undertaken is studied in the light of the Marxian concept of social structure and the Gramscian concept of hegemony.

- 1) The structure of any society consists metaphorically speaking the 'Base' and the corresponding superstructure. The Base of any society is formed of the production system prevailing in the society. To suit this production system, an appropriate pattern of economic relations becomes necessary. The society is divided into social classes and their nature is determined by their role (participation and non-participation) in the production system.
- 2) Corresponding to the production system i.e. Base, arises a "Superstructure". The function of structure and ideology (culture, languages, literature etc.)
- 3) Gramsci, the Italian Marxist thinker has formulated a concept of hegemony to elucidate how such as ideology of the ruling class comes to be believed by the ruled. According to Gramsci, the ruling class does not achieve its domination on the subjects through force and fraud alone. It is achieved through hegemony which is combination of coercion and consent [1]. The ruling class achieves domination by making the subjects willingly submit themselves to their masters. This is done through an implicit or hidden ideology. The tenets of this ideology which benefits only the ruling or oppressing class are accepted by the oppressor as well the oppressed. In other words, the oppressed internalize the ideology of the oppressor. The oppressed become the 'collaborators' of their own oppressing. Language is one of the ideological apparatuses used by the oppressor. It functions as the carrier of the ideology of the oppressor.

The Gramscian concept of hegemony and the importance of language as an ideological apparatus can be illustrated well by citing the example of Sanskrit language. In a country as large as India, it has always been necessary to have some one language to function as lingua-franca or linking language. In the classical times, Sanskrit performed this role. In this period this language was the vehicle of the ideology of the ruling class (ruling *varnas* or castes). As Robert D. King puts it:

But Sanskrit was always more than merely a voice for facilitating communication over the diverse regions of the country...The great unifier of India has always been 'Brahmanical ideology'...The instrument of penetration of Brahmanical ideology into the Deccan and South was the Sanskrit language and the sacred texts written in Sanskrit[2].

In India, Sanskrit was more than a language. It was assigned the political function of achieving cohesion among the upper-caste élites. *Vedāntism* was the ideology that unified the brahmins and Sanskrit became the carrier of that ideology:

Suffice it to say here that the great unifier of India has always been 'Brahminical ideology'; not only the familiar structures of Hinduism such as caste, cow worship, religious ceremonies, cremation and so on, but the intellectual authorities of the great classical texts, the *Vedas*, the *Upanishadas*, the *Bhagavadgita*. The instrument of penetration of Brahminised ideology into the Deccan and the south was the Sanskrit language and the sacred texts written in Sanskrit[3].

As Sanskrit was considered the language of deities and celestial beings and earthly surrogates on the earth, access to it was restricted, by the large, to the upper *varnas* of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Unlike Sanskrit, there are no scriptural injunctions against the learning of English. English is theoretically as accessible to the 'non dwija' *varnas* and women as it is to the 'dwijas' However, the brahmanical classes have monopolized the use of English[4].

English Education: Colonial Period

Like the educational policies, the linguistic policies also arise out of the cotemporary needs of the ruling class. They are framed to suit to the interests of the elite. Many colonial documents reveal the fact that the British colonial rulers in India used "linguistics" to achieve the "non-linguistic" goals. They used English (the education of English) to establish their hegemonic rule in India. 'linguistic colonialism' was part of 'economic colonialism'.

Macaulay's Minute on Education clearly states that the colonial power intended to create an educated and westernized class that would function as a mediating class between the ruler and the ruled. English education offered various opportunities of personal gains to only a section (a class of) of the society and not all. The introduction of English was primarily for the benefit and consolidation of the British power, but it also afforded distinct opportunities to certain sections of the Indian population[5]. The upper castes came

forward with a great zeal to enjoy the fruits of this language the British did not cause any harm to this section of the India society in the early period of colonialism. They established a Madarassa at Calcutta in 1781 and a Sanskrit College at Banaras in 1792.

The East India Company made a provision of Rs. One Lakh for the promotion of Sanskrit Arabic and Persian. However, this sum was not utilized till 1823. The British colonisers did not want to hurt their native allies i.e. the upper castes by education all the Indians. The British wanted to create, what B. R. Bapuji calls, 'a class of comprador intellectuals'. M. G. Ranade, a liberal Brahmin thinker in Pune, had warned the government of Bombay to not to allot more money for primary education at the cost of higher education which was the demand and need of the newly arising intellectual class[6]. Jotirao Phule, the leader of the anti-caste movement, was greatly disillusioned with the upper-caste reformist project and bitterly resented the Brahminical dominance in the colonial period[7]. He had urged the Hunter Commission in 1882 to make education compulsory and increase the expenditure on education. Jotirao Phule's demand remained unheard of as it is a fact that even after 100 years of the British Rule in India, the literacy was only 15.9% (in 1947).

Post-colonial Period

After independence, India should have redefined the goals and priorities in education in general and English education in particular. However, it is a fact that English education in the post-colonial India has been only a continuation of the colonial experience.

The dominant classes in India in the pre-independence period articulated such a language policy which would entail their linguistic interest in general and socio-political interests in particular. A Three Language Formula was accepted by the Indian National Congress in the Belgaon Congress Session in 1924. The reason why the Nationalist leaders included English as the language of international diplomacy in their language policy was to safeguard the economic interests of the ruling and commercial classes in India. The widespread dominance of English (the language of the world capitalist class) in the international economic field forced the Congress to choose English as the language of international diplomacy[8].

English remained the chief cultural and communicational instrument for the centralization of the bourgeois state in colonial India. The main cultural claim of English during the colonial India was a non-literary one. India was internally so fragmented, so heterogeneous, that it needed a centralizing language to sustain the national unity[9].

The growing popularity of English education in the first few years of independence was borne out by

the legitimacy that was accorded to English education by the post-colonial Indian state. Such The discourse on the language has now been linked to the wider conflict over power in the society between two elite groups: the nationally entrenched, pan-Indian English educated elites and the new but ascended elites which have lately emerged on the national scenes. Given that English serves as the language of knowledge and market in post-colonial India, there has been tremendous for English education and readiness to pay for at the extreme extent.

The national elite tightened its hold on the levers of power at the national level since independence. This group controls the higher echelons of politics, bureaucracy, the armed forces, corporate business and profession.

Education in general and English education in particular became an additional tool at the hands of this national elite. With the advent of the colonial education system, the controversy over 'mass education versus nurturing excellence' began in India. The British colonizers supported the idea of public school in the 19th century in order to conciliate the new aspirant class.

The colonial as well as post-colonial education policy resulted into the dual education system in the already stratified India society. The rich upper castes had/have English medium school with their eyes glued on cushy and lucrative jobs while not-so-rich lower castes who look forward to the intermediate institutions provided not only linguistic skills but also a set of values laden technical and managerial tools. It provided an 'entry-ticket' into the elite class. However, as a result of this class-caste based educational policies majority of the poor population has remained uneducated and, resultantly, deprived of English.

It is now a well-known phenomenon in India that there is not a single city in India where the English medium schools have not sprouted like some kind of viral fever. The emergence of these schools corresponds to the emergence of the new elite class which hailed from the groups such as Punjabi Hindus, Kashmiri Pundits and South Indian Brahmins. There are traditional urban oriented professional castes such as Nagars of Gujrat, the Chitpavans and the Chandraseniya Kayastha Prabhus of Maharashtra and the Kayasthas of the North India. Also included among them are the old elite groups which emerged during the colonial rule. The Probasi and Bhadrakal Bengalis, the Parsis, and the upper crusts of the Muslim and Christian communities. These elites form the homogeneous all India group which sees the nexus between knowledge and power. They use English as a mean of exclusion and an instrument of cultural hegemony.

The central power was wielded at the hands of the above-mentioned national elites until the 1970's. The regional elites have as a result of the democratic politics and the Green Revolution in the 1970's, arisen at the regional level. They are trying hard to create for themselves spaces in the power structure at the national level. This class has hailed from the dominant peasant castes in the respective states. They have acquired not only political clout but also a material basis to their power in the rural economy.

The relationship between the national elites and the regional elites is of patron-client type. Major share of the national income and natural resources are appropriated by these national elites and a very small portion of it is left for the regional elites. Though the regional elites express their resentment at this relationship, they are also benefited by this relationship as they function as the secondary allies of the national elites.

The developments of the last thirty years have brought the regional elites into prominence. However, the old neo-colonial upper-caste elites, with a long tradition of education in the past, still constitutes its core. The national elite has incorporated the regional elite. They jointly continue the pre-eminence of English in India.

One of the unintended but inevitable consequence of the language policy implemented in India was the millions of the lower caste-class masses for whom learning English has remained an illusion. According to the 1991 Census, 9 percent of the Indians—that translates into 90 million people – know English as a first, second or third language. This indicates that English has remained a prerogative of a few.

This language policy has produced a whole generation of mofussil youth who has no exposure to English. The teachers of English in the mofussil areas are not competent enough to teach English. These youths are taught English at fairly late stage of their schooling. They usually hesitate to speak English. If they do so, it is with strong regional accent. Every year thousands of the students fail in English in the S.S.C. and the H.S.C examination. In spite of spending several years in learning English fluency and accuracy elude the learners. This has an adverse effect on the morale of the learners of English. This lead them to frustration and finally, they give up attempting learning English itself.

The British colonizers made English popular by introducing it as a compulsory course in the competitive examination. This policy continued even after independence. Majority of the students who have had their scholarship and graduation through regional languages fail to attain proficiency in English.

Resultantly, they cannot compete with the English-educated city dwellers. This mofussil vernacular-educated students have to face a lot of discrimination and humiliation for not being proficient in English. For example, in Lucknow, Those educated in the English-medium often use derogatory labels, such as Hindi Medium Type (HMT) (derived from the popular acronym for the company, Hindustan Machine Tools) to mock those educated in the vernacular medium[10]. Thus, English becomes a barrier to their social mobility. To overcome this disadvantage, the mofussil students make pathetic efforts by joining “English Speaking Classes” or resorting to some cheap and locally available means of learning English. They do this at the end of their career when it is too late to learn a language.

Towards an equity-oriented language education

- 1) A total restructuring of the education system is prerequisite to an equity-oriented language education. The national expenditure on education must be raised up to 10% so as to achieve cent percent literacy.
- 2) The pre-eminence of English should be reduced the case is obviously not about abolishing English. The predominance of English has created the big divide between the metropolitan elite and the mofussil subaltern. The unabated continuation of English should be reduced. The case is obviously not about abolishing English. The predominance of English has created the big divide between the metropolitan-rich-elite and the mofussil-poor-subaltern. The continuation of the dual education system in which one stream of schooling uses English as a medium of instruction needs to reoriented.
- 3) The growing preference of the middle and lower-middle classes for English medium schools is, in fact, due to the poor quality of teaching English in government-run and regional medium school. In order to correct this imbalance, the teaching of English in the non-English medium schools needs to be improved and rationalized. Merely introduction English from the first standard will not be enough to bridge the gap between the metropolitan India and the mofussil India. The uniform implementation of the language policy is the prerequisite for an egalitarianism. This only avoid English becoming a marker of imperialism and class privilege and a terrain of struggle among elite groups.
- 4) Nowadays, all the Indian languages and dialects are undergoing a deepening crisis under the impact of imperialistic globalization. On the one hand the state projects itself as a benevolent state by introducing English at the primary level on the other hand the state keeps

million of people illiterate. Like other disciplines language is also being used very strategically by the imperialist forces to realize their goals. English has also emerged as a potential threat to the Indian languages. It has established its hegemony across the world as it the language of world capitalism. Therefore, urgent steps need to be taken to strengthen the regional languages.

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