



Education, English and Social Empowerment – Banishing the Monster of Stratification from an Indian Classroom

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Universalisation of elementary education has often been seen as one of the esteemed goals towards the attainment of which the nation must work in complete solidarity. And indeed several sincere endeavours in this direction have registered optimum success. There has been a substantial rise in the literacy rate in the last two decades as a result of mass movements such as the total literacy campaign. The enrollment in various government run schools has also increased. But this spread of education has somehow failed to bridge the ever-widening gulf between the elite and the masses. It has left unaddressed, some of the cherished dreams and aspirations of the masses who should have benefited from these programmes. The aspirations of the underdogs of our society to enhance their standard of living or to seek an upward mobility through education are yet to materialise. Therefore, it is about

time that we reassess and redefine our goals and objectives.

After six decades of Independence, our efforts at universalisation of education must not only aim at the spread of literacy but should seek to establish a classless society based on the equality of opportunity for one and all. Education should not be an end in itself but should be the means to an end. Education should be the means of social-empowerment of the weaker sections of our society. For this, we must ensure that quality education is not the privilege of a few but is accessible to all who cherish it. The standard of education in government run schools needs to be enhanced to such an extent that elites do not shy away from these schools.

Apart from the competent teaching of the scholastic subjects and personality development through the co-curricular activities, the teaching of English can contribute a great deal in this direction.

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Today, English has ceased to remain a monopoly of the privileged class. English, nowadays, is not only a mode of communication, but also an official language of administration, a medium of



instruction in higher education and professional courses as well as an important medium of creative expression. English has therefore become an integral part of the Indian social reality to such an extent that proficiency in English has almost become synonymous with 'being educated'. Competence in the English language goes a long way in enhancing the self-confidence and self-esteem of a learner as it not only increases his/her capacity to articulate his/her own thoughts and ideas, but also adds to his/her potential to comprehend the world around himself/herself. Hence, it is very important that certain steps are taken urgently for efficient teaching of the English language to the underprivileged learners in government schools, especially at the primary school level,

where a single teacher is expected to teach all the subjects, including English, regardless of his or her own poor command over the language.

A teacher who has to rely heavily on help from colleagues for structuring a simple sentence in English can scarcely be expected to develop English language competency in the students. For example, in a particular incident, a teacher struggled hard to find a synonym for the word "progress" in a vocabulary class. In another shocking incident, a teacher wrote a leave application, mentioning in the subject that it was an application for sick leave; however, in the body of the application, an urgent piece of work at home was stated as the reason for the required leave. To prevent these alarming incidents from becoming a recurring phenomenon in schools, and the unfortunate teachers becoming a source of embarrassment to the authorities, ideally English teachers should be appointed to teach English at the primary level as well, very much like the upper primary or higher secondary levels.

Alternatively, the existing faculty can be given the opportunity to improve their own knowledge of the language through regular in-service training and workshops.

The next important hurdle that one must endeavour to overcome pertains to the background of the learners. One must keep in mind that a substantial number of the students joining these

schools are first generation learners. The parents of these students are not only illiterate but seem to have almost nothing to do with the education of their wards. Their reason for sending their children to school could be anything from the free mid-day meal to the free woollens distributed in winter or simply entrusting their children to the care of the school teacher while they are away at work. In such a scenario, the entire responsibility of education, along with the responsibility of teaching this foreign language to these students, is that of the teacher and this duty can be best performed as a collaborative effort between the school and the community.

Firstly, since most of the students are not likely to be familiar with the English language, it should be made simple and interesting for them. English should be taught not only within the four walls of the classroom but also in real life situations. For example, in the playground, simple instructions in a particular game may be given in English. Likewise, in the co-curricular activities class a simple English song or prayer can be taught to them. Also, the students should be

encouraged to listen to the English news on the radio and television; if possible, even during schooltime as language can be easily acquired from mass media.

Besides, participation must be sought from the community as language can be best learnt if its usage in the community is internalised by the students. For this, cultural programmes can be hosted by the school, wherein educated residents from the vicinity of the school may be invited to the school and students should be encouraged to interact with them. Co-curricular activities such as debates and creative writing competitions can be organised, wherein students can interact with public school students who are proficient in the English language. But before all this can be done, care must be taken to reduce the burden of the English syllabus on the classroom teacher.

Hence, English language which has become a means of social empowerment in the present context should no longer remain the neglected part of primary school education. For this would go a long way in putting an end to class stratification and pave the way for the upward mobility of the downtrodden.

