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English in India: The White man's burden

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Abstract: Human beings are considered the most intelligent among all the living creatures on earth. They have contrived different means to make their life cozy and expedient. Language is one of them. It has always been an important part of human life. It solves many problems of our daily life. But at the same time, it hinders the path of an individual's development. In India, there are hundreds of languages being spoken. Languages change here after a few kilometers. In such a diverse country, it becomes difficult to have a common language, the absence of which gives rise to a communication gap. This communication gap further gives rise to many intricacies. This paper is an endeavor to deal with the problems and prejudices arising because of language and their possible solutions. English has become a global language, an ambrosia, which has an ability to make mortals immortal. Indians are not untouched of this. Everybody wants to come under the spell of this magical language. Learning a language and many languages always help us to broaden our mental horizon and think

divergently. But it should not be in the cost of our mother-tongue. Ideas, always, come in our mind in our mother-tongue, not in the language which we have acquired. But the way we are running blindly behind English poses a challenge to Indian languages. And if we keep ignoring our languages for a few more years, our future generations will not be able to get benefit out of them.

Keywords: Language, Communication Gap, English, Global, Mother-tongue.

Language in colloquial terms is defined as a system of speech and sounds, which enables the people to communicate with each other. But the reality behind this underlying truth is that language is an all-encompassing phenomenon that represents our fundamental self and also that of our country and community. It bears within itself the representation of our thoughts, feelings, gives expression to our desires, fuels our mind with values, forges relationships, constitutes values and ideals, helps us to understand our country and culture. Language is an important part of our being and thus J.S. Mill has rightly pointed out that language is the light of the mind. It harbors the thoughts of greatest minds and sustains their knowledge for future generations. It has the capacity of both incurring and healing wounds, of generating hopes and quashing desires, of building cultures and eliminating societies. Our language shapes our thoughts and emotions to the extent that Ludwig Wittgenstein says, “If we spoke a different language, we would perceive a somewhat different world” (as cited in Gomez 131).

Language is that fundamental reality of our life that is as primitive as the existence of life itself. And there has always been a direct correlation between the ruling power and the influence that a particular language wields upon the vernaculars of the world. When Romans and Roman Catholic Church were all-powerful, Latin held its sway. Thereafter, French also assumed a status of importance and now it’s

English which has been heralded as the global language. With the colonizing ambitions of Great Britain reaching its zenith, English also wielded its influence as the lingua franca of the world and has been magnified with epithets of being the Language of Library, Language of Knowledge, the Window to the world, Language of Science and so on.

However, the rise of English has partly been due to political reasons and mainly because of the urgent necessity of the world. Swift transportation and better communication facilities have converted the entire world into a global village and never was there such a dire need for a common language as today when people of different countries and communities interact on daily basis. This lacuna was filled by English, which now is easily accepted and widely employed as the lingua franca, to the extent that the non-native users have outnumbered the native users of English. The most brilliant minds pen their thoughts in English which nowadays is studied in almost every nation of the world. But the effects of this language around the world have both been diverse and varied in degrees. And same is the case with India.

India possesses a rich linguistic history with different languages dominating its society in different times. In ancient times, Brahmins and upper classes were held in great esteem and thus Sanskrit, being their language, became dominant. As the influence of Buddhism gained momentum, Pali language assumed a far important status. Thereafter, the Islamic rule exalted the status of courtly Persian in Indian society and with the advent of British Empire, it was but inevitable that the English language became the dominant force in the linguistic field. A change in the dominant language along with the change of ruling power has somehow been the arcane law of history. As India achieved Independence, Hindi became the most widespread language employed in India and 14 official languages (in 1950) were recognized by the constitution. But the Independence turned out to be a pyrrhic victory for Hindi as English still continues to be the language of administration, language of courts, of journalism, of science and of the educated. Hindi and English co-exist on unequal status in our society and indeed it is English which is considered to be the language of the elite.

In order to fully comprehend the complications and intricate tensions prevalent in the linguistic arena of India, it is of paramount importance to study Kachru's model of World Englishes. His model about the spread of English language in the world allocates its presence in three concentric circles, one inside another (Krishnaswamy and Burde 5):

- 1) The inner circle represents those countries in which the language functions as a native language.
- 2) The outer circle represents those countries, where the language was forced upon the subjugated people and functions as a second language.
- 3) The expanding circle represents those countries, where the language exists as a foreign language.

India should naturally lie in the second option, but the unique fact about the situation prevailing in India is that it co-exists in both the second as well as the expanding circle. Before dwelling deep into it, first let's revise the difference between second language and foreign language. A person's second language is that which is not the mother tongue of the individual but used in the area of that person. In contrast, foreign language is the one that an individual learns but is not generally spoken in his/her vicinity. English exists in India at both levels. In the urban and developed India, it exists as a Second Language where the marination of English with the mother tongue can be easily witnessed. But in the rural and undeveloped India, it sustains and perpetuates itself as a foreign language, where the post-colonial effects or Macaulayism (Aula 2014) has still not loosened its grip on the minds of the people and the students are trying to learn the language where it is not being employed in daily conversations.

This particular factor has created a huge gap as Stephen Krashen as part of his Monitor theory defines the distinction between Acquiring and Learning language (i.e. between mother tongue and foreign language). According to him, acquiring a language is a natural process while learning a language is a conscious one where the students need to partake in error correction (Krashen 1-2). The urban students learn the language where it is put into a conversation on a daily basis whereas the

rural students have to acquire it in an environment where it has been accepted as the language of the elite and beyond the precincts of the common man.

The problem being faced or rather encountered by rural students doesn't germinate in recent times but its seeds were sown way back during the British rule in India. With the initiation of Macaulay's reforms in education, English attained a new status in the society. It became the judgment standard of not just knowledge and intellect but also civilization. As the British proclaimed to the whole world that they were indeed civilizing the barbaric colonized, English language became its parameter. It assumed an aura of importance and a guise of intellect. The British reached the shores of India in the ship Hector to trade spices, and later colonized the nation by force but hegemonized the society by language. White Man burdened himself to civilize the barbaric masses and did so by teaching them English. India might have overthrown the rule which was forced upon them, but it still has to shake off the hegemony the rule initiated and the battle is still being fought.

Even today, when a rural student goes to school he is carrying with him the white man's burden and thus the resultant process of acquiring the English language becomes all the more complex and complicated. A child in a hamlet or a remote village grows up witnessing his parents, friends, elders, seniors all treating English in a sense of pre-independence aura of reverence. Every child builds around himself a spurious sense of fear of the language. The problem doesn't lie in learning the language but in overcoming the false sense of fear which disables him from acquiring the language from his childhood up to higher levels of education and it can be vindicated if we notice that the number of people in rural India who understand English are noticeable, those who can read or write are negligible, but it is feared by almost everyone. And now the question concerns the third generation of scholars after Independence to put an end to the hegemony which has linguistically enslaved a relatively huge proportion of the nation's population.

However, the ignominy of a student doesn’t end with his studies, as it is a hardline truth that the English language is a necessity to get a job at this age. In 2013, a report was issued by “Aspiring Minds” India’s largest employability solutions company which concluded that 47% of the graduates are not employable in any sector of the knowledge due to lack of effective communication skills in English language (British Council India 2013). The same company conducted an “Employability Test” on 32000 MBA graduates from 220 Business schools across India and unearthed that only 10% qualified in the necessary skills to be eligible to be hired by recruiters (Rana 2012). A Bangalore-based Education consultancy ‘Merit Tac’ also conducted a study on 2264 MBA graduates and found that only 21% of them were fit for employment (Rana 2012). Lack of effective communication skills was one of the primary reasons behind disqualification of other candidates. The essence of the problem is not lack of knowledge but the lack of communication. The Indian education system is churning out enough graduates to assuage the demands of the private sector but not enough English speaking graduates.

That is why parents prefer to admit their children to English medium schools instead of govt. schools, because being well versed in English not just guarantees better employment opportunities but also a respectable position in the society, as a new socio-economic status has been established in India on the basis of fluency of language and analogy of haves and have-nots. This, although, is inherently illogical but at the same time effectively prejudiced. However, people being oppressed and discriminated by knowledge or lack of it is wholly unacceptable in a socialist democracy. A few possible, tentative solutions to effectively stem this discredited system of evaluation might be as follows:

Training of teachers- A teacher has to work as a facilitator in the classroom to sort out the difficulties being faced by the children. A highly qualified teacher always makes a difference in student outcomes. So it becomes quite essential to tutor the teachers in such a way so that they could be able to deal with students’ problems.

Build a proper base- It is essential to have a resilient foundation to withstand the future challenges. We cannot expect from a fragile foundation to hold the burden of a multi-storied building. To make the children converse fluently, generally in any language and particularly in English, it is indispensable that they should be provided with the nuts and bolts.

English as a vocational course- Vocational education is education that prepares someone for a specific job/vocation. English being a secondary language in India needs a special attention to be given. In the age of globalization, India cannot rely only on Indian languages. To compete with the world knowledge society, it becomes essential to have knowledge of English because this is the language in which most of the literature, related to any discipline, is found.

Different curriculum for rural and urban students- The inclusion of the term curriculum has been a deliberate act as 'syllabus'; a preferably limited term would not have sufficed. The whole system of education in the rural area needs to undergo a radical change. Right now in India, we have a generalized syllabus and curriculum. We expect a student in a remote hamlet to study and give results on par with a student in Delhi. A rural student is subjected to an educational system geared to the needs of a student in an elite urban school which needs to be altered.

Eliminate Social Inequality- The diversity in India has facilitated the task of discrimination in the nation, which employs gender, caste, and religion as its potent weapons in order to perpetuate it. However, we are all curiously oblivious to the whole new system of discrimination based on language. The English language has become the inaccurate benchmark of knowledge in our nation. And this particular area needs to be addressed both urgently and diligently. We cannot allow, in a country like India which boasts of ideals of equality and secularism to build another caste based on linguistic terms and the problem in India is both deep-rooted and intricate to the extent that even after six decades of Independence we are not clear as to what our capital is- Delhi or Dilli. Such a deep-rooted menace has to be fought systematically and with a sustained effort.

The above-cited steps may initiate a sound beginning but ultimately there is only one possible, ultimate solution- either accept English or eliminate it. There is no iota of doubt that India cannot allow, another socio-economic barrier to be created based on language and we can avoid that by following the footsteps of countries like China, Japan, France who have employed their national language in every sphere of life and not allowed a foreign language to impede their society as a language is of utmost importance to unite a nation under a common umbrella. The fact was further proved when language movement played an important part in catalyzing the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan. In India, English exists as the language of courts, of administration, of journalism, of cine stars and is, in fact, the De-facto national language of India and the issue of discrimination can be resolved by eliminating the English language altogether. To start teaching the new generation in Hindi so that after two or three decades, we have engineers, doctors, bureaucrats etc. all conversing in Hindi. The endeavor may take long but can be rather an effective medium to linguistically reform our society.

However, its impracticability can be attributed to two major factors. One that Hindi itself cannot be considered as the language omnipresent in the whole nation as it is scantily employed in the Eastern India and completely invisible in South India. And the second and more pronounced factor might be that not teaching the global language to the young generation would be rather a regressive step. A more pragmatic and sensible approach would be to accept English as part of our society and culture. Up to now, especially in rural areas, it is still considered as something foreign thrust upon them and the time is ripe to accept it as part of our curriculum of daily life. However such a radical step might be wholly unacceptable to pugnacious politicians and prejudiced religious leaders but its results would be far-reaching. If the English language in India guarantees exalted status and better job opportunities, then it could easily be a panacea for the deprived masses. India in fact, is a unique nation where a language holds the key to elevating the deprived. So, let's turn a weapon of discrimination into a tool of equality and progress.

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