

Diagnosing and Remedyng Backwardness*

English Education Defines the New Brahmins and the New Dalits of India

○ Madhu Purnima Kishwar

The current simplistic debate over reservations as a key remedy for inequality, injustice and backwardness has been reduced to a single point — should educational reservations be caste-based or include economic criteria as well? The underlying mistaken assumption behind both these alternatives is that deprivation has only two facets in India — being born in a caste or tribe listed in government records as backward or depressed, and/or being born in a poor family.

In the process we are ignoring a vital aspect of deprivation and denial of opportunity that has come to acquire crucial significance in modern India. Today, in our society, the single most influential factor that determines access to elite educational institutions, and hence to important avenues of economic and social advancement, is the ability to use the English language with ease and facility. This is the magic wand that opens many doors that can lead to inclusion in the social and economic elite.

By operating the modern economy in India only through the English language, the ruling elites that emerged during the British rule have ensured their own perpetuation and continuing dominance over the

See also my article, "Destroying Minds and Skills: Dominance of *Angreziat* in our Education" in issue number 102.

rest of society. They have also ensured that most Indians are unable to attain a high level of proficiency in English, as a result of which people fluent in the language are in perpetual short supply. A person who has acquired even reasonable proficiency in English will enjoy a major advantage while competing for jobs while those few who have a good command over the English language behave and get treated like an imperial race. They have any number of highly paid jobs both in the public and private sectors to pick and choose from, no matter what their other abilities, class or caste background. The rest, who lack this skill, are made to feel worthless and therefore lose self-confidence.

However, someone who has failed to acquire this magical skill can qualify neither for entrance to any institution for higher learning nor for

any decent white-collar job. He or she may be a first-rate scholar in Marathi, Hindi or Assamese but that will not make the person eligible for anything more than a peons' job even within the linguistic boundaries of Maharashtra, UP or Assam — states in which these languages are spoken by millions of people. He/she may have great expertise in botany, the science of healing Indian architecture or astronomy. But that will not qualify her/him to any of the institutions of higher learning for these subjects.

A Passport to Privilege

Why is it that this routine and pervasive aspect of discrimination and elitism has ceased to bother us, while caste and class have long dominated the discourse of those who claim to oppose sources of privilege? Despite the widespread prevalence of caste-based deprivation, it is easy to cite any number of examples of persons from SC, ST and OBC backgrounds who have come to acquire high status jobs in both the government as well as the private sector. But it would be impossible for any of us to name people who have succeeded in getting admission into an IIT or any other elite medical, engineering or management institute, or cite instances of someone securing a high status job in the modern sector of our economy — public or private — without having acquired a certain level of competence in English.

It is easy to cite any number of examples of persons from SC, ST and OBC backgrounds who have come to acquire high status jobs... But it would be impossible to cite instances of persons securing a high status jobs without competence in English.

The English-speaking elite act as though they alone have a national perspective on vital issues and the regional language elites represent narrow sectarian and divisive tendencies.

If you want to qualify for medical school, you have to know English — even if you want to practise in rural or small town India, where very few of your patients are likely to speak in English. If you want to train to be an architect in India you have to know English, even to apply to a school of architecture. People who do not know English are treated as a lower species, unfit for any place in a modern society or economy.

A Vicious Divide

The English-speaking pan-Indian elite is entrenched in the higher echelons of bureaucracy, politics, the armed forces, corporate business and diverse professions —medicine, engineering, architecture, law and so on. Consequently, this tiny elite dominates the terms of intellectual discourse on most issues, be it social legislation, defence policy, farm policy, educational, legal or electoral reforms. They act as though that they alone have a national perspective on vital issues of national importance and the regional language elites represent narrow sectarian and divisive tendencies. They present English as the language of modernity and those rooted in indigenous languages are projected as being leftovers of a pre-modern, traditionalist, anti-progress, even obscurantist worldview. For all their nationalist pretensions, they insist on using a colonial language for their project of modernising India and

project themselves as saviours of national unity and national culture as well as repositories of intellectual merit and progress. The only role they assign to the masses is to uncritically accept their version of progress and modernisation, which includes a good deal of denigration of their own cultural heritage.

Since the domination of the English-educated elite depends on preserving a centralised state structure, movements for political decentralisation have often been presented as threats to national unity. However, since this elite lacks social and cultural roots in Indian society, and their lifestyle and aspirations are all directed towards the Western world, they lack the vision and the competence to govern a society as

The edge that English-based education provides often trumps the traditional divides of caste and class.

diverse and complex as ours. That is why the laws they enact, including those for the ostensible benefit of the people, are observed only in their violation; the system of governance they preside over is marked by corruption, incompetence and tyranny; the law and order machinery they preside over has become increasingly lawless. Because their social reform discourse is couched in an alien language and uses an alien framework, the social reform measures



they propose usually create a backlash or at best remain on paper.

The New Brahmins

By retaining English as the medium of elite education, as a requirement in the professions and in government offices, even after India was formally freed from colonial rule, we have ensured that the schism that was deliberately created by our colonial rulers between the English-educated elite and the rest of the society has grown even further and acquired deadly dimensions that are destroying the minds, souls and self-respect of the majority of our people. The edge that English-based education provides often trumps the traditional divides of caste and class.

Traditional Brahmins used Sanskrit mainly as a language of higher intellectual pursuits, for chanting mantras to gods and goddesses and performing certain types of religious rituals. The new Brahmins speak in English even when talking to their dogs or their little infants. They insist that their children learn their nursery rhymes in English. They use local languages only when ordering menials who service their needs. The power of the old Brahminical elite was effectively challenged by various Bhakti movements with women and people from castes supposedly lower down the hierarchy defying the dominance of the Sanskritised elite by asserting their right to talk to their chosen gods in the mother tongue. Today the descendants of those very castes are in such awe of the English language that they too have learnt to prostrate before its soul-destroying hegemony.

They do so because they see that you gain instant entry into the charmed circle of the social and cultural elite if you can speak English in a manner and accent deemed appropriate within the national elite, even if you do not come from the high

No matter how high your caste, no matter how much land your family owns, if there is no good English-medium school within easy reach of your village, your children will end up at the bottom end of the job market.

castes, while the doors are as good as shut for those who can't, even if they were born into the highest among twice born castes. They are assumed to be from a lower species.

People rarely ask me what caste I belong to. They simply assume I am from one of the twice born castes because I speak English with a noticeable public school accent. It is ironical that in order to draw attention to the damage being done by the unhealthy dominance of English, I have to write in English. If I wrote the same thing in a regional language and did not have a certain level of competence in English, my critique would be dismissed as an expression of envy of the incompetent.

No matter how high your caste, no matter how much land your family owns, if there is no good English-medium school within easy reach of your village, your children will end up at the bottom end of the job market. That is how the sons of Jats

There are not many other countries in the world where people suffer such severe deprivation and disability within their own motherland for having failed to acquire education in a foreign language.

of Haryana, Punjab and UP, who constitute the landowning and political elites in these two states, end up as bus conductors and drivers if their families reside in villages that do not have good English-medium schools close at hand. That is how so many Brahmins end up as street vendors, selling *paan bidi*, vegetables or other tidbits when they migrate from poverty-ridden villages, which do not have reasonable quality English-medium schools within easy reach.

Conversely, Christian boys or girls living in certain districts such as Ranchi, where missionaries run far better schools than those run by the government in villages and towns of India, stand a far better chance of getting good education and good jobs than upper caste young men and women from backward villages without such schools. A person who has studied in Modern School or St Stephen's College, no matter what his caste by birth, is easily accepted as a member of an *all India Super Caste* and thereby has far more opportunities than anyone can get by relying on his or her caste by birth as his main qualification.

Most educated people have come to consider this state of affairs as so 'normal' that this is not even seen as a matter of note, concern or alarm. However, the absurdity and injustice of this situation becomes obvious if we look around and observe the fact that there are not many other countries in the world where people suffer such severe deprivation and disability within their own motherland for having failed to acquire education in a foreign language.

Demands of Globalisation

It is true that, in a fast globalising economy, English language skills are somewhat at a premium in every country. However, in most of these countries, English is used for

communicating with the outside world, for international transactions or exchanges. It is extremely rare for a country to adopt English as the language of internal governance, education (including technical education) or internal business dealings. A person in China, Korea, Thailand, Japan, France, Turkey, Iran, Chile or Germany can become a lawyer, doctor, architect or engineer without knowing any or much English. In India such a person will not be able to get anything above a menial, blue-collar job. A person who does not know the local language would not even be considered for any worthwhile job in most countries of the world and would be considered a weird aberration. India is perhaps the only country in the world where highly educated people who have been raised and educated within their country consider it a mark of status to declare that they are illiterate in their mother tongue and cannot speak ten sentences in either their mother tongue or in Hindi, which is officially the national language of India, without mixing in a good number of words and phrases in English.



century, only a minuscule minority, even among the educated upper caste sections of our society, is able to use the language with any clarity and effectiveness. Most of our MAs and PhDs cannot write three correct sentences in English even though all their exams were given in English.

However, they get away with it because even the pretense of knowing English, no matter how poor the person's actual language skills and knowledge, works better than being genuinely proficient in any of the Indian languages, if you are not simultaneously competent in English. That is why upwardly mobile segments of the middle and even lower middle classes are ready to sacrifice an incredible proportion of their social and financial resources in bribes and other forms of influence in order to get their children admitted to a school or college that provides quality English-based education, beginning with the crucial admission into one

Many will counter this by saying:

- 1) It is not English language skills that are the key to success, but rather that the English-speaking elite just happens to be overwhelmingly from the upper castes. Their real dominance comes from their caste and class position.

2) English language skills can be picked up easily since there is no caste bar to learning them.

This is as naïve as saying that anyone can qualify for an IIT-type entrance exam merely because the test is open to all those who qualify on merit irrespective of caste or class background.

Despite the dominance of English in our education system for over a

of the highly regarded English-medium nursery schools.

Denied Access to Knowledge

The growing preference for English-medium schools is primarily due to the poor quality of education imparted in non-English-medium schools and the low status value ascribed to learning in regional languages. If you are going to be treated as an illiterate for not being fluent in English, you have no choice but to prioritise learning it, even at the cost of other necessary skills. Given the lower standards that prevail in non-English-medium schools, it is assumed that those who have studied in English are better educated and hence make better teachers. This despite the fact that teaching quality is so poor in most of our English-medium schools, barring a few exceptional institutions, that most of our students are ill-equipped to make sense of even newspaper reports, leave alone read serious books in English. Yet, they spend just about all their energy trying to grapple with English and willfully neglect learning their mother tongue, Hindi or any of the Indian languages, which they could master with great ease.

In the process, they end up with nothing more than a pidgin language — a confused mixture of poor English and their mother tongue — that damages their over-all linguistic abilities for life. This also seriously impairs their thinking capacities because language is the primary tool for understanding the world, for grasping ideas and using concepts for effective communication. A person's thinking is seriously impaired if they are not well rooted in at least one language. Linguistic cripples grow up to be intellectual cripples.

This is also one of the major reasons why there is huge deficit of good school and college teachers in India. Those who know good English

Even the pretense of knowing English, no matter how poor the person's actual language skills and knowledge, works better than being genuinely proficient in any of the Indian languages

ordinarily move on to higher status and better paying jobs. The few who choose teaching gravitate towards elite schools and universities, while those who have studied in Hindi-medium schools, or in schools using any of the regional languages, by and large end up being intellectually stunted because they have far less access to sources of knowledge and learning without good knowledge of English.

The dominance of English has consequences far beyond what most of us dare acknowledge. Those who study in various regional Indian languages, and know only a smattering of English, do not have access to all the knowledge and information being produced in various disciplines, including the politics, history, geography and sociology of India. Consider the absurdity and injustice evidenced in the following examples of the arrogance and callousness of our English-educated elite:

- There are no medical or science, technology or social science journals in any of the Indian languages, including those that are spoken by millions. All scientists publish their findings in English. All technology institutions teach in English as if English is the natural language of science and technology. This is not the case in Thailand, Korea, China and Japan, not to speak of Germany or France.

- The medium of instruction and examination in all our schools of architecture as well as the course content is in English, even though India has an exceptionally well-developed and distinct architectural tradition of its own.

- It would be difficult, if not impossible, to find training manuals for plumbers, electricians or masons in Hindi, Marathi or Tamil. As a result, people who take to these occupations end up acquiring half-baked knowledge as apprentices on the job by observing the work of others, or by word of mouth. The children of our

**There are no medical,
science, technology or
social science journals in
any of the Indian
languages.**

impoverished farmers and artisans learn what they can by simply following traditional ways or picking up new skills by observing others. There is hardly any educational material available to them in their own languages for upgrading their skills.

- India is one of the very few places in the world where pharmaceutical companies do not bother to write the names of the medicines they produce in any local language. Almost all the allopathic medicines produced in India



are labelled in English; the accompanying literature about directions for use, side-effects and precautions are provided only in English. Today, even the fashionable among Ayurvedic companies label their medicines in English. Most doctors, including those who work in government offices and service low-

**India is one of the very
few places in the world
where pharmaceutical
companies do not bother
to write the names of the
medicines they produce
in any local language.**

income groups, write their prescriptions in English. Given that only a tiny percent among the educated sections can make sense of things written in English, imagine what it means for those who are barely literate to decipher their prescriptions and understand the nature of treatment and medication prescribed to them.

- Our lawyers draft petitions in English on behalf of even those clients who do not know a word of English; court proceedings, especially at the higher levels, are all carried out in English, legal judgments are delivered in English, the laws and precedents on which those judgments are based are leftovers of British law and are written in English. Thus most people who approach the courts for justice cannot comprehend a word of what their lawyers write or say on their behalf, or make sense of the verdicts passed in their favour or against them, except through the agency of their lawyers. The sense of helplessness and crippling dependence this creates is a major reason for corruption and unaccountability, and for the exploitation of the poor by our legal system.

- India is the only country where no social science journal is published in any of the Indian languages. All “eminent” historians write their histories of India in English. All “eminent” sociologists publish their micro and macro level studies of Indian society in English. For those who are not well-trained in handling the English language, all the new knowledge being generated about the past and present of Indian society is inaccessible. There are no serious books or journals available to them in the subjects they study or teach. A large proportion of them have never read anything other than cheap student guidebooks, many of which are in turn written by poorly educated people. Consequently, most of our MAs and PhDs, especially those from

Our lawyers draft petitions in English on behalf of even those clients who do not know a word of English.

small town universities, are so poorly educated that they cannot write five correct sentences in the language in which they have to submit their thesis. Not surprisingly, high status scholarly conferences on Indian history, politics, sociology and even Indian religions are mostly held in American, British, even Australian and German universities rather than in Kurukshetra, Patna or Meerut universities where few even among the senior faculty are likely to be fluent in English.

One of the reasons why Indians have so deeply internalised the disdainful view of their colonial masters about indigenous Indian society is that very few among the educated elite are able to read or make sense of Indian language sources of Indian history and society. Consequently, we depend on the accounts written by colonial administrators, foreign missionaries and sundry foreign travellers to get a sense of our past. Scholarly studies and translations of Indian epics and *dharmic* texts are also mostly done by Western scholars. As a result, their biases, their interpretations, their critiques become ours. We begin to view our successes, our failures, our problems and delineate even our aspirations through the eyes of outsiders.

We celebrate those who are celebrated by the West. We ignore those who are disapproved of or looked down upon the West. Today, if you ask anyone among the English-educated elite to name three good current Indian literary authors, they are likely to name the likes of Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor or Amitav Ghosh. Very few will name OV Vijayan, who is one of the best writers in Malayalam, or Vijay Tendulkar, who wrote some of the finest plays in

Marathi. Why? Because these writers wrote for fellow Indians in Indian languages and won Indian literary awards, not a British or American award. They have given us profound new insights into our society and made significant literary innovations both in form and content. But we do not consider these authors as important as authors who have won a Booker Prize. Can we think of an important Chinese, Japanese, German or French writer who has never written in the language of his/her own people? Writers elsewhere get international recognition after they have been read and admired at home. In India, we are intellectually browbeaten into admiring those who are smart enough to achieve recognition in the West.

Those who think English is the language of opportunity would do well to remember that while it opens doors for a select few and provides them the wherewithal to be internationally competitive, it shuts all doors on those who are denied the opportunity to get a good education in English. We are so obsessed with and enamoured by our ability to be able to communicate and work with people in New York, London, Toronto, Sydney that we don't seem bothered by the fact that English acts as a barrier in communicating with hundreds of millions of people living in our own country and is making them feel like third class citizens.

English can never serve as a vehicle for mass education in India. Proficiency in English is unattainable for most and creates conditions of unequal competition for the vast majority. More than a century and a half after English came to be imposed as a language of governance and for the elite professions, no more than one percent of our people use it as a first or second language. For the majority, even of educated Indians, English remains at best a third language. Nearly 45 percent people live in states where Hindi is the official language while a

significant percentage of people even in states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Kashmir, Assam, Punjab, Bengal, Andhra, Orissa have a working knowledge of Hindi. And yet, the English-educated elite gets outraged at the idea of Hindustani replacing English as a link language.

The Politics of Language

Regional languages have become the vehicle of mass literacy as well as a medium for the assertion of new regional cultures emerging through the process of subsuming many of the folk languages and dialects and non-official languages in various states. For example, Hindi as the official language of UP has marginalised Bhojpuri, Awadhi and the many other dialects of Uttar Pradesh and in the process homogenised the culture of the state, though at the cost of the latter. However, it is impossible for non-official languages to gain respectability if the official regional languages get treated with disdain. Though these languages are downgraded socially and economically, they are the vehicles of political discourse in states. It is no coincidence that today, there is only one Chief Minister of a state in all of India — namely Navin Pattnaik of Orissa — who is not comfortable in speaking in the language of his State. He too could not have won an election but for the tremendous goodwill built by his father Biju Pattnaik, who was well rooted in Oriyan culture. Sonia and Rahul Gandhi have both had to learn Hindi with sustained effort, after they

All “eminent” historians write their histories of India in English. All “eminent” sociologists publish their micro and studies of Indian society in English.

developed political aspirations, whereas for the first 30 years of her life in India, Sonia Gandhi did not bother to learn Hindi nor taught her children to learn it seriously.

The political power of regional languages and regional elite is evident from the fact that a person who is not deeply entrenched in the language and culture of his/her constituency is not likely to win an election, no matter how high his/her other qualifications. This is an indirect indication of the language policy that people actually endorse

when they have the power through their votes. However, the judiciary, bureaucracy and elite professions are dominated by people who cannot write five sentences in the regional language, all because people have no power to influence the language preference of the elite in those areas, as they do in politics through their votes.

However, this has also meant that our politics has come to be dominated by people who have failed to acquire good quality education. Consequently, most of our elected

representatives are ill equipped to handle the job they are meant for, namely, legislation. Therefore, bureaucrats and hired legal professionals end up conceptualising and drafting most of our laws, rather than people who get elected to legislatures. Thus the decline in the performance and standards of our political institutions is a direct consequence of the dual language policy we have adopted, which leads to poor quality education for the general mass of people in India.

To be continued. □

Mapping Womanhood

*in a child's understanding of geography
the boundaries were set by paper margins
and tumultuous folds of countries
that unsteady fingers could not charter*

*Perinthalmann was a dot
on a map thus created
a noisy, unglamorous pit stop
with a name far too long perhaps
though the letters rolled off one's tongue
distinctly, comfortingly, tasting of home*

*in womanhood, the once-child
is introduced to the virtues
of a dusty town with nothing to claim
as its own
except clandestine bars
where men throw up on statues
of voluptuous, naked women
their curvatures even more pronounced
after one drink too many*

*by the roadside
lined by bars they call 'cool',
on a hilltop,
stands the temple
where girls are promised grooms
in return for prayers*

*she climbs the steps her silk skirt swishing against her toes
the jasmine flowers in her hair
wilting in the sun*

*wondering about the goddess
in whose name
women were encouraged to
jump into their husbands' pyres*

*in Perinthalmann,
the goddess answers prayers
with a groom
to die for,
she frowns as she imagines this*

*she has seen no temple
where men can pray
for worthy wives
where a morning of chants
and push and shove
to see a bedecked goddess
gets you closer to the
one with whom you will share your bed every day,
the father of your children,
and if lucky,
a man who will not be angry
if you do not make his tea
sugary, as his mother always did*

*in the redrawn boundaries
of womanhood
she wishes a pencil stroke
could smoothen the jagged edges,
that all uncomfortable topography
could be overlooked,
or translated into a straight line
with a child's quiet self-assuredness*

Deepa Anappara