1

The Deification of English

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I remember a news item published a few years ago which stated that a temple was being built in honour of the "Goddess of English", in a small village called Banka in Lakhimpur Kheri district in Uttar Pradesh. The foundation stone was laid on April 30, 2010, in a simple ceremony, with women singing 'Jai Angrezi Devi Maiyaa Ki', (Long live Mother Goddess of English) in honour of the goddess. Donations were already pouring in for a temple. Intrigued, I took in the details. The temple was to be a single-story structure covered with black granite. It was being built on the premises of a local school, the Dalit-run Nalanda Public Shiksha Niketan. The temple would be run by a trust. A 30 inch brass image of the goddess was brought from New Delhi to the village for the consecration, which was attended by around 1,000 villagers. (The news item stated that 3 feet high statue of the goddess would be installed at a later stage). The image was modelled on the lines of the Statue of Liberty: the Indian image is wearing a floppy hat, with a pen aloft in one hand, and holding the Constitution of India in the other. The image of the goddess has been installed on a pedestal in the shape of a computer screen. The pen in her right hand indicates that she favours literacy. Her dress is a kind of long robe, very unconventional, and the hat (Indian women don't wear hats, much less goddesses) symbolises a rejection of the traditional dress code. The plan was to inaugurate the temple on October 25, 2010, to coincide with Lord Macaulay's birth anniversary. As most of us would recall, Macaulay was a 19th century colonial official who sought to create an English-speaking Indian middle class elite. Construction work has halted, however, following a directive from the district administration. The authorities said that the builders have not obtained permission to construct the temple.

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The temple is being built by the Dalits, who form the lowest rung in the hierarchy of castes in India. They wish to symbolise their belief in English, and also honour Lord Macaulay, by including an icon of Lord Macaulay in the temple premises. The temple is the brainchild of Chandra Bahu Prasad, a Dalit social psychologist, who says, "This temple would help encourage Dalits to learn the language, which has become essential for one's growth."

The Constitution of India guarantees equality of status and opportunity to all citizens. However, although the caste system was abolished, prejudices still remain. Most Dalits still believe that they do not have access to good quality education. By this they mean mainly the ability to speak and write English. For English is perceived by them as that which separates the educated elite from the masses.

Since time immemorial, schooling has always been the result of community effort. In India, the education of the younger generation in villages in pre-independence times was usually entrusted to a learned person respected by those around him. This is beautifully brought out by the writer Khushwant Singh when he describes childhood in a rural setting:

"My grandmother always went to school with me because the school was attached to the temple. The priest taught us the alphabet and the morning prayer. While the children sat in rows on either ride of the veranda singing the alphabet or the prayer in a chorus, my grandmother sat inside reading the scriptures."

Generally, education in India was restricted to boys belonging to upper caste families. Later, schools were established by missionaries. Between 1813 and 1921, the British administrators laid the foundation of the modern Indian educational system, though, of course, mainly for their own colonial and imperialistic purposes. As Macaulay's Minute makes clear: "It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."

The worst difficulties were encountered when the problem of educating the 'untouchable' castes came up. The schools established by the East-India company were, in principle, open to all children. The renowned educationist J.P. Naik recalls that the first test case arose in 1856 when a boy from an untouchable caste applied for admission in a government school in Dharwad, Karnataka. He was refused admission because it was feared that it would result in the withdrawal of the upper caste children, and thus in the closure of the school itself. But the decision was sharply criticised by the Governor-General of India as well as by the court of Directors of the East-India Company, a clear policy was laid down that no untouchable child should be denied admission to

a government school, even if it meant closure of the school. In the years that followed, children of the untouchable classes began to get admission to the government schools in slowly increasing numbers, and their right to admission was recognised. Thus, the British administrators firmly and unequivocally established the right of every child irrespective of caste, sex or traditional taboos to seek admission to all schools supported or aided by public funds."

The Indian leadership which assumed control of education from 1921 made a more committed approach to the problem of equality in education. Education was viewed by Indian leaders as an integral part of nationalist thought in India. Thus developed the idea that the educational system should provide equality of educational opportunity. They launched many measures to spread among girls and the disadvantaged groups. In 1906, the Indian National Congress, then spearheading the Indian freedom struggle against the British Empire, passed a Resolution stating that the time had comes "for the people all over the country to take up the question of a national system of education for boys and girls" on national lines (Zaidi, 362).

After independence the Constitution of India emerged out of the ethos of the freedom struggle. The process of building a new India on the values of the freedom struggle become the guiding vision for drafting the Constitution, which was geared towards the national interest. In education, the idea of equalisation of educational opportunity has been brought out in the Education Commission, which says "The education of the backward classes, in general, and of the tribal people in particular, is a major programme of equilisation and of social and national integration. No expenditure is too great for the purpose." In the context of promoting equality through education, the Education Commission (1964-66) was of the view that it was the responsibility of the educational system to bring different social classes and groups together and thereby promote the emergence of an egalitarian and integrated society. It recommended a radical transformation of the existing system through the adoption of the 'neighbourhood school concept', where each school would be attended by all children in the neighbourhood irrespective of caste, religion, economic condition or social status.

The idea is continued in the National Policy of Education (NPE) 1986 which says "More intensive efforts are needed to develop among the backward classes and especially tribal people." The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), a Government of India's flagship programme, was launched in 2001 with the aim of fulfilling the goal of universal, free elementary education. It particularly focuses on the girl child and the weaker sections of society. More recently, the Right of Children to free and compulsory Education Act (RTE) was passed on 4 August

2009 under Article 21A of the Indian Constitution. It came into force on 1 April 2010, giving every Indian child the right to have elementary education, i.e., eight years of schooling.

For centuries, bilingualism has been the accepted norm among the educated in India. For instance, a knowledge of Sanskrit/Persian (the language used in administration) along with one's mother tongue was expected. In the days of colonial rule, Indians saw no contradiction between commitment to their own country and learning a foreign language. Since independence, there has been a sea change in the attitude of Indians towards English. In 1961, English was seen as the language of the ruling class. In the 70s, the relationship between English and the Indian languages was perceived to be one of competition. The opening up of the Indian economy in the 1990s has coincided with an explosion in the demand for English in our schools because English is perceived to open up opportunities. Today, by and large, no antagonism is perceived between English and the various Indian languages. The Focus Group Position on the Teaching of English, which formed one of the bases for the *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF) 2005, states that "English is in India today a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education. Its colonial origins now forgotten, or irrelevant, the current status of English stems from its overwhelming process on the world stage and the reflection of this in the national arena. The level of introduction of English has now become a matter of political response to people's aspirations and not an academic issue."

The visible impact of this presence of English is that it is today being demanded by everyone at the very initial stage of schooling. This has led to the mushrooming of so-called English-medium private schools in every locality. Many middle-income and lower-income households spend a considerable part of their incomes on sending their children to schools that claim to teach English. The quality of the education they provide is questionable, yet parents prefer them over government schools. A study examining children's schooling in Andhra Pradesh, India, has revealed a dramatic rise in the number of parents opting for fee-paying private schools over state-funded government schools. The perception among parents is that children will make better educational progress in private schools, because government schools mostly teach in the vernacular. Trends in government schools are responding to the competition from private schools by changing over to English medium, or by introducing English medium streams. A British Council study on the status of English in India found that "In Mumbai, the Corporation (BMC) has been finding that recruitment to its Marathi medium schools is failing, which that of its English medium schools is rising. Andhra Pradesh introduced English medium teaching

in 2008 from Class VI in 6,500 high schools in rural areas, to offer 'convent type English medium education' to the children of the poor" (Graddol, 86).*

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC), a high-level advisory body to the Prime Minister of India, stated that in a multi-lingual country like India, language is relevant not only as a means of communication or a medium of instruction but as a determinant of access. Those who are inadequately trained in English as a language find it exceedingly difficult to compete for a place in institutions of higher education, and this disadvantage is accentuated further in the world of work. As the NKC states "An understanding of and command over the English language is a most important determinant of access to higher education, employability and social opportunities. This reality is not lost on our people."

Conclusion

Two points seem to emerge from the news item:

I. Till now, almost every effort and demand with regard to the welfare of Dalits had expected 'others' to act. The 'others' referred to the state, society or media. The exercise of the temple building is praiseworthy in this crucial aspect. As the academic Shyam Babu commented, "The state and society cannot emancipate all Dalits from backwardness and poverty. The Dalits themselves should shape their own future."

II. The construction of a temple dedicated to a 'new goddess' is an idea that has for its basis the flexibility and accommodation of the Indian tradition. It is envisaged that in future, the temple would become the focus of Dalits with most of their rituals like the ones relating to births and weddings revolving around it. There are innumerable gods and goddesses; a deep philosophical examination would reveal that they represent various concepts and ideals. The message of this goddess is, "Come to me –I will empower you." If English is perceived as something that will lead one to prosperity, its deification, in some minds, is perhaps inevitable.

English language cosmopolitanism is greatly admired in societies such as ours. This condition has been produced by a combination of colonialism and contemporary globalisation, both of which have helped to make English the powerful medium that it is. In many cases it may even be a more powerful marker of difference than caste – a Dalit with English language fluency is likely to be much more accepted in upper-caste company and "get ahead" than an upper-caste non-English speaking person. For many, this is a good thing since it is seen as signifying

* The research is part of the Young Lives Project, which is tracking the development of children in four countries, including India. The sample group of 3,000 children were selected randomly from 20 different sites in Andhra Pradesh, representing a range of social and economic backgrounds. Retrieved from www.younglives.org.uk.Web.

how education can overcome inherited disadvantage.

A few aspects, however, are disturbing:

1. Attaching a pious identity to the modern language was understood as the easiest way to bring it within the orbit of daily life. In other words, the perception is that people accept things more readily if they are linked with religion. For instance, removal of footwear, or washing one's feet before entering a place of worship has as much to do with maintaining cleanliness as with godliness. But how much of piety and its associated qualities actually form part of daily life? The holy basil is worshipped, but is not generally used in most Indian kitchens on a daily basis. One apprehension is that, if English becomes revered as a goddess, and the worshipful attitude is carried to an extreme, the very purpose of including it in daily life may be defeated.
2. A knowledge of English is expected to be the harbinger of modernity and progress, according to the founders of this temple. Engravings of mathematical symbols, formulae of physics and chemistry, English proverbs would adorn the walls of the temple. 'English' is the new *mantra*. But in the frenzy of chanting it, no one seems to have paused to wonder about the kind of English that children would be exposed to. The tragedy is that the common people usually mistake learning of English with 'English Medium', and as a consequence, send their children at great financial sacrifice to the so-called English medium schools. In the 21st century, how should teaching and learning, and by extension, learning environments, respond to changing needs? Mechanically repeating 'A for Apple' in Class I, or engaging in extensive rote learning of incomprehensible 'English Question-Answers' is hardly what one would associate with quality education.
3. The third, and most distressing fact, is the utter disregard shown by them for the indigenous languages. While there is no denying that at the heart of India's new prosperity is English, and that the (often opportunistic) acceptance of English has improved the lives of countless Indians, educational theory stresses on the role of the mother tongue for optimum learning at the initial stages. "In the formative years where Science and Maths are being introduced and consolidated in the mind of the student ...emphasis on comprehension, excitement of quest and the enjoyment of discovery are vital and these can be communicated best in the mother tongue"(Narlikar 132). Research on language education has shown that bilingualism/ multilingualism has definite cognitive and social benefits. For any sound programme of language

teaching in schools, it is important to recognise the inbuilt linguistic potential of children as well as to remember that languages get socio-culturally constructed. The fruits of these research studies are reflected in the *National Curriculum Framework-2005* which states,

"Languages provide a bank of memories and symbols inherited from one's fellow-speakers and created in one's own lifetime....They are so closely bound with identity that to deny or wipe out a child's mother tongue(s) is to interfere with the sense of self."

Considering the knowledge of English as a mark of social advantage and that of the vernacular as backwardness disenfranchises significant sections of society.

Thus, the three — community, culture and language are very intimately connected with each other. Multilingualism is very much a part of the Indian linguistic landscape, and cannot be set aside.

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