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INDIANIZING ENGLISH TEACHING CURRICULA FOR A BETTER CULTURAL AFFINITY

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Abstract

With the adoption of the New Education Policy 2020, India is in for a revolutionary shift in various foci of our education system. The change is on the anvil in various areas like the choice of courses, course structures, teaching methodologies, lateral entries, evaluation system, teacher training opportunities, infrastructure, etc. The central government has also invited all stakeholders and general public to share their perceptions of desirable changes in various course curricula in order to finalize the National Curriculum Framework. While there may be various perspectives of the issue, we need to be aware of the requisites keeping in mind an ordinary student in India. This paper focusses on the teaching/learning of English language only at the college level which suffers from different anomalies due to which a lot of national talent pool is getting wasted. Apart from a few specimens of texts unsuitable for contemporary times and the ones that should be brought in, it also explores allied issues which have a bearing on the teaching of English language in our classrooms.

Keywords: Indian colleges, Teaching content, Indian English Literature, NEP 2020

Piles of statistics are not needed to stress the point that teaching-learning of English language in India leaves much to be desired. At the level of ordinary schools and colleges situated in rural and semi-urban areas of our country, one can easily notice the large number of students who fail in this subject and for whom this subject remains a nightmare throughout their stay in educational institutions. They are not able to acquire the skill to use this language for routine purposes, leave aside literary compositions. This is a cause for concern, more so, as we look at the world around us where English has acquired a very important place as a medium of communication, learning and employment. The situation within the country is no different even as the NEP2020 seeks to correct the

imbalance in favour of English by introducing regional languages in courses of study including engineering, and of course, in recruitment exams for various state services boards or even the central civil services.

Divergent views have been expressed by experts to explain the phenomenon of lack of aptitude for English language among our students. Crowded class rooms, untrained teachers, faulty evaluation system, poor infrastructure are some of the reasons which have always been there. Lack of resources is very often pointed out as responsible for this malaise. However, the defective curriculum has not attracted as much attention as it should have. What is more, removing its defects will not be such a drain on our resources, rather it would save a

lot of money and energy if we were to try the changes in an imaginative manner.

Our first concern should be to have a clear idea of our students. According to the statistic available for 2019-20, total enrolment in Indian colleges was 38.5 million, out of which 79.5% students had enrolled in undergraduate courses including humanities. (Umarji). Since they have varied backgrounds and form a motley crowd, it would, therefore, be useful to form a mental picture of an average student. By an average student, I mean a student the like of whom we meet in most of our colleges. A majority of them study English as a compulsory subject in the three or four-year degree course meant for arts students. An average student is born and brought up in a rural, semi-urban region or a small town and has had access to a government-run school or an ordinary privately-managed school. His parents may or may not be adequately educated. He has a mediocre mind that absorbs influences without much distinction. After the completion of studies or even midcourse, he would like to launch on his career as a government or private sector employee or set up his own business if his family could afford to invest the necessary finances. If the student is a girl, she would be expected by the family to get married soon and then pass life as a quiet housewife or if she aspires to an individual identity in sync with these times, she might choose a career. Of course, exceptions are everywhere and even among average students, one might come across one with a lot of promise and potential.

When these students enter college, they have at their back either thirteen or eight years of learning English language, depending upon whether they studied English as first or second language respectively. But even this longish period hardly equips them with the necessary wherewithal to use this language for normal contingencies, leave aside literary compositions. It seems to amount to a colossal waste of human resource.

The knowledge of English language required for a majority of young men and women in the country is of functional variety which means comprehension of simple written text with the ability to write it and development of speaking-

learning skill to use this language to meet the day-to-day requirements. What the noted linguist S. Pit Corder said long ago still holds good: "When we teach a learner a language what we are doing is to prepare him to behave appropriately in a number of English-speaking situations, public or private, formal or in informal, technical or everyday, in one part of the world or another, in writing or speech" (Corder 82). The fact is that English is not a luxury in the present day world, rather it is a necessary tool to do a great many things in everyday life from filling up a form in the bank to working as a technical hand at the computer table, from comprehending English telecast of news or cricket commentary to conversing with a person who can only be approached through English.

On the face of it, it might appear to be a simple job of mastering certain basic structures, rules of grammar and a limited vocabulary with a bit of spoken skill, but the ground reality is quite different. The need of the hour is to think not only of innovative approaches but also of appropriate teaching content that takes into account the realities of this fast-changing world. It would, therefore, be interesting and rewarding to study the emerging paradigm in the field of communicative English.

The future of functional English in India is being shaped by the modern tools of communication like computer, mobile phones etc. The American pattern of spelling shows the way here. As for rules of grammar, its stranglehold has somewhat loosened. The press in India has winked at and indeed played an accomplice in bringing into currency colloquialism. But what is still treated as a fetish is the standard British pronunciation called Received Pronunciation. A lot of energy is wasted in learning this pronunciation or, as an alternative, the American pronunciation. Even with a huge English speaking population, we do not think of standardizing Indian English pronunciation. The report about the discomfort of Americans with the "put-on Westernised accent" (Tejaswi) and fast speech of Indian call center employees should be an eye-opener. Even the Americans do not relish over-Americanised accent and would rather settle for reasonably good accent.

Leaving aside the call centre requirements, so far as the average students are concerned, we can and should make do with or without a particular accent. It is high time we took up again the dormant project of General Indian English (G.I.E.). A critic rightly comments: "Even though a wide range of studies on individual aspects of Indian English phonology, lexicon and syntax are available by now, this work has so far not culminated in a comprehensive grammar of Indian English. Moreover, the mismatch between the actual size of the Indian English speech community and the scholarly activity directed at the study of IndE [Indian English] is striking" (Lange). Evolving G.I.E. would mean that we can have our own rules of rational pronunciation with greater intake of vernacular words. In this post-colonial era, we owe it to our average students to shed inferiority complex in the matter and adopt what is logical and beneficial.

We now come to our second concern – the disinterestedness of an Indian student in English literature due to cultural estrangement. Our students are fed on English poems, stories and essays upto class XII. At the undergraduate level, a play or a novel or both are added. As it is, the syllabus is somewhat biased in favour of literature (Mohire 760), but the majority of our undergraduate students are hardly able to appreciate literature. The aptitude of rural students is worse than that of urban students in learning English, as per studies. (Beg 743). Very few students get to acquire that feel of literature which is supposed to be the highest objective of its study. To my mind, the reason behind this is the cultural alienation of our average students from the texts taught in the class. No sooner are they introduced to the ABC, than they are confronted with rhymes, poems and stories written by English or American authors. And this trend continues even in college.

It might be argued that literature in any language speaks of the same passions and ideas as which mankind harbours all over the world, but this is, at best, one aspect of literature. There is a lot of literary material prescribed for college classes which is culture-specific and a reader has to take a plunge into the cultural waters of a text to gather a few

universal truths. The difficulty in this regard can be appreciated from the general observation that whereas one does come across students who have developed a liking for Hindi literature in this region to the extent of being able to dabble in literary composition, cases of students taking similarly to English literature would be few and far between. Expecting students to partake of the experience of life through literature and to develop a critical bent of mind with regard to literature is indeed a tall order. All this cannot be achieved unless the students have an emotional engagement with literature.

The truism that culture and literature are intertwined and also reinforce each other holds good universally. When we teach a foreign language to students, we also expose them to the alien culture. The measure of understanding the language corresponds to their interiorization and appreciation of the culture of which the language is expression. A teacher has a real problem at hand if the cultural meaning of a referent is not clear to the students. Robert Lado states much the same thing when he quotes a similar problem in American schools: "Every time that the textbook or the teacher mentions a word or describes or refers to something that the American student does not understand culturally or misunderstands because its cultural content differs from his native patterns, there is immediate need to deal with the cultural difference involved" (Lado 149). Harold B. Allen and Russell N. Campbell have generalized the experience thus: "Cultural anthropologists point out that given acts and objects appear vastly different in different cultures, depending on the values attached to them. Psychologists investigating perception are increasingly insistent that what is perceived depends upon the observer's perceptual frame of reference" (Oliver x-xi).

In order to aid the perception of students, the role of the teacher cannot be underestimated. It is the teacher who facilitates the relevance of the culture in understanding a text couched in a foreign language. In fact, Bruce Pattison refers to a teacher's job in this context in glowing terms. According to him, his problem is also "arranging direct experience of particular work produced originally for the

author's own speech community, trying to secure a fuller response to them and so encouraging students to go on reading and to get more out of their reading in future" (Pattison 195). Not many teachers would probably match this description. The qualification criterion that the Modern Language Association sets down for a superior grade school teacher of English includes a few years of first-hand experience of foreign culture in the form of stay amongst the people whose language is to be taught. How is that going to be feasible for all the teachers in our country with limited resources available to individuals and the governments. Secondly, there is also the flip side: Will such a teacher trained abroad be able to impart the cultural experience to his/her students without any hangover or high-brow attitude that one normally sees in our English-speaking class of people? The main objective, therefore, is to be able to make the student learn in a recognizable common cultural context. Then, there are issues like "the lack of infra-structure, variations in socio-economic levels of the learner, psychological barriers etc. And the problem stands out in bold relief" (Menon 17).

The lack of common cultural context does impede the understanding and enjoyment of an English piece of writing for an average student. The theme of the text taken up in class may be an English fare or festival or it may be description of the English countryside with its flora or fauna. It could as well refer to a cultural icon or idea. Thus, Robert Lynd's essay "Pleasures of Ignorance" or Bacon's "Of Friendship" or Robert Frost's poem "Design" may not be comprehensible to an average student. Secondly, the old English of Shakespeare, Milton and Lamb hardly interests ordinary students in focus here, nor does it add to their functional English.

The gulf between cultures is further widened on account of selection of certain texts that show colonial bias. Thus, H.G. Wells' story "A deal in Ostriches", or George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" have anti-Indian sentiments; their references to the Indian as "the Hindoo" reflect colonial hubris. Even our Indian litterateurs are not totally devoid of the sentiment of colonial servitude. Sarojini Naidu, though an accomplished poet, shows this approach in her poem "The Gift of India" written

in 1917 when many in the Congress including Mahatma Gandhi believed that if Indian soldiers fought on behalf of the British and shed their blood in the First World War, Britain would "gift" independence to India. Such attitude would be rightly considered beggarly by the young readers.

Real problem is faced by an average Indian student in appreciating English poetry in another way also. Apart from the strangeness of the idiom and queer foreign names like Bluntschli or Fitzgerald, the reading of a poem requires due attention to pronunciation, which may be standard British or American (presuming most of the poems are written by the British or Americans) or a varied version in keeping with the demands of the metre or rhyme scheme. Now, this is an area in which majority of teachers would be found wanting. Poor rendering of a poem fails to get students to mark the cadence and as a result, students take to poetry just as they take to prose.

What is desired at this level is the greater inclusion of English literature produced by Indians. We have a very rich tradition of Indian writing in English starting from the middle of the nineteenth century. Whether it is prose or poetry, plays or fiction, we have writers of world repute. Great poets and writers like Vivekananda, Tagore, Aurobindo, whose works are replete with a mix of humanism and spiritualism attracted the attention of the entire literary world. In prose, the inimitable style of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan's great philosophical treatises, the simple and easy style of Mahatma Gandhi's lofty experiments with truth, and the impressive style of Jawaharlal Nehru's scholarly history-based texts provide praiseworthy examples of language use, apart from the admirable content, that students will do good to follow.

The genre of poetry had wonderful contribution from many poets who appeared on the scene right from the 19th century. Of them, mention may be made of the beautiful verse translations by Romesh Chander Dutt of material from Sanskrit classics – both spiritual and literary. In our times, A.K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Shiv K. Kumar, Keki Daruwalla are just a few names out of myriad poets who penned poetry.

We have had some remarkable fictionists like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, et al. who steered the course of Indian literature. Their fiction takes up themes of nationalism, socio-economic issues, spirituality and regional life, etc. which still carry great appeal. They were followed by some very interesting authors like G.V. Desani, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seth, et al. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* was hailed as an admirable postmodern work. Another change-maker was Chetan Bhagat who ushered in the era of popular fiction in a big way. Our times have seen infusion of fresh blood and we have scores of award-winning novelists hogging the limelight at the international level. According to a study, some 1400 novels were published by Indian authors in the preceding two decades (2001-2020) that cover all types of themes: individual psyche, gender studies, regional life, socio-cultural issues, political and economic problems, history and myths, diaspora and multiculturalism, crime and adventure, thrill and romance, etc. (Batra).

Again, we have a large body of literature in regional languages which is being translated into English by competent translators. Being more rooted in the Indian milieu and belonging to rather ordinary strata of society, the regional language writers' works have a better cultural connect with the students in ordinary Indian colleges. Take, for example, Bankim Chandra's *Anandmath*, Tagore's *Gitanjali* or *Ghare Baire*, Prem chand's *Godaan*, U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, leading up to the latest Geetanjali Shree's *Ret Samadhi* – such works score far better over the works written originally in English in terms of spontaneity of experience and the use of Indian idiom, all of which lead to reader's cultural affinity. All this can be more relevant to the needs of students than the literature about the foreign soil or culture produced in an alien idiom.

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