

Rethinking English Pedagogy: Perceptions from the Margins

Dr. Ibrahim Khalilulla. M

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Sahyadri Science College (UG and PG)
Kuvempu University, Shimoga-577203,

Abstract

The Post-colonial context of English has been comprehended asymmetrically across caste, class and gender hierarchies. The last two decades have witnessed a crisis in English departments in India and elsewhere. Globalization and the liberalization of the economy spawned a new nationalism that was openly political and overtly critical of the ideological investments embedded in canonical English texts. A perceived need to reinvent English studies to suit the exigencies of in postcolonial milieu encouraged a shift toward cultural studies methodology. This paradigm shift is most evident in the construction of English syllabi at various universities. Such syllabi have increasingly focused on issues of gender, class, and caste oppression, dismantled the cultural hegemony of British literature, and opened up the canon to include other non-British texts. This paper argues that the institutional practices and ideologies of English pedagogic have undergone significant revisions in the last two decades, including syllabi revisions and curricular reforms, point to a destabilization of the imperial, hegemonic agendas that had earlier informed the institutionalization of English literature programs in non-English speaking countries and even media hype for only upper caste.

The problematic consequences of colonial legacies of language policies and English language education in the multilingual contexts, using a postcolonial lens, the paper explores the language hierarchies that results in students from low-income backgrounds/marginal

communities losing their mother tongues without acquiring academic fluency in English. Our recognition of our privilege in having access to English within the contemporary context of globalization and its increasing influence as a global lingua franca led many drawbacks, which can be described as an approach to education which acknowledges that the teaching/learning process is political, and carries within it the structures of domination and power play. In this context present paper attempts to interrogate English pedagogy from the perspectives of the marginalized communities.

Keywords: English pedagogy, linguistic imperialism, classroom transaction, gender, class, sensitization, Marginalized communities.

The mediated Indian public sphere, despite its linguistic diversity, remains dominated by two dominant languages and their media—the more widespread Hindi, and the more profitable English media. While the audiences and reach of both these language media vastly differ, both media environments and the discourses they produce are predominantly controlled by upper-caste. However, English-language, media, and in particular the press, has consistently remained more profitable due to its advertising revenue and nationwide reach. Additionally, due to the English language’s historical proximity to powerful leaders and institutions in colonial as well as postcolonial India the English-language public sphere of which English-language news and social media are crucial participants arguably wields a decisive influence on what issues and narratives dominate national imagination. Brahmin and savarna media professionals and commentators who own and dominate the landscape of English-language media, claim to speak for an amorphous middle class, are key protagonists in this process. The paper focus on how English language pedagogy is based upon the premise that English-language public sphere in India is an epistemic structure that perpetuates the violence of caste through Upper caste representations of India’s male middle class using

the literary celebrities. English-language narratives of entrepreneurial subjectivity are not accessible equally by all segments of the population. Narratives of such neoliberal success are not just limited to men of dominant castes; even the power to author such narratives is controlled by certain castes and classes of men. Similarly, the readerships for such narratives of ascent are those who have been socialized into gendered caste identities through English-language education and access to its public sphere. Many studies were conducted on conventional colonial heritage; however, less attention examines the developing concept of English curriculum. The hegemony of English in high-learning institutions and the caste and gender discrimination in education system continued even at present. The curriculum reinforces the exclusion of the marginalized.

In a 2006 survey conducted by the Delhi-based think tank, the Media Studies Group, India, researchers noted that about 71% of jobs in the Indian journalism industry were held by Hindu savarna male journalists. If we were to break it down further, Brahmins alone composed 49% of senior positions in national media. Similarly oriented studies of representation in India's biggest political parties have reflected more parallels, with over 70% of decision-making party positions held by Savarnas, and over 80% by males. Despite the linguistic and regional diversity among Brahminsavarna communities in India, this is a scenario compounded across several sociopolitical institutions, including academia. Deconstructing how the Brahmin-Savarna male becomes a normative figure in contemporary cultural texts is therefore an important task for anticaste feminist frameworks in media and cultural studies. The matrix of oppressions concerning caste and gender identity has received some academic attention; however, scholarship has increasingly focused on Dalit-Bahujan subjectivities and women's movements. In contrast, anticaste web platforms commenting on

the intersections of gender and caste have argued for a deeper, more complex analysis of patriarchy in contemporary India grounded in ideologies of Brahminism and that particularly locate the savarna male figure in structures of patriarchy, especially the Brahmin man Brahmin-savarna male media producers who control the majority of Indian media discourses enable these media to become critical sites where the primacy of Hindu Brahmin masculinity is reinforced, sustaining the disparate power structures of caste. There is, thus, a strong argument to be made for scrutinizing the savarna male's dominance that is constantly reproduced in cultural texts and knowledge structures, creating a Brahmin-supremacist patriarchal discourse that requires a complex analytic to disrupt his hegemony. By studying contemporary popular texts and paratexts, particularly those complicating the position of English in India's neoliberal postcoloniality, the paper will situate caste as an epistemological framework through which Indian masculinities and class inequalities are naturalized in English-language popular culture in India. Since the British made it a policy to use English in India for the administration of the empire, English was made accessible primarily to privileged savarna men who served as ideal workers within the colonial apparatus. Chandra's (2012) historical analysis foregrounds how the logic of English-language education in colonial India was embedded in social dynamics that enabled the Brahmins to control who learned the language and to what purpose. English therefore operated within the caste and gendered codes of colonial India, where savarna men policed the spread of English, and the gendered Brahminical power of English was consolidated by savarnas within the postcolonial Indian state as well by controlling the administration and operations of public education and print media. Consequently, the English-language public sphere in India that is predominantly constituted in the industries of culture, education, and media has bolstered discourses that establish an amorphous English-speaking middle class, which has become definitive of neoliberal India. Since the English language becomes a linguistic power structure operating

through caste and gender, it is advocated that an upper caste entrepreneurial male subjectivity seeks to legitimize caste supremacist values for a subaltern population aspiring to escape their own caste and class positions. The emergence of the Dalit discourse in recent years has brought to the fore a long overdue struggle and a very integral factor in the cultural framework of India. Caste as a category is no longer ignored, it is now being confronted and interrogated as a discriminatory practice. In contemporary times, the issue of caste is now included in the official syllabi. The language English is generally regarded as a language bereft of caste markers unlike many Indian languages which contain various derogatory words indicative of biases and prejudices pertaining to caste. In such a way, the language English can be considered to have an emancipatory potential as far as the question of caste is concerned. In this case, the reader is familiar with the aspect of caste in the source culture because it is a part of their lived experience. So, the student is engaging with the text at two related but different levels. At the level of content, the student recognises known prejudices in the fabric of the society and is able to challenge them through their tutored analysis. At the level of language, English is the second or third language for them. In a peculiar manner the familiarity of the context is somehow distanced by slight unfamiliarity with the language. The site of struggle for the student is now at the level of language. However, a certain knowledge of the context lends the students an amount of confidence to use the English language. It bears testimony to the fact that they can also convey a 'reality which is their own in a language which is not their own' in a significant and successful way. It is this admission of ability to use a language, which is the aim of a language teaching class. It is at this juncture that the teacher has to step in with diverse pedagogical tools to teach English and indigenous cultures along with a sensitive approach to alert them to an extremely relevant issue of caste. For proficiency in any language, the skill of reading is an integral element. It is a commonplace observation that reading is 'caught' and not 'taught'. In the Indian context, it is

usual to find that most Indian languages are taught with a focus on content. And that is an approach which the student carries within even in an English classroom. For an adult learner acquainted with the second / third language English, the first stage is comprehension in reading, which because of prior knowledge of the language, they are able to achieve partly and rarely completely. The teacher's instructions are required to achieve full comprehension by the students. Once the students develop a joy in reading, the craft of the writer and the modes of narration incite their interest and they display enthusiasm in the exercise of reading. Even though in this case, the end semester examinations demand an intensive reading; the pleasure in the practice of reading keeps their attention intact. Another aspect of language use which is worthy of attention is that of making the second or third language your own and not constantly imagining it to be the other or that of the other. Conventionally the English language is pre-determined to be a language of the elite and believed to be the domain of the privileged, by the students. However, reading English Translations of Indian writings demolish this assumption to a large extent. When we constitute ourselves through language, we also constitute that language, marking it with the politics of the time. No language comes to us pre-formed, already constituted. This is a realization that the students share and communicate their thoughts in a lucid manner.

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